



Sam Bennardo

ON THE INSIDE

With
SAM BENNARDO & MATT THIEL

By Michael Bradwell

Company: AUMA Actuators Inc.
Title: Sam Bennardo, President
Matt Thiel, Executive Vice President

Anyone who has visited Pittsburgh's Point State Park and admired its fountain – the very essence of “The Point” – would probably be surprised to learn that a Washington County company provides the device that turns the glorious display of water on and off at one of Southwestern Pennsylvania's most popular sights.

A small but powerful motor, known as an actuator and manufactured by AUMA Actuators Inc. based in Southpointe, is responsible for helping to create the display, but it also does more anonymous, but highly critical duty in remote, even hazardous conditions like onshore oil and gas drilling pads and a variety of other industrial applications.

While the Point Park fountain is one of the area's most famous sites, AUMA's actuators are also in service on the de-icing equipment at Pittsburgh International Airport and are installed on the locks at dams along the area's major rivers.

“No one even knows what an actuator is,” Sam Bennardo, president of AUMA Actuators, says with a chuckle, explaining that the device sits atop valve gear boxes and is controlled from a remote site to open or close the valves in a wide range of industrial applications: power plants, water and sewage treatment facilities, chemical and petrochemical refineries, steel works and in food and beverage production.

Bennardo noted that the company has seen a shift in the use of its actuators in the energy industry, with deployment in coal-fired plants declining along with their decommissioning while increasing in gas-fired plants that are now replacing coal-fired models.

While valves and dampers directly control the flow of liquids and gases in the various industrial processes, the actuator provides the muscle to open and close the valve. It also acts as the interface to the plant's control system. Integral motor controls and control accessories are available to interface with a wide variety of plant control systems, including digital communication systems. As a result, the actuator is a critical component in many industrial facilities.

“We test every actuator before it leaves to make sure it functions for what it was designed for.”

AUMA has been calling Washington County home since 2003, when it moved from Allegheny County into the former Bayside Automation plant along Southpointe Boulevard.

Despite the fact that it makes largely unknown, yet vital devices for controlling the flow of fluids and gases, AUMA's customers are well aware of its product. For that reason, quality control is at the center of the plant's operations.

"The actuators see some nasty stuff," Bennardo said in stressing the importance for attention to quality and performance standards.

"We test every actuator before it leaves to make sure it functions for what it was designed for," he said. A sign in the quality control lab reads, "The customer is the focus of everything we do."

The Southpointe site employs 140 people, with about 130 of those working directly at the Southpointe Boulevard facility, with a full day shift and a partial second shift. The plant produces the electric motors for sale around the world. Besides its Southpointe production site, AUMA has two plants in Germany and two others in India and China.

"We are an international company," Bennardo said, adding that the Southpointe plant is the only one outside of Germany that can sell its products anywhere. "It gives us a real competitive advantage," he said.

Since its arrival in Southpointe, AUMA, a privately held company, has invested \$3 million in the 70,000 square-foot factory, where the company employs those with skills in machining and electrical component assembly.

Maintaining the flow at AUMA from a management standpoint is also undertaken with the same attention to precision as with its actuators.

Bennardo, 64, will retire in January 2016 after 24 years with the company. He will hand off the duties to Matt Thiel, who

joined the company in February 2015 as executive vice president.

During a meeting in Bennardo's office, Thiel, who earlier served as vice president of sales and marketing for an industrial instrumentation company in New Kensington, PA, said he has enjoyed the time he has had to learn the actuator business.

"Having a long transition is really great for me," said Thiel, 39, an electrical engineer who also holds an MBA. Bennardo added that the arrangement is one of the advantages of being a private company.

The time has given Thiel an appreciation for the breadth of the company's operations from shipping and receiving to high end machining and assembly of electronic components.

During a tour of the plant, he noted that because of the actuators' critical service in often hazardous environments, they are given a final coat of powdered metal as an added layer of protection. He also showed the plant's state-of-the-art computer numerically controlled machines.

Both men acknowledged that it is challenging to find qualified labor for the positions in the production

end of the company. AUMA worked with Canon MacMillan High School students on a summer project in which they optimized the size of boxes used to ship the actuators.

"We also work with the local trade schools for interns," Thiel said.

Both Thiel and Bennardo added that with millennials working at a job for an average of only 2.3 years before moving on, it is difficult to train someone to perform skilled labor for the long haul.

To help remedy that situation, AUMA recently hired a new human resources director who is putting together programs that address younger workers. One of those is a mentorship program designed to expose people to the different aspects of manufacturing.



Matt Thiel

And despite the challenges of bringing in new workers, Bennardo noted that AUMA has its share of employees who have worked at the company for decades, a testament to its workforce longevity.

"We give out 25-year awards at the rate of a couple a year," he said.

And for those who stay, the company has a policy of promoting from within. Some who have started on the shop floor have gone on to positions in sales, engineering and operations.

And as Bennardo bows out, Thiel is preparing for a future that immediately promises to keep the flow of ideas and products coming under his leadership.

He said the company plans to introduce a fail-safe mechanism for actuators used on onshore drilling sites, pipelines and storage tanks.

"If everything fails, it fails in a safe state," he said, explaining that it will keep oil in the system from igniting.

The company is also looking to increase its direct sales force and adding to its service offerings.

One thing that will remain constant with the change in leadership is AUMA's home in Washington County, which Bennardo said he always liked as a good place to do business.

"It is a very welcoming area," he said. "The services are very good."

And as one man prepares to take the company to new places, the other is looking forward to new venues in retirement.

"I want to be able to spend a winter down south," Bennardo said.