

# Brainstorming on Whiteboard Wednesday

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ZEELAND – Engineers from Disher Design & Development describe their company as a one-stop shop for product design and development.

Aligned with Innotec Group, comprised of seven or eight companies in a one-mile radius, including a couple of manufacturers and an industrial design firm, Zeeland-based Disher Design & Development has a keen manufacturing mindset, according to Jeff Disher, who founded the company in 2000. The formidable synergy between the companies allows Disher Design to be competitive as a full-service product development company. A group of tooling engineers formed Vortec five months ago, which adds another dimension to what the group of companies can offer, according to Disher. Part design, tool design and tool build are offered in one building.

"What typically are departments in larger corporations are now separate companies that need to be competitive in the industry by themselves," Disher told *MIBiz*. "As a combined group, we have more competitive components."

Although design and engineering with program management is Disher Design's bread and butter, the connection point with manufacturers in industrial design and tooling allows the company to "bring a full package to the customer," Disher said.

He described an example of how thinking like a manufacturer helped Tier 1 supplier to Toyota. Disher's engineers redesigned an overhead interior system for a Toyota minivan that resulted in cost savings of more than \$1 million.

"We came up with a cost reduction idea," Disher told *MIBiz*. "We're very much focused on manufacturing." He noted that money is saved through attention to detail while maintaining the quality and function of a product. In the medical arena, Disher's engineers redesigned a biopsy tool so it could be operated with one hand.

Disher Design serves a variety of industries including automotive, office furniture, a mix of consumer products, medical and marine industries. Engineers and project managers work with automotive components and assembly, seating and office products, consumer electronics, household devices and medical instruments. Eleven engineers have patents awarded to a range of products from a variable backstop, roll clip, overhead console to a sliding visor.

"They come to us for our engineering capabilities," Disher said.

In an effort to come up with innovative products and solve existing design or production quandaries, Disher Design & Development offers its trademarked "Whiteboard Wednesday" to customers. Whiteboard Wednesday includes one hour of brainstorming with Disher engineers for problem solving, concept evaluations and product development.

The idea for Whiteboard Wednesday sprang from Disher's observance of taste tests in grocery stores and a fast food chain offering punch cards for free sandwiches after purchasing a specified number of sandwiches. Disher decided his company's offer would be a free, one-hour brainstorming session. Customers get a quality taste test of the company while Disher Design may gain potential customers.

Through the sessions customers can have honest discussions about a particular challenge or idea that may not be possible in their own environment, said Graham Weeks, Disher's product/business developer and brainstorming session leader. Creativity is encouraged through clay, everyday materials like paper clips, and a white board for sketches and ideas. With an adjacent prototype shop next to the meeting area, quick mockups of ideas can take place. Multi-national manufacturers to individual inventors have taken advantage of Whiteboard Wednesday.



Jeff Disher founded Disher Design & Development in 2000, a Zeeland-based company that has grown to include 35 engineers and product managers.

In the heat of everyday battles, manufacturers may not be able to problem solve, or face mental blocks that can be unlocked in a brainstorming session, according to product developer Russ Holdredge.

Disher engineers agree the sessions are creative and fun. "Engineers love to build things and make it work," Holdredge said. Disher engineers are also growing the business through their own product development. Weeks said the company has set a goal for generating money from its own products. One product already on the market and sold in Target stores is Roll Buddy, a plastic roll wrap to store wrapping paper or for drawings without the use of rubber bands. Other products in the works include a cake stacker that is in the process of being sold through retailers and a bike tire lock to secure detachable bike wheels. Weeks already developed a prototype of an attachment to hold a tennis ball at the end of a pole after observing a janitor use a tennis ball to remove scuffmarks on the floor.

Lakeshore Advantage President Randy Thelen said companies like Disher Design & Development fill a niche as more and more businesses outsource R & D and product development.

"Within the region there's a great deal of expertise," Thelen told *MIBiz*. He noted that many Holland area companies are providing cutting-edge product development services to businesses throughout the country. Thelen commended that Whiteboard Wednesday as a way for small and mid-sized firms to be able to tap product development and design expertise.

Disher said his company has grown from two employees in 2000 to 35 employees today, making it one of the largest engineering firms in the region. Disher employees come from a variety of backgrounds -- many from local manufacturers including Johnson Controls.

Disher Design & Development operates with a simple mission statement of "Make a Positive Difference." Besides its Zeeland headquarters the company also has an office in Budapest, Hungary.

Company capabilities include program management, project and design engineering, industrial design, FEA/mold flow, light lab/ray tracing, tooling design and sources, prototyping/testing, offshore coordination and on-site placement.



Key members of Disher Design & Development team include Fred Pettinga, Graham Weeks, Russ Holdredge, Bob Soeters, and Jeff Disher.