

Worcester's Slideways Looks Forward
A Job Shop for the Plastics Industry

By Matthew Brown
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Like Tom Doody, president of Component Systems, which I featured in the last Industrial Strength column, Tom Sioui, co-founder of Slideways Inc. in Worcester, is on the cutting edge of modern manufacturing.

Sioui is an engineer by training. When the company he previously worked for was going through some changes, he knew that he wanted to start his own company making plastic parts for custom machine makers.

His previous employer was in a similar line of business, and Sioui had heard lots of talk from customers about prices, services and technological abilities that would make any company successful.

“Being engineers, we thought there would be space for us in the market, so we made our move,” he said. Slideways was founded in 1994.

In the beginning, Sioui, and co-founder Glenn Priest would make sales calls during the day and manufacture plastics in the evenings.

“We really did it by the seat of our pants,” Sioui said.

Playing Chicken

Slideways' first home was off Route 9 in Shrewsbury. It's been in 20,000 square feet off Plantation Street in Worcester for the last five years, right next door to a Saint-Gobain Performance Plastics facility.

Its 16 employees make highly specialized plastic components for machines used in a variety of industries that use high-volume production lines. On a recent visit, components were being made for poultry processing lines.

Slideways typically makes parts for chain guides, belt guides, wear strips and bearings, but it also does a large amount of business in custom components.

“We have a catalog of standard parts, and the customers often take a look at the catalog and say, ‘I want that, but,’” Sioui said. “We’re a classic job shop or service company like Nypro. We don’t have a product, we’re very service oriented.”

Slideways’ components may be a very small part of a larger machine, but may also be a very important part of that machine. Its components are used in production lines run by pharmaceutical firms like Eli Lilly and Merck and foods companies. One of its customers even makes the machines that make Thomas’ English Muffins. Other Slideways components are part of an egg washing machine that can wash 100,000 eggs per hour.

And while Sioui may have started the company by the seat of his pants, it didn’t get to where it is today that way.

While studying engineering, Sioui knew he would be in manufacturing.

“I was familiar with it, and I could visualize drawings very well,” he said. “The electronics courses that were popular then, I didn’t do so well in.”

But as Slideways grew, it needed help, and the company got it from InnerCity Entrepreneurs, the Service Corps of Retired Executives and the Small Business Development Center at Clark University.

As a result, Sioui said he’s been gratified to watch the company’s middle management layer improve over the years. And the company remained innovative as the economy collapsed.

“A year ago in November, business just stopped,” Sioui said. “And we had this excellent (sales) guy. So, we changed the way we worked.” Instead of focusing solely on sales, the company decided to reach out to new customers.

“They’re all trying to save money, so we might as well introduce ourselves,” Sioui said.

[Watch the YouTube clip here!](#)