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Award winners manage to shine during tough times



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Rich Williams

It's a simple question: Is this a good time to be a plastics processor in North America?

Doug Callahan answered it well: "With volatility and change comes opportunity, and we've never had more opportunity than we have right now."

Callahan is the owner, president and CEO of Saline, Mich.-based MMI Engineered Solutions Inc., our 2021 Processor of the Year. He answered that question on stage as part of a panel discussion on March 23 at the *Plastics News* Executive Forum in Naples, Fla.

Attendance at this year's forum set a record, and the plastics processors in the audience said business is very good. Many are expanding or have plans to add space and equipment.

But they worry about recruiting and retaining workers to staff their plants. And seemingly everyone had a story to share about some resin or other raw material that they just can't find enough of right now.

Supply chain issues are straining every manufacturing business. But that's both a problem and an opportunity. The leaders of our Processor of the Year finalists universally said that this is a good time to be a North American plastics company.

"We see a tremendous amount of opportunity," said Tom Thompson, president and chief commercial officer of Teel Plastics LLC in Baraboo, Wis. Teel is a plastic extruder and injection molder of custom products for highly regulated end markets, including medical, water treatment and industrial piping.

Thompson and Gurvinder Singh, global product director at Proto Labs Inc., both said they see evidence of reshoring.

"I think our customers, [because of] what's happened in the last two years, are rethinking their supply chain strategies. It used to be focused just on cost. And now they're evaluating it based on value and risk," Singh said. "I think it's going to be exciting. We're going to see production a lot closer to consumption."

Protolabs' speed-to-market capabilities were vital during the pandemic, as it was able to quickly prototype and help commercialize COVID-related products.

Michael Ruggieri, CEO of Comar LLC, said innovative North American companies that can automate effectively are going to pick up business.

"A lot of people recognize over the last couple of years that complex supply chains can equal your product being off the shelf, and that's a lot more painful than spending a couple of extra pennies on things," Ruggieri said.

Comar made several significant acquisitions in 2020 and 2021, and it also built new molding plants in California and New Jersey, plus it moved into an expanded facility in West Bend, Wis.

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John Budreau, director of new business at PTI Engineered Plastics Inc., agreed that automation will be key. Macomb, Mich.-based PTI has been adding both complex work cells and easy-to-program collaborative robots. It will have 10 cobots on the factory floor by the end of March.

"I have had firsthand conversations with companies that typically went offshore, and they're building facilities here to manufacture their products domestically," Budreau said.

PTI is a custom injection molder serving a diverse customer base, including medical, automotive, defense/aerospace and commercial/consumer products companies. The company specializes in low-volume complex parts.

MMI, Teel, Protolabs, Comar and **PTI** were our five finalists for 2021 Processor of the Year, and we had many more highly qualified nominations. These are companies that stayed open and kept workers safe during the pandemic and made essential products that were desperately needed to battle COVID-19.

The winner, MMI, received the Bregar Trophy, named in honor of Bill Bregar, our senior reporter who coordinated the award for many years. He really loved visiting and writing about the Processor of the Year companies.

MMI is the 27th company to claim the title Processor of the Year. In a unique twist, Callahan was also part of the team that won the 2004 award at his previous employer, Miniature Precision Components Inc.

All of the finalists took home nice hardware this year. Comar scored very high on all of our Processor of the Year criteria and won the *PN* Excellence Award for Employee Relations.

Protolabs, in many ways, is more like a software/tech company than a traditional plastics processor, and to recognize its unique capabilities, it received a brand-new award, the *PN* Excellence Award for Technological Innovation.

PTI is well known for being active in the community. Recognizing the company's stellar reputation, it received our *PN* Excellence Award for Industry/Public Service.

Teel Plastics was tasked with tremendous responsibility in 2020 and 2021: to rapidly expand capacity to make swab stick handles for COVID-19 diagnostic test kits. The company scored well in all of our criteria and took home the *PN* Excellence Award for Customer Relations.

Watch for profiles of our *PN* Excellence Award winners in our April 4 issue, and nominations will officially open up in June for the 2022 award.

Our Processor of the Year competition is open to all companies engaged in North American plastics processing for at least the past five years. Companies are judged based on seven criteria: financial performance, customer relations, employee relations, environmental performance, industry and public service, quality and technological innovation.

It will be tough for the 2022 finalists to match the outstanding results that we saw this year. But based on what they all said about the opportunities for North American processors this year, I have high expectations.

Don Loepp is editor of Plastics News and author of the Plastics Blog. Follow him on Twitter @donloepp.

Letter — to the — Editor

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