

steel

BY LAUREN DUENSING

As president of a smaller distribution company, Don Ascione, founder of Continental Steel & Tube Co., Fort Lauderdale, Fla., knows it's imperative to constantly adapt and use every type of technology available.

Today, the company has a complete online strategy, which Ascione built from the ground up with the help of ThomasNet, New York.

"My company predates the electronic era," he says. "The tools at our disposal didn't exist when I started the company in 1985, but as technology evolved, I committed myself and my company to state-of-the-art technological tools and a constant exploration and adaptation to an evolving, changing business world."

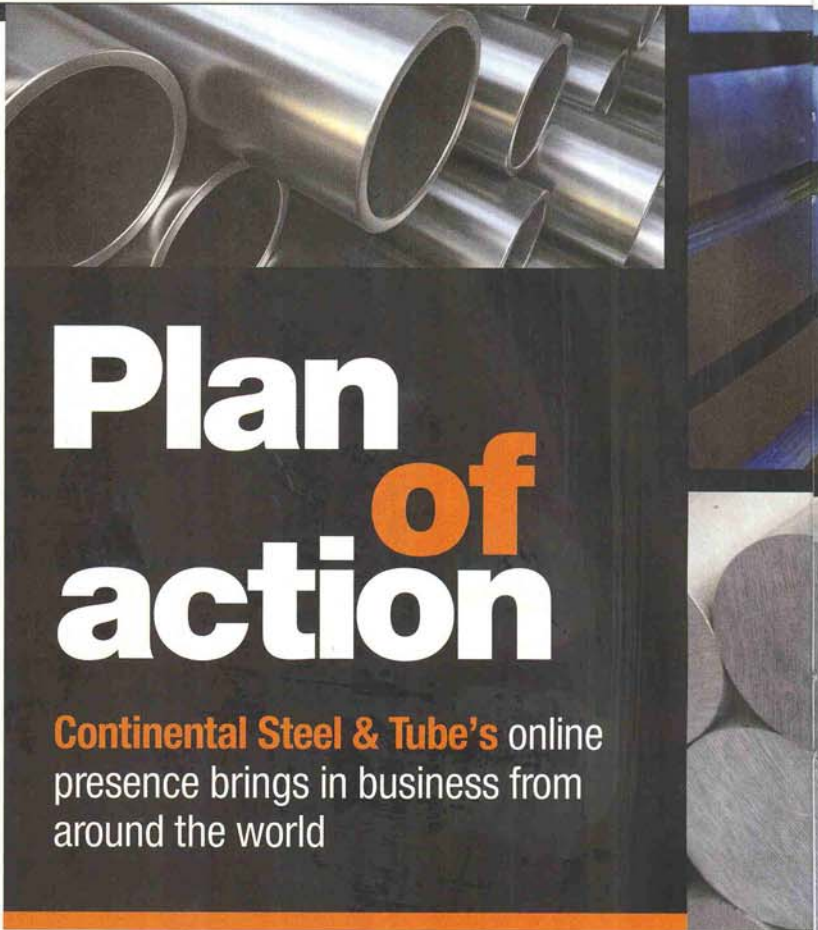
Continental Steel & Tube provides customers with a comprehensive inventory of aluminum, titanium, hot-rolled, cold-rolled, galvanized, stainless and electrical steel in coils, sheet, strip, plate, angles, bars, rounds, squares, hexagons and other shapes. The company also stocks tube and pipe in welded, DOM and seamless.

In 2008, Ascione founded a second company, Continental Chemical USA, Fort Lauderdale, Fla. The combined companies have a staff of 10 employees, maintain warehouses in Ohio and generate about \$15 million in annual sales.

Moving online with customers

The company's size allows it to retain its entrepreneurial spirit and flexibility and compete effectively against multinational companies and other larger distributors.

"In today's very challenging economic climate, we regard our [smaller] size as an asset—not a liability," Ascione says.



Plan of action

Continental Steel & Tube's online presence brings in business from around the world

"The controlled, fixed overhead that emanates from nimble, lean management enables our company to offer extremely competitive pricing. With the personalized services a smaller company like ours can extend to customers and prospective customers, we're often regarded by serious buyers as a highly preferable choice."

The company is "extremely focused in our areas of expertise," he continues. "We're not all things to all people. Instead, we target those discriminating buyers that rely heavily upon a supply chain that knows and understands their needs. Most companies try to provide high-quality, good service and competitive pricing; we guarantee it, and we do what's necessary to completely satisfy and maintain our customers."

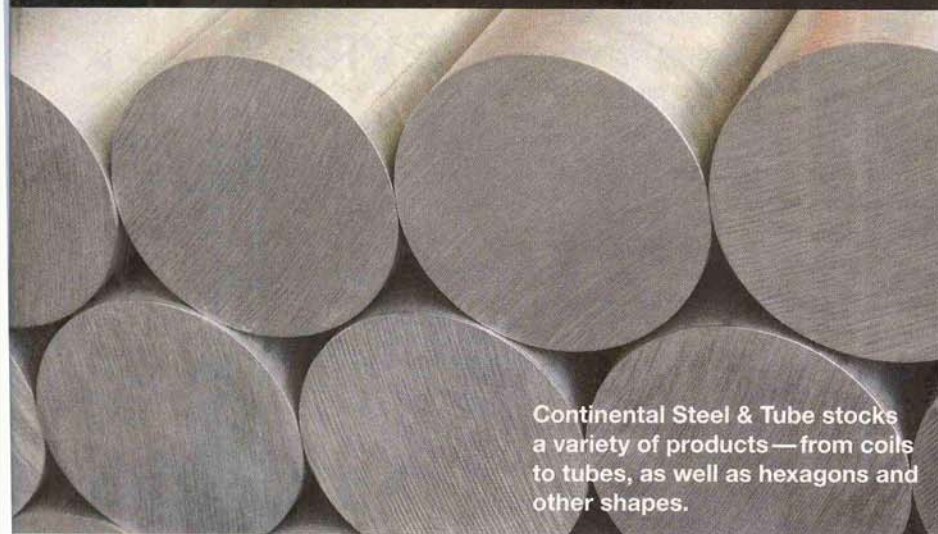
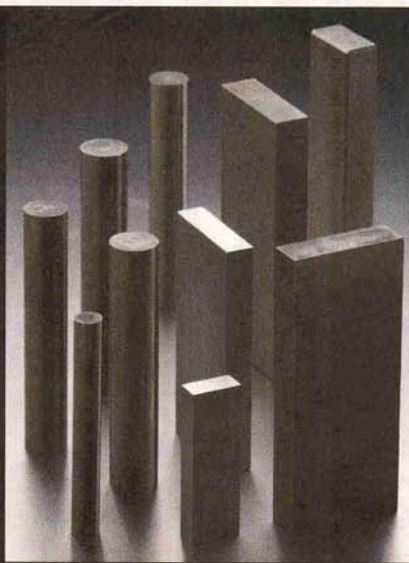
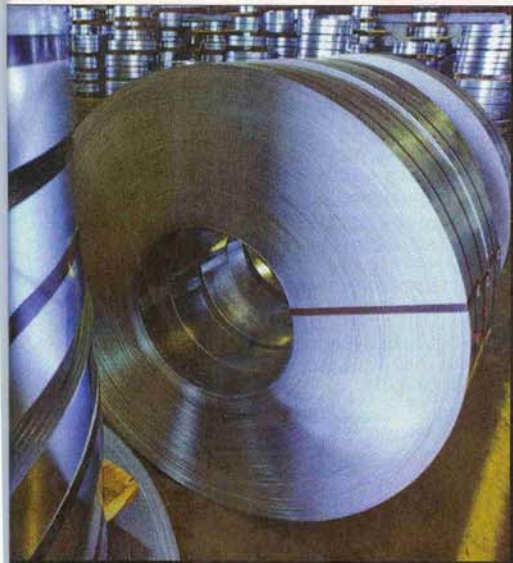
In today's economy, those customers have moved online, conducting research

and making purchases. As a result, Continental Steel & Tube chose an online strategy to help business grow and evolve, developing a website with ThomasNet.com, an online industrial search engine. Ascione was familiar with the company, having worked with the printed Thomas Register since the early 1980s.

Its online presence allows Continental Steel & Tube to "find bona fide buyers, determine what they need, create a viable proposal and efficiently process the order," he says. In addition, he wanted to further leverage the Internet to reach new markets and expand the company's distribution footprint.

Detailed catalog attracts buyers

Instead of hiring a full-time sales force to drum up new business, Ascione focused the company's online strategy on attract-



Continental Steel & Tube stocks a variety of products—from coils to tubes, as well as hexagons and other shapes.

ing prospects, initiating the sales conversation and encouraging visitors to request information or make a purchase. He chose ThomasNet's latest technology, the Navigator Platform, to help him achieve these goals.

"My company's use of the online tools offered by ThomasNet through their Navigator Platform attracts hundreds of viable inquiries from serious buyers every day. Instead of laboriously prospecting for leads, my sales department responds to inquiries and efficiently prepares and submits dozens of competitive quotations daily. Without the use of these tools and a professionally designed advertising campaign, these efficiencies wouldn't be possible," Ascione points out.

The Navigator Platform provides a highly detailed online catalog, which, for Continental, includes detailed descrip-

tions and 26,000 photos of aerospace metals, titanium rods, stainless steel tubes, brass milled and other products. The catalog includes specific product details and language that a prospective customer would use in an online search.

On Continental's website, visitors can view a full index of a dozen product categories where they can narrow their choices continuously based on certain specifications. For visitors who know exactly what they want, there is an option to search by keyword or item number.

Continental's staff also can take advantage of back-end tools that allow them to build on the content in the online catalog. They can add new products and edit what's available, keeping inventory up-to-date. The system also allows Continental to measure activity and adjust content as needed.

Extending sales worldwide

Ninety-five percent of Continental Steel & Tube's business comes directly through its website. The company receives 50 to 100 e-mails and phone calls every day as a result of Web visitors.

The company recently landed a \$1 million contract with the world's largest oil service company. According to the company's purchasing agent, Continental could compete for the business because the website gave him and his team the confidence that they could deliver on the order.

In addition, race car manufacturer Ferrari found Continental Steel & Tube online and now sources titanium for its Formula One division. Other new customers include: Siemens AG, Munich, Germany; The Boeing Co., Chicago; Lowe's, Mooresville, N.C.; Halliburton, Houston; and Ford Motor Co., Dearborn, Mich.

"My company's constant and professional Web presence has elevated our stature exponentially and enabled us to extend our purchasing and sales efforts worldwide," Ascione says. "Today, we're known and respected on all seven continents—thus our name: Continental Steel & Tube Co.

"Like most companies, we certainly recognize the significant changes and challenges that have affected our industry," Ascione says. "Unlike our competition, however, when the downturn began, instead of curtailing the expense to maintain our online presence, we deployed considerable additional revenues to ensure broader visibility. I'm pleased to report that our strategy worked—business has never been better." ■

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