

Unique niches

Kris Hanchette, executive vice president and general manager of MultiCam Inc., Dallas, discusses his company's products and how plasma equipment is changing

FFJournal: What equipment does MultiCam offer?

Hanchette: We're a full-fledged fabricator and build our own CNC knife routers, laser, plasma and waterjet cutting systems in-house. Few other plasma equipment manufacturers also make routers, lasers and waterjets. We build lasers up to 400 watts. A 180-watt laser can cut up to $\frac{3}{16}$ in. steel at a high speed. So for cutting thin sheet metal on a budget, this laser makes sense. Our laser with the complete metal cutting setup is offered with either a 4-ft.-by-8-ft. or a 5-ft.-by-10-ft. cutting bed.

We have a simple agenda: We want to build, design and sell what companies will buy. So we pay close attention to our customers and their needs and offer equipment that meets those needs.

Q: Do you have a niche for your plasma equipment?

Since we're a metal fabricator, we know what fabricators need and want. A lot of our own metal fabrication we subcontracted out. Then we decided to bring it in-house. Initially, we thought we'd have to buy a high-power laser, but we didn't have the budget for it. Some of the parts were cut using high-definition plasma systems, but they weren't the quality we needed. When we started looking into our own systems and put a high-definition plasma head on one of our CNC routers, it gave us excellent cuts. So we researched the equipment and decided to produce a unit using the Hypertherm high-definition plasma equipment.

As we've grown, we still sell the high-definition plasma, but Hypertherm has introduced a new HSD 130 plasma system that's an excellent cutting solution at a much better price. Now, using the HSD 130 system, we're actually selling many more. In fact, we're also introducing several new lower-cost products, such as our 1000-series heavy-duty plasma cutting system, to take better advantage of the HSD 130 that's allowed us to bring out a Cadillac machine at an entry-level price.

Q: Why do you think high-definition plasma offers more growth in the market over regular plasma?

What happens with customers is that as things change over time, the customer says, "I'm building this part with a plasma system now, but I'm not sure what our needs are going to be three months or a year from now."

The big advantage of purchasing a high-definition plasma system is that a shop can increase its quality for thinner parts. Also, the high definition allows the shop to be more flexible to take



KRIS HANCHETTE

jobs that it might not have been able to previously produce. It could be picking up work that a laser might've been doing.

It's much faster to cut thick metal with plasma than with a high-power laser. For example, when cutting $\frac{3}{4}$ -in.-thick steel, it can be cut at about 30 in. per minute with a 6-kW laser. Conversely, with a MultiCam unit using a Hypertherm HPR260 plasma head, $\frac{3}{4}$ -in. steel can be cut at 90 in. per minute, three times faster.

Q: What about waterjet? Can high-definition plasma take work away from this equipment?

We produce both systems. We want to make sure that our customers have the right equipment for their overall needs. There are certainly applications where a waterjet will work and a plasma system won't, such as cutting tile, plastics, glass or ceramics. In some ways, it's comparing apples to oranges, unless we stick to metal cutting, where plasma and waterjet systems often compete. To offer one over the other really depends on the customer's needs.

Q: What do you think is the future for plasma systems?

When the company was small, I couldn't afford to buy the best equipment. Now, as we've grown, I can't afford not to buy the best equipment. The bigger companies that have the resources tend to move into more sophisticated equipment, and they're going to move into higher-power equipment, like lasers, that require a large investment.

But there are still many companies that would like to have a high-power laser that just can't afford one, and they're scared to take the risk. So they'll be looking at a high-definition plasma system. Therefore, I believe plasma systems will continue to grow at a fast rate.

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