



MAKING WAVES

For 2017, a continued focus on productivity and throughput are popular themes as well as versatility to make up for the skilled labor shortage

by Jimmy Myers, senior editor



Sawing industry professionals, whether they produce saw blades, actual sawing machines and/or components in the periphery, are constantly evolving to bring value to customers. They're also listening to customers and delivering the tools they need for specific applications.

In an age when it seems technology changes every hour, keeping up with innovation is difficult. But sawing equipment manufacturers are also a driver, pushing the envelope of what can be done to improve productivity for customers.

Ultimately, the trends that pop up with every New Year are related to providing value to the consumer, and this year is no different. Sawing equipment manufacturers have an eye on technology in an effort to improve productivity, but they're also striving to offer sawing machines that bring a multi-tool use onto the shop floor for better throughput. At the same time, the manufacturing and fabricating

industries continue to find ways around the skilled labor shortage and come out on top.

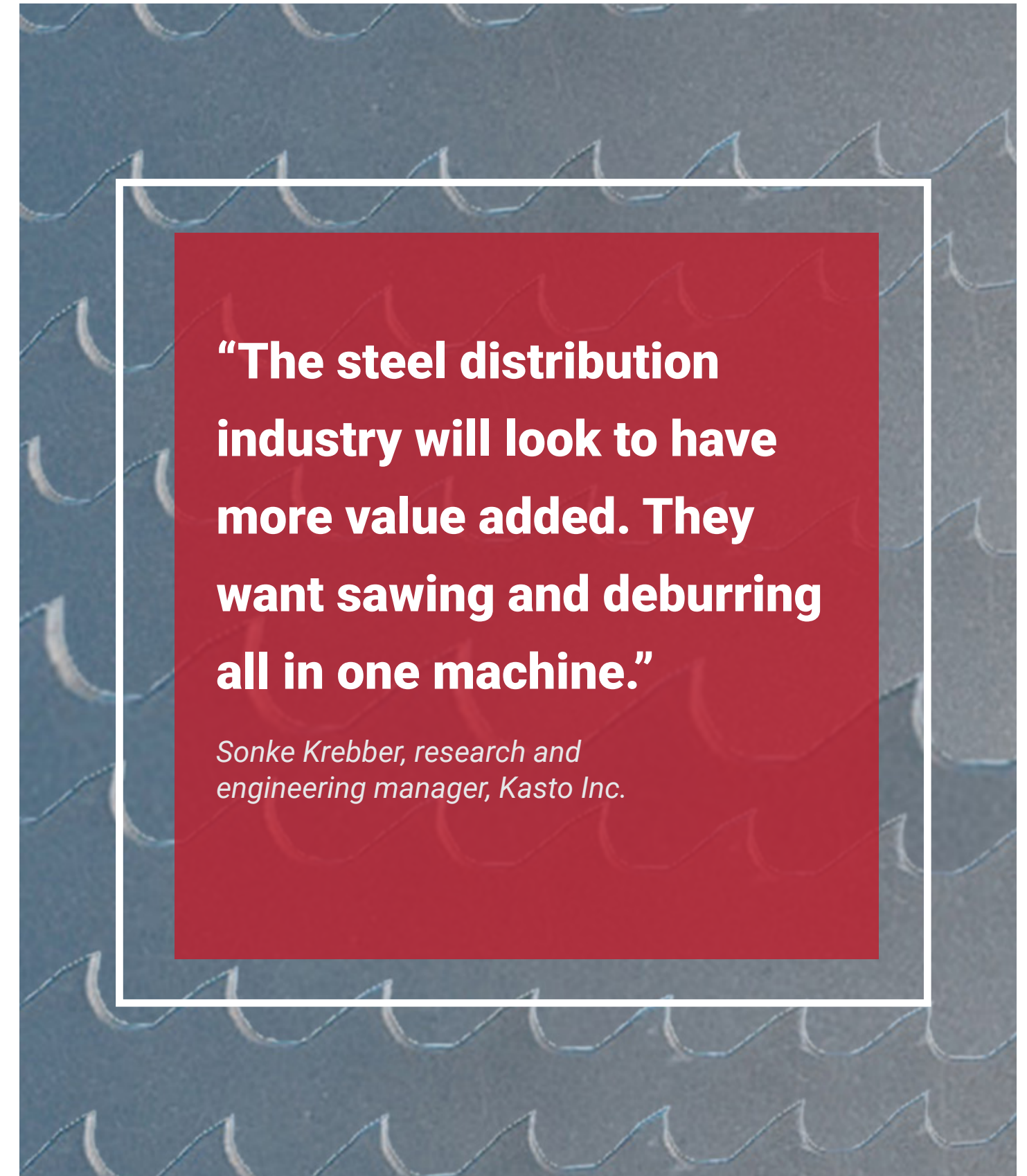
PUSHING PRODUCTIVITY

Sonke Krebber, a research and engineering manager at Kasto Inc., says his company's customers are facing productivity challenges, and the trend in 2017 will be to face those challenges by producing sawing machines that offer better productivity, less downtime, handle multiple applications, achieve longer blade life and consume less energy.

"They all have to bring out more pieces in less time with less effort," he says of the sawing machines.

There is also the issue of versatility – getting more than one application out of each machine.

"The steel distribution industry will look to have more value added," Krebber says. "They want sawing and deburring all in one machine. This is clearly a trend we see." →



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Jordan Loehr, an account executive with Edwards Mfg. Co., says he is seeing similar needs from customers.

“Everybody seems to want a machine that takes care of everything,” Loehr says, adding that an extra advantage with such machines is that they take up less space on the shop floor. “When we bring out new accessories, they are fairly compact.”

SKILLED LABOR AND AUTOMATION

America spends a lot of money on education, yet it’s not in the top 10 for education performance, falling short of countries like South Korea, Finland, The United Kingdom, Canada and Poland.

Regardless, the push to get more high school graduates enrolled at a four-year college is doing no favors for the

manufacturing industry. In fact, the push for higher learning has brought a negative connotation on vocational education as a “second rate” position. Manufacturers are feeling it, too, as finding skilled labor is becoming increasingly difficult.

It wasn’t always this way; according to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), in 1992, 97 percent of public high school graduates had completed at least one vocational education course. Many organizations are now calling these courses “career and technical education,” or “CTE.” It represents a move from traditional shop classes to a more “contemporary vision of high-tech education,” according to a survey from the NCES.

The lack of skilled labor is a problem that is driving manufacturers to increasingly seek out fully automated systems. Mike Finklea at Cosen Saws tells of a customer who says he has come to a point where he’s looking to have robots load his machine and pull off parts and accomplish everything with offline programming.

“More people are asking about monitoring capability,” Finklea says, which is something his company has already addressed with its Mechalogix system that utilizes sensors and cloud-based machine monitoring technology. Customers using the system get real-time machine performance data, which means they can make the necessary changes for smoother performance.

“They want to be more efficient and have less people working for them,” Finklea says. “They want to be able to manage what they’re doing better.”

Not all manufacturers will look to completely automate production, but there are some areas where automation makes a lot of sense, even for the smaller shop. Tasks that are repeatable and where accuracy is important, such as at the cutoff stations, are great candidates for automation. TigerStop LLC’s stop gauges can automate most existing saw, drill or punch stations, removing the need for a tape measure and increasing output while reducing waste. →

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Simon Spykerman, director of marketing at TigerStop, says his company is all about making equipment that is easy to use, which is becoming more important than ever.

“The big challenge I hear a lot about is hiring skilled labor,” Spykerman says, adding that TigerStop has included an even more user-friendly control device, a touchscreen tablet package using Microsoft’s Surface Pro, to make operating sawing machines with a TigerStop much easier. “We’re addressing this whole issue of skilled labor and training new employees with our TigerTouch platform.”

To reduce the number of mistakes made by operators, TigerTouch takes the tape measure out of their hands and uses innovative software to automate material processing. Parts lists can be downloaded from the customer’s office design software, making the TigerTouch control unit the hub for everything the sawing machine needs to do.

TigerTouch’s simple interface and intuitive controls make it easier to train operators. It also adds features, such as the ability to see and switch between up to three cut lists. And, it creates and stores custom offsets for math-free use by operators.

IMPROVED TECHNOLOGY

Doug Harris, president at HE&M Inc., says many of his customers, particularly in the oil and gas industry, are experiencing a challenge that they hope will not continue in 2017 – too much idle time on their hands and excess capacity.

While that’s been a common challenge among workers in many industries since the Great Recession, the current trend, Harris says, is that everyone is looking to achieve greater productivity with smarter solutions.

Sawing equipment manufacturers are increasingly drawn to “smart” solutions that bring a more digital-age component to the saws, but they’re

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Jordan Loehr, account executive, Edwards Mfg. Co.

also working on peripherals, such as material handling.

“If I have a saw that’s twice as fast and you’re doing longer parts,” Harris says, “unless you add the material handling onto it, you’re lucky to get a 20 percent increase in production.”

Utilizing offloaders and other material handling equipment, Harris says customers are able to increase productivity more than 100 percent.

“One company was hoping for a two-year payback,” Harris says of one sawing system with material handling HE&M sold. “We were able to do that in nine months.”

While the material handling portion is important, Harris says they’re continuing to see better production through smarter machines and greater connectivity.

“Customers want to know what they are able to do and how to tell what is going on with their machines,” Harris says. “What we’re doing to meet the challenge is all from the control standpoint.”

FOREIGN MARKET IMPACT

Rick Arcaro, vice president of sales and marketing at Hydmech Group Ltd., says the economy has had a hand in changing the metal processing industry. For instance, the unstable global economy and volatile pricing have sparked the demand on value-added services.

“This has made operational efficiency a critical element of success,” Arcaro says. “The challenges we all face are to provide value-added machinery to do more work with less people at an affordable price, but easy enough →



to operate with lower paid and less skilled labor.”

To address the challenge, Arcaro notes that Hydmech continues to develop steel processing machinery that has reduced scrap, yet also offers better productivity and cost savings to their customers.

“As we continue to introduce new products and processes,” Arcaro explains, “we have really focused on the after-sale support with our parts and service department trying to exceed our end users expectations.”

Arcaro says he’s noticed that in parts of the United States, he’s seeing signs that foreign manufacturers, which are looking to establish production facilities here, could help stop the hemorrhaging of jobs across our borders.

“Traditional manual jobs are unlikely to return,” he predicts, “but factors such as a desire to enter the American market directly, the inconvenience of shipping across the world and

rising wages in China have created the potential for a shift of advanced manufacturing back to the United States. A few dozen highly trained workers will be able to program machines to efficiently produce goods that previously required hundreds of factories outside of the United States.”

While various aspects of the sawing industry will remain the same, sawing equipment manufacturers continue to push the limits of what the equipment and software can do in an effort to meet customer needs. Challenges will continue to shape the trends of the industry, but the future looks bright for manufacturing and fabricating. ●

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