



Favorable trade winds

Steel processor combines sound work ethic with CNC punching technology to fuel growth and meet changing customer needs

Author Mark Twain said, “Twenty years from now you will be more disappointed by the things that you didn’t do than by the ones you did do. So throw off the bowlines. Sail away from the safe harbor. Catch the trade winds in your sails.”

That’s exactly what Paul Carling did when he began selling steel in 1992 with nothing more than a forklift and a torch. In 1996, his college roommate Brian Satsky joined Carling. He made deliveries in a dilapidated truck while Paul cut steel.

“I was working in the scrap metal business part-time,” says Carling of those days before he ‘threw off the bowlines’ to start SteelMart Inc. in Norcross, Georgia. “It was common practice to have yard sales at the scrap yard. People would stop by looking to purchase a single piece of steel. We thought, what if we take the next step, pull out what we feel is salable, set it aside and bring in customers rather than have them dig through scrap? Our market initially was used and surplus steel.”

The company grew, adding space, employees and equipment. In 2004, Carling and Satsky opened a second location in Gainesville, Georgia. In 2006, the pair completed construction on a new 20,000-sq.-ft. service center in Doraville, Georgia.

Hydraulic hold-downs prevent material slippage. (Guard was removed for the photo only.)



But it wasn’t long before SteelMart outgrew that space as well, prompting the partners to purchase a 60,000-sq. ft. steel production center in Tucker, Georgia.

Growing pains

“We’ve moved four times and are expanding our current facility by 47,000 sq. ft. under crane to house our structural sawing, drilling and punching operations,” says Carling. “Processing steel is

our bread and butter. Our niche from the beginning has been our ability to proactively respond to changes in market conditions and customer requirements and adjust our practices accordingly.”

It was this mindset that prompted SteelMart to look for new punching equipment. “Quite simply, one of our top customers’ specifications changed,” he explains. “The job required holes punched in plate not thermally cut. We were doing



uted exclusively by Trilogy Machinery. Rollers make it easy for operators to move heavy material across the punch. Its hydraulic hold-downs prevent material slippage and allow SteelMart to produce accurate, consistent holes. The Sunrise punch is equipped with a CNC back-gauge that can be programmed to run multiple parts quickly.

While the original job SteelMart bought the punch for has since ended, "the beauty of the equipment is that it is used for a range of jobs that come through the door. Dollars and cents wise, it is cheaper to punch plate than cut it," Car-

SteelMart replaces costly drilling operation with a 220-ton Sunrise Semi-Automatic CNC single-end punching machine.



Rollers make it easy for operators to move heavy material across the punch.

a tremendous amount of drilling, which was time consuming and costly. We needed to be able to punch 1½-in.-thick steel. Trilogy Machinery Inc. had the biggest punch on the market. Other machines we looked at gave us features we didn't want. We just needed to punch big holes in heavy plate accurately."

In 2015 SteelMart installed a 220-ton Sunrise Semi-Automatic CNC single-end punching machine, distrib-

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Punching

ling says. "You just have to be sure material handling is minimized. The hold-downs keep the plate from moving during processing. I've seen hold-downs tear up on other machines and that affects part quality. The rollers make it easy to move steel pieces without any strain."

Material handling is further minimized by the punch's ability to eliminate manual layout, measuring and part marking. This is due to the machine's backgauge, which can be retracted or moved forward. "It holds the accuracy so all parts are consistent," says Carling. "That's nice."

"We've found that layout is often the biggest expense and the culprit behind loss of time," says Ben Flamholz, Trilogy Machinery's national product manager for Sunrise. We help companies like SteelMart retain operators who have years of experience because their skill sets can be used more efficiently. Once they learn the machine, their productivity increases."

Industrial customers are busy these days, particularly structural fabricators.



SteelMart is able to punch big holes in heavy plate accurately and consistently.

"Structural steel accounts for about 75 percent of our business," Carling says. "We are able to punch different thicknesses on the Sunrise. If our plasma

cutting department gets busy, we have the flexibility to pull parts and saw and punch them instead. The punch can handle 80 to 90 percent of our needs."

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Punch meets automation

“Few companies realize you can automate a punch with a CNC control and increase its productivity,” asserts Flamholz. “It’s easy to think about CNCs on lasers, plasmas and press brakes but rarely do people associate a CNC with a punch machine or ironworker. Trilogy Machinery is one of two companies in the market that offers this capability. And the payoff period is quick—less than six months for most customers because they can perform part layout in a couple minutes versus hours of manual layout.”

Attracted by the advanced software, SteelMart operators are clamoring to learn how to run the punch. High schoolers participating in paid internships with SteelMart are also being exposed to the steel distributor’s technology.

“The punch holds the accuracy so all parts are consistent. That’s nice.”

Paul Carling, SteelMart

“Customers have products they want us to make,” Carling says. “They don’t have time to do it. We’re good at making parts to their expectations. That’s our niche. Equipment like the punching machine helps us do that.”

Service isn’t just a commodity for SteelMart’s customers though. “If we need special punches or dies, Trilogy Machinery can get us what we need,” says Carling. “If a customer needs a non-standard punch that requires a different setup, Trilogy Machinery specialists will work with us to make sure it’s done correctly. That’s been really helpful.”

In addition to more space, SteelMart may be looking at expanding its offering to include punched holes on angle iron. “Trilogy Machinery has a tool for that,” says Carling. “We plan to take a closer

look at Fabtech in November.”

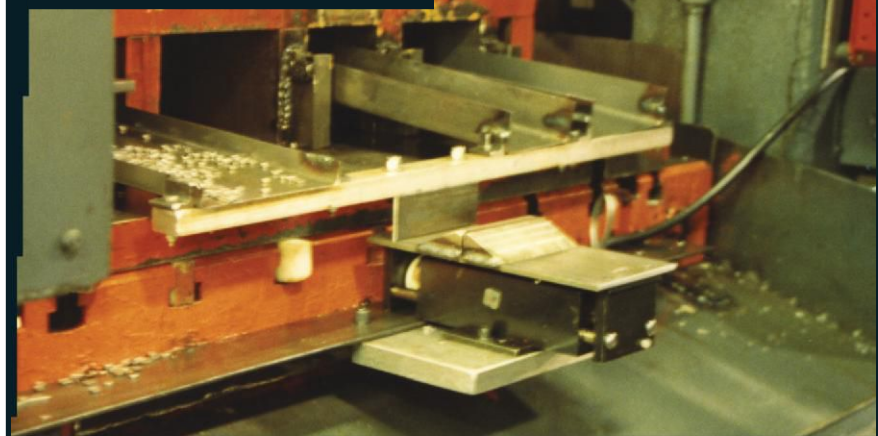
In the current climate, angle, plate and structural steel consumers want fast deliveries. That means efficient production.

“The real secret behind our growth is that we run our business based on a simple philosophy,” Carling says. “Do what you say you are going to do.” **FFJ**

SteelMart Inc., Tucker, Georgia, 770/416-6999, www.steelmartatlanta.com.

Trilogy Machinery Inc., Belcamp, Maryland, 410/272-3600, fax: 410/272-3601, www.trilogymachinery.com.

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