

ULC, Local Chamber of Commerce Article

Profile: United Lens Company

Bill Lannon and Jim Waddick sit comfortably around the conference table, talking business. To a visitor, it feels like they've invited you into their home. And in a way they have. Because Bill and Jim are two members of the United Lens family, which has been using homegrown talent to build its business for more than 90 years in the town of Southbridge.

Since it was founded in 1916, United Lens Company has been privately owned – by the same family, it should be noted -- and has experienced a long history of growth and diversification. Since its modest beginnings as a producer of molded spectacle lens blanks, United Lens has become recognized as a technological and business leader in the optical industry. And it services customers in some of the most demanding application areas, including aerospace and medical. A list of current customers includes such familiar names as Honeywell, Goodrich, and Northrop Grumman.

Diversity is a watchword at United Lens, which manufactures custom molded blanks for optical elements, as well as precision cut blanks that are sawed, shaped, generated, or wafered to spec. The company also offers an extensive optical glass and quartz inventory, along with polished and coated flat optics.

"We offer a wide range of solutions," Jim says, "and that breadth has helped us stay competitive. When we see that the business is changing, we have to be ready to move." One such example, Jim points out, was when the eyeglass market moved from glass lenses to plastic.

This adaptability is perhaps best illustrated in the company's newest division, called the Service Center. It specializes in precision machining of optical glass and other materials for customers who require faster delivery as well as high quality. In the Service Center, the same material may pass through any of a number of operations, including cutting, edging, surface grinding, centerless grinding, wafer slicing, CNC multi-axis machining, and curve generating, to meet the customer's requirements.



Another part of the plant houses the Molding Division, which produces hand-molded optical blanks, which are supplied to companies that manufacture finished optics used in a wide variety of applications.

In a third division, called the Optical Shop, operators run state-of-the-art equipment that performs close tolerance surfacing and shaping of flat precision optical elements, such as mirrors, prisms, windows, and other flat optical components, and, in many cases, applies thin-film vacuum coatings to the finished substrates.

Throughout the plant, the company stays competitive by focusing on productivity. Often times, that means investing in the latest technology. One example is the advanced wire saw technology the company put in place about two years ago. It's some of the highest precision technology in the industry, and it's a "lights out" operation – it requires a skilled operator to set it up, but then it runs continuously three shifts a day

"It was a big investment for the company, but this precision operation helps the company save on materials, some of which cost hundreds of dollars per square inch – and pass those savings along to the customer," Bill says. "In the optical conversion business, we're the only company that has this technology in-house."

So the next time you visit the United Lens offices, don't let the welcoming atmosphere fool you. Rest assured: these guys know what they're doing, and the next 90 years look very promising.