

Quality Design Machining, Inc.

A Success Story Written by Angela Clements Cattell

During high school Robert Fletcher was an avid motorcycle enthusiast who learned how to fix the very motorcycles on which he rode. However, he soon realized he could not always easily find the parts to finish the repairs. He became inspired to learn how to make the necessary parts that were not always available for sale. This interest eventually led him to attend Ashtabula Vocational School where he studied the trade of precision machining, and he later found a job at a machine shop in Mentor, Ohio requiring more skilled labor than his former position in production. While working at his job, he met Richard Muny, founder of Chemsultants, who would later inspire Mr. Fletcher to start his own machine shop by becoming his first customer. Moving fast forward many years later, Mr. Fletcher is now the proud owner of Quality Design Machining, Inc. located in Mentor, Ohio, a successful business that was started over 20 years ago.

Quality Design Machining was established in 1998 by Robert Fletcher as a machine shop and service provider for local manufacturers making pre-assembled parts for the adhesives, pneumatic pump and automotive industries. Mr. Fletcher employs both family and friends giving Quality Design a dependable and vested workforce. His workers must first attend a two year program at A-Tech Vocational School in Jefferson, Ohio and then they are trained informally by Mr. Fletcher himself in the areas of manual machining, CNC and computer technology.

Before officially starting Quality Design Machining, Mr. Fletcher first operated out of his garage while working for another company.

Richard Muny of Chemsultants became his first customer. Mr. Muny could not find another machine shop to make the kind of parts he needed, and Robert Fletcher was willing to go the extra mile and learn how to make those parts on his own. Between Chemsultants and maintenance customers referred to him by Mrs. Fletcher from her place of employment, he was able to dive into his new business full time and eventually lease building space located in Mentor, Ohio.

While his customer base grew, Quality Design Machining continued to grow producing more parts and developing more manufacturing capabilities in all areas. Mr. Fletcher relocated his business several times throughout the years to accommodate his needs. As he continued to expand, he moved into his most previous building location on Hamilton



Shown here is Robert Fletcher, owner of Quality Design Machining, inside of his new building at 9349 Hamilton Drive, Mentor, Ohio.

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Road in Mentor. Although the building was large at 6,000 square feet, Mr. Fletcher still needed an even bigger space to allow for more efficient production and equipment use. The additional space would help his business to continue growing by allowing him to expand services and hire new employees. He also wanted to own a building as opposed to leasing so he could start getting a return on his investment.

In 2014, Mr. Fletcher became aware of a 10,000 square foot building for sale, also located on Hamilton Road in Mentor. The building was owned by Muny Family Limited Partnership which was previously used by Chemsultants.

After meeting with a banker at First Merit Bank to look into financing this project, Mr. Fletcher was referred to Martin Gareau, a business advisor for the Lake/Geauga Small Business Development Center in September of 2014. Mr. Gareau reviewed Mr. Fletcher's business and financial information to help determine if purchasing the building was feasible. Mr. Gareau then began researching the SBA 504 loan program requirements for Mr. Fletcher's specific needs. He also examined a potential loan from the Lake County Economic Development Loan Fund to help fill in the financing gaps. Mr. Gareau met with Mr. Fletcher on a few more occasions and assisted him throughout the entire loan application processes for both loans. He helped the client by helping prepare necessary documents and responses to the SBA when clarification was requested. According to Robert Fletcher, "Marty made everything easy. He did everything except hold my hand through the application process. He kept everything simple."

By the middle of October, 2014, the SBA 504 loan was approved. The very next month, The County Commissioners passed a resolution approving the loan request for the LCED loan fund.



Mr. Fletcher was now able to purchase his building and finally own real estate to support his business. "Once you own real estate, you have equity and banks look at you differently," explained Mr. Fletcher. He went on to say, "I needed capital to grow my business to its' full potential, and that's where Marty came into the picture. It's well worth the effort to go after the financing; it's a win/win for everyone!"

Since owning his new building, Mr. Fletcher went from employing five workers to nine. He has doubled his work capacity through fabricating, machining, engineering and technological intelligence. His customers include but are not limited to Cheminstruments Inc.(formerly Chemsultants),

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All-Flo Pump Company, Stoneridge Inc., Royal Plastics Inc., American Roll Form Products and Lincoln Electric.

Quality Design Machining has also expanded into another area beyond business to business customers where he works one on one with individuals helping them to create their ideas and ultimately their inventions. He calls this subsidiary of Quality Design: "That's Bugenius." This provides additional income for the business giving Quality Design both machining rights and 30% of any profits made from the invention. The idea must be well thought out and palpable for Mr. Fletcher to move forward with the creation. "When owning a business, you must be very diversified; don't be afraid to think outside of the box," says Mr. Fletcher.

Mr. Fletcher has a great deal of advice to give other entrepreneurs when starting a business. "Save some money for working capital before going into business to take the pressure off of day to day expenses," he explains. He further encourages researching the business resources available before starting a venture such as the Small Business Development Center. "Don't think you know everything. Talk to people for specific advice which saves time and stress," he states.

Starting a business not only takes a lot of support from various business resources available, but also from your own family too. "Be prepared to work long hours. You will need an understanding and supportive family. It takes a lot of work to get to the level of having a team of help," explains Mr. Fletcher. He should know. Mr. Fletcher has both a wife and five children who have been there to support him throughout his venture.

When it comes to building your customer base, he urges entrepreneurs to be patient and to really get to know their customer. "It takes a long time to grow relationships with customers," he explains. Mr. Fletcher actually drives out to his customer's place of business to both deliver parts and to meet his customers face to face.

He further adds, "Get in contact with at least three people from each of your customer's place of business. By doing this, if one of those people leave that business to work somewhere else, you will still have other contacts that know you well." By keeping those lines of communication open with several people from each of your customers' place of business, you will keep bonds strong with your customer ensuring a lasting relationship and a long term source of income.

Mr. Fletcher also tries to do a great deal of networking to gain new customers. He met an employee of All-Flo Pump Co. while having lunch out at a restaurant and discussing his business capabilities. Subsequently, Quality Design Machining has been doing almost ten years of continuous business with them and the company with which they have since merged.

Lastly, Mr. Fletcher expresses the need to stick with what you know to save time and money. "Contract out when necessary to avoid wasting time," he explains. "Trade services on Craigslist to save on costs." He adds, "Also, network with friends in the

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trades for services. Pay them well and they will be a good source in the future too.” Contracting out is one solution to alleviating many operational pressures.

When owning a small business, taking the time to network and build relationships with customers, other contracting sources and various business resources will help you create the kind of foundation that can keep your business efficient and profitable for many years to come. The Small Business Development Center (SBDC) is one of those essential resources that can give you the support you require from the very start of your business to a time much later down the road. Providing assistance on areas such as start-up basics, business planning, marketing, human resources, loan packaging and much more, the SBDC can be instrumental in your small business growth and help you build the kind of successful small business of which most Entrepreneurs only dream.