

'Best year ever'

Local tech company has never had a sales downturn

BY AL PARKER
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TRAVERSE CITY — Several sections of Michigan's economy are in decline, but one 20-year-old Traverse City manufacturing company has never had a sales downturn.

"We're on track to have our best year ever," said Jim Childs, who owns Opti Temp with partners Don Williams and Dan Dorn. The company specializes in the design and manufacture of innovative heat transfer systems for commercial, military, industrial and laboratory uses.

"We've never had a down sales year. It's been a lot of hard work, but it's worth it," Childs said.

The owners are engineers and guide the high-tech company with a sort of "mentality of engineering."

"Our goal is to provide good value to our customers," said Childs.

"Typically, our clients come to us with a problem and, as engineers, we want to solve their problem."

Opti Temp offers several complete lines of chillers and heat exchangers, units used to control temperatures in lasers and other sophisticated equipment, including X-ray imaging equipment used by several countries for national security.

The company has years of experience in the design of process heat-



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Travis Dollaway assembles an evaporator for a chiller built by Opti Temp.

ing and cooling systems for lasers, welding, semi-conductor, plastics and other applications. Opti Temp services include basic heat and mass transfer calculations, plus system design. They also provide consulting engineering services.

In addition, the company designs and manufactures filtration and purification equipment, along with de-ionized water systems.

"About 75 percent of our products eventually get shipped overseas," said Childs. "We sell them to clients who put them on their equipment, which then gets sent to Europe or around the world."

Several of the company's clients are large military contractors, factories and hospitals, said Childs. They use Opti Temp's sophisticated units in a variety of formats.

For example, NASA uses an Opti Temp unit to maintain steady temperatures in the x-ray units that scan the Space Shuttle engines fol-

lowing a flight.

Another client installed a laser on a large jet as part of a nuclear missile defense system. The laser is designed to shoot down incoming missiles that could carry nuclear warheads.

"A laser gives off a tremendous amount of heat," said Childs, a Frankfort native who now lives in Traverse City. "But only 10 percent of the heat goes out with the laser beam and 90 percent of it has to be cooled. Our units do that. We did a lot of work to keep those lasers cooled."

Naturally, when doing business with defense firms, security is a high priority.

"Confidentiality is a big part of our business," said Childs.

Opti Temp's chillers also are used locally for a less intimidating function than missile defense.

"At least six area wineries are using our chillers to cool their products," said Childs. "We're constantly

getting calls from new customers."

Williams founded the company in his garage in 1988. Childs joined in 1995 and Dorn came aboard in 2003. Williams is now semi-retired, leaving Childs and Dorn to handle the daily operations. The company has 25 employees, about one-third of whom have engineering degrees.

"We've invested technology and our expertise in small companies," said Dorn, a Ferris State University grad who grew up in Grand Haven. "As they grow, we grow."

Opti Temp has commission sales representatives throughout the world, with two salaried sales people based in Kalamazoo and Phoenix.

"The last three years have been really dynamic," said Dorn. "We've tripled our sales in the past three years. Our markets are in areas that are starting to mature. People are counting on us as partners in their businesses, not just their suppliers."