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snips

APRIL 2008
VOL. 77 • NO. 4
www.snipsmag.com
A bnp media PUBLICATION

Virginia contractor speeds up with new machines

A magazine for sheet metal, heating, cooling and ventilation contractors

changing gears

By Michael McConnell

Virginia company's needs lead to first paring of high-speed technologies

A new machine wasn't going to make ColonialWebb Contractors — already a $200 million operation — a success. But company officials said it would make them more successful. That's what led to the Richmond, Va.-based operation's decision to purchase a new $750,000 coil line equipped with a power-pinning system that they say makes it one of the fastest such units anywhere.

The machine is the Insulmatic model IM5EG-GN-Weld from Iowa Precision Industries of Cedar Rapids, Iowa. Equipped with the five-head Power Pinner 50 from Rhode Island's Gripnail Corp., it allows duct liner to be fastened in 4- and 5-foot widths. Electronic PLC controls make positioning pins easier.

But what really excites people like Gripnail Vice President Dave Ashton about the machine is its speed — up to 50 feet per minute. It represents the first time a high-speed brake like Iowa Precision's has been used with an equally fast pinner like the model from Gripnail. The process can be done in as little as six-tenths of a second.

"That makes a lot of sense," Ashton said of the paring. But it wasn't easy to do.

"There was some technology that had to be overcome," he said.

ColonialWebb Contractors purchased this new coil line from Iowa Precision Industries for its Richmond, Va., shop. The machine has a high-speed wrap brake, shown in the foreground, and a high-speed pinner/welder from Gripnail, pictured in the background. Photo by Dave Ashton.

Va. company has grown, changed with times

Despite its name, ColonialWebb doesn't date back to Revolutionary times. But it has witnessed some major changes in the mechanical contracting industry.

In 1972, Bill McAllister started Colonial Mechanical in Richmond, Va., and Howard Webb Sr. launched Webb Technologies in Norfolk, Va. The two separate companies often worked together on projects.

Then in 1999, at the height of the utility company-fueled consolidation movement, Colonial and Webb were purchased by First Energy Corp., one of the largest power companies in the United States.

Four years later, the Webb family repurchased the companies from First Energy. In 2005, they merged to create ColonialWebb Contractors, the largest such operation in Virginia. Today, the combined companies have more than 1,400 employees in South Carolina, Maryland and North Carolina as well as Virginia, and annual revenue of $200 million.

Major clients for their HVAC, piping, refrigeration and electrical services include such household business names as Capital One, Costco, Sara Lee, Target, Ikea and the U.S. Department of Defense and commonwealth of Virginia.

Need for speed

Previously, similar machinery had to be slowed down to about 25 feet per minute when attaching duct liner, significantly sacrificing efficiency. The new unit eliminates that problem, which made ColonialWebb managers very happy. It's been in use since late 2007.

"This new line is so automated, it has allowed me to move three of my guys to other areas," said Dave Owensby, the company's sheet metal fabrication superintendent. "The sealing system replaced one person; the wrap brake requires only one person to unload and I only need one person to close the Pittsburgh (machine) because the duct is coming out in one piece instead of two."

Until now, most remove brakes made ductwork in L-shaped sections, requiring two sections to make the traditional rectangular box. This configuration eliminates that extra step, saving time, although it does make things busy for the operator.

A close-up look at duct coming off the Iowa Precision wrap brake. Photo by Dave Ashton.

Dave Owensby (left), ColonialWebb's sheet metal fabrication superintendent, and machine operator David Ledford, both say they are very happy with the new equipment. Photo by Dave Ashton.

Machine

A closer look at the high-speed Gripnail pinner that allows the coil line to operate at 50 feet per minute while adding insulation to ductwork. Photo by Dave Ashton.

"When you make ductwork that fast, you'd better have a good person catching duct at the end of the line," Owensby said. "The gap time between ducts is just enough for the operator to put a label on it, place the duct on the floor and go back for another piece."

The person running ColonialWebb's line now produces 1,000 pounds of duct per hour.

"It's been a lot more efficient for us," Voltz said.

Less space

An added benefit is the machine doesn't take up too much space, added Rick Martin of N.B. Handy Co., the wholesaler that sold the machine to ColonialWebb.

"It gives them more room to work with," Martin said. "It's the fastest machine in the market with the smallest footprint."

He estimated that it takes up 200-300 less square feet than similar equipment.

Unlike many machines, it can use 2-inch pins without changing the machine's feeder bowls, saving more time, Martin said.

For Martin, Gripnail's Ashton and officials at Iowa Precision, making the sale was a long process, as they worked for two years to create something that would meet ColonialWebb's needs. The new machine was replacing a 20-year-old model from Engel that had become in need of regular repair.

David Ledford unloads finished ductwork from the machine. Photo by Dave Ashton.

Before they agreed to purchase the newly designed machine, ColonialWebb's executives visited a shop in the Atlanta area and saw a similar piece in operation, although Warren Voltz, ColonialWebb's detailing manager, noted no other shop has its exact configuration.

"The speed and quality" caught our attention, Voltz said. The machine downloads directly from Technical Sales International software.

ColonialWebb officials say the new machine has significantly saved time for the busy company.

"It's been a lot more efficient for us," Voltz said. "You're cutting out a lot of hand inputting (of information)."

Ashton said he thinks the matching of a high-speed brake and pinner is going to excite a lot of sheet metal companies in the future.

"You're going to be making more duct in a shorter period of time," he said. "High-production shops are going to be very interested."

Reprinted from April 2008 SNIPS, a BNP publication.