



Space savers

Master distributor and processor makes use of each inch of its facility from floor to ceiling

BY GRETCHEN SALOIS

Expansion meant a new perspective for Olympic Steel Inc.'s Schaumburg, Illinois, warehouse. "We've had the same footprint since 1993. Customer demand brought us to where it was time to build another facility to continue growing," says Andrew Wolfort, regional vice president for the Bedford Heights, Ohio-based metals distribution chain. "We were limited by town restrictions to [expanding by only] 42,000 square feet, so we quickly realized we needed to move away from traditional horizontal stacking of sheet metal to accommodate our new coil processing line."

Space wasn't the only concern. As individual sheets become thinner and requirements for surface condition more stringent, quality control proved difficult with the traditional storage method of stacking material on top of itself. "We had to move toward a more protective storage method. Scratching or damaging the sheet metal was not an option.

"Coming off the street, we didn't know the variety or range of quality of racking systems available," Wolfort says. "I discovered early on there is not only a wide range of systems but also different levels of design service. Some of these racking options were from a catalog and you pretty much ordered from what they had available and installed the racks yourselves. We knew

from the beginning we would need a more sophisticated approach."

Joined efforts

Olympic Steel chose Combilift's ST series forklift to maneuver material throughout the shop floor. "It was Combilift's Jeff Saxman who suggested we take a look at Canrack's racking systems," Wolfort recalls. "Right away, we noticed the design of the racks positioned the bolts that hold the arms in place off to the side, as opposed to the more typical front."

Wolfort also noticed that Canrack designed its racking system by taking into account how fork trucks operate, including how guided aisles are laid out. "We bought a guided aisle and lift that tailored

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Cantilever racks keep products off the floor yet readily accessible without causing damage to inventory.

the racking and shelving systems to ensure materials can't move or shift as much, which reduces friction and any damage to the materials," he says.

Combilift and Canrack supply customers requiring narrow-aisle storage. "We openly share and develop the engineering details to ensure the customer has a turnkey system," says Jeff Saxman, regional vice president of sales at Combilift's U.S. base in Greensboro, North Carolina. "We're willing to customize any configuration as opposed to just offering whatever we have available."

"We're not trying to sell based on a script or a set of flyers," says Jason Clark, president at Canrack Storage Systems Inc., Toronto, which has developed storage solutions for 40 years. "I let the inventory tell me how it needs to be stored."

Early meetings between Canrack and

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any customer involve a lot of questions. "I need to understand the customer's business, what they do, how and why they do it that way. Then I'm able to come up with a systems design that works for their needs and their building layout," Clark says.

"All service centers want to have as much inventory on the floor as they can—provided [that] keeping it on hand isn't an inefficient process," Clark says. "When an Olympic Steel-type operation is turning coil into [sheet blanks], they need to do a lot with limited floor space. The customer de-

manded a different product, and Olympic started producing more, but then ran out of places to put it. It's a natural progression. Their customers' demand increased and so they realized if they were going to keep up, they'd need to put it away more efficiently."

Moving up

Instead of stacks of metal lined up horizontally along the shop floor, Canrack's design places material vertically. "You can go up versus spreading stacks of metal all over your warehouse floor," Worfort says.

“Instead of stacking thousands of pounds on top of traditional wood skids, our system has an individual skid per shelf.”

Olympic Steel’s team told Canrack it did not want to have a racking system that was going to hold 10,000 to 20,000 pounds in a slot. “It would be an individual skid per slot,” Wolfort says. Canrack measured and adjusted its design to accommodate space limitations as well as Olympic Steel’s requests to keep floor space open.

Canrack went through multiple designs to accommodate Olympic Steel’s needs. “There were multiple bays with multiple cranes placed perpendicular to those bays,” Clark recalls. “We came up with a plan so a side loader could be accessed from the back of the system without having to crane material through all the racks.”

Olympic Steel is getting the most out of its 42,000-square-foot expansion. “We are using half of the square footage we’d otherwise have eaten up using a traditional stacking method,” Wolfort says. “We’re able to not only store metal sheet but also maintenance-re-

lated items, allowing us to be better organized and able to keep and maintain our facility. It’s less hazardous for our workers. They are no longer tripping on material sticking out of a rack or cutting themselves while walking through stacks of steel. Everything is neatly tucked out of harm’s way.”

Incremental design

The arms on Canrack systems are adjustable in 3-inch increments. “That helps the customer figure out how they can store inventory,” Clark says. “More importantly, two or three years down the road, it’s easy for the customer to change out setups. Our racks are made from brake-formed steel in varying gauges so they are the size and capacity they need to be.

“Each column tapers outward,” he continues. “They are wider at the bottom and thin out toward the top. That allows customers in the truck have a better visual range as well as make sure that when racks are fully loaded, they are never bending into the aisle where the side loader could be.”

Canrack’s team visited Olympic Steel multiple times, adjusting designs as they went along.

“We appreciated the time Canrack spent because we were spending about \$11 million on a building and equipment to go with it,” Wolfort says. “We didn’t want to hold back on anything. The entire system at Canrack was sturdier than other options we reviewed and offered the smoothest, most protected surface without nuts or bolts or weld seams that could catch onto thin pieces of metal and bend or dent them.” ■

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