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Electrical Apparatus

More than Motors

**Essential
business**
in the time of coronavirus

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Recycling EV batteries
The Covid-19 stimulus

Electrical work in the time of Covid-19

As businesses across the country faced shut-downs or ramp-ups, the electrical industry responded to the novel coronavirus crisis in many ways

By Selena Cotte, *EA* Managing Editor

Where were you during the 2020 SARS-CoV-2 crisis?

The pandemic that's swallowed up the better part of the year will no doubt be a historical moment to share with children, grandchildren—or just record for posterity, generally. Many industries have been shut down, or recreated in a virtual space. The argument for what constitutes an “essential” business has been had, and the verdict is in: electrical repair and maintenance is as essential as they come.

Every shop and distributor has their own approach to work, even on an average day. This depends on their location, their typical clientele, and the strengths (and weaknesses) of their own people. How they respond to the coronavirus is no different, but everyone took their responsibility as “essential” business seriously.

Working in a crisis

In mid-March, states across the country began closing down non-mandatory operations, implementing what we've called “stay-at-home” orders, or mandating that residents “shelter in place,” for all except emergencies.

As unprecedented crises typically go, there was no protocol for what this might actually mean, and confusion abounded regarding: What is essential? Who can stay open in these trying times? Industrial repair center City Machine Technologies in Youngstown, Ohio, was quick to let their community know that no matter what, they would be in business, sending out notice as soon as their governor issued the order.

“Ohio has been issued a ‘stay-at-home’ order from Governor DeWine, and CMT is excluded in this order because our work on power plant operations, food manufacturers, municipalities and commercial and industrial HVAC makes us essential,” Claudia Kovach, vice president at CMT, said. “Our operations have not been disrupted, and we will continue business as usual.”

Many repair and maintenance shops are finding themselves in similar situations. While some of their service jobs may be “inessential,” the majority of them are not. In an EASA webinar held on April 8 and hosted by the association's Management Services Committee, titled “Coping with Coronavirus Impacts,” an early poll indicated that none of the 50 or so participants at the meeting served primarily in-essential businesses. Many shops still open have remained so to fill this need.

“Anything for hospitals and related to medical needs or anything that could impact health, safety or our food supply.

For some companies that could be exhaust fans or blowers, for others, elevators and for still others, it could be stamping presses,” said Jennifer Ake-Marriott, CEO of Redmond Waltz Electric in Ohio, when asked to define “essential.”

As the backbone of bigger industries, Redmond Waltz is taking its mission very seriously, even in these confusing times. “We keep manufacturing thriving in Cleveland. Steel mills, forging, metal stamping, automotive, plastic extrusion, aerospace—we keep them up and running,” Ake-Marriott said. “Our tagline is ‘It's downtime or Redmond Waltz’ and that really sums up the philosophy.”

However, while remaining sturdy themselves, Ake-Marriott understands the importance of being flexible with others, and rolling with any punches that may come.

“In a general way, we have reached out to our customers that have critical spares to be repaired that we will work with them on payment terms,” she continued. “We don't want our customers to be damaged because they waited on a repair they shouldn't have. We need our customers to survive this and come out the other side ready to work.”

Please turn to next page



Rea Magnet Wire of Fort Wayne, Ind., used their aluminum stock to donate mask components to their local hospital. —Rea Magnet Wire photo

Not quite business as usual

While the work at an electric motor shop is never fully predictable, many have had to make changes in their daily routines, protocols, and workload to accommodate this unique situation.

“For a few weeks, things seemed to change weekly if not daily,” Ake-Marriott said. “On March 9th, we rolled out more extensive guidance and started asking people to be mindful of their physical proximity to other people, to practice social distancing (no more face to face meetings) and set a schedule for disinfection of shared surfaces to happen three times a day. We required everyone on our shop floor to wear gloves, we separated shared office space, and started requiring people to work from home as much as they could.

“[Sometime in April] we decided to split our shifts. We want as few people in the building as possible at any given time but also to make sure that if someone does become ill, our entire workforce isn’t forced to self-quarantine because of exposure,” she continued. “We have also gotten stricter with the work from home. For example, our sales staff are all former machinists and mechanics, and we will need them to fill in should the unthinkable happen and we lose our workforce for an extended period of time. For the time being, they are not allowed in the building.”

For Redmond Waltz, early action, as well as compassion for their workers, was key to their peace of mind and their staff’s safety.

“Basically we took it seriously and started early,” Ake-Marriott said. “Our feeling is that we didn’t just need to keep our employees safe, but we had to be sensitive to the needs of individual families and make efforts to extend our precautions to them as well.

“We felt that it didn’t do much good to keep our workplace clean and disinfected if our people didn’t have the same ability in their own homes.”

For those who are coming in every day, new measures are in place to ensure everyone’s safety.

“Everyone has their temperature taken before entering the building,” she continued. “[There are] no sales calls, no deliveries inside, and everyone wears a mask when they are in proximity to others. We have [also] given all employees bleach and water solution in large spray bottles to take home for disinfection purposes and are generally trying to do whatever we can.”

Fellow Ohio shop City Machine Technologies has done similar things to ensure operations run smoothly.

“We are following all CDC protocols in our shops. We have a handful of associates just going around and cleaning and disinfecting,” Kovach said. “We check associates’ temperatures before each shift and actively remind people to stay at home if they or someone in their household does not feel well.”

In neighboring Indiana, residents are under a similar stay-at-home order. Fort Wayne-based Rea Magnet Wire, a manufacturer of magnet and nonferrous wire products, has also been taking the issue seriously.

“The health and safety of our employees comes first, and we already have a very strong foundation to keep employees

healthy and safe with our existing policies,” Weston Dunker, marketing manager at Rea Magnet Wire, said. “We are following the guidelines outlined by the CDC when it comes to additional cleaning and sanitation. We have completely limited travel and anyone that can work from home is.”

Slow sales but high hopes

It’s no secret that we’re facing an economic crisis as a result of the shutdown. No motor shop can survive on “essential” business alone, and like businesses in other industries, many are facing decreased sales and uncertainty about what’s going to happen next. The Small Business Association’s coronavirus loan programs have piqued great interest across industries, and much confusion as well—it was one of the most talked about subjects during EASA’s April 8th webinar, and even for those who aren’t looking for outside assistance, it’s hard not to notice a difference.

“[Business] has basically fallen off a cliff,” Ake-Marriott said. “The first few weeks we were down 20-25% and it felt like, ‘OK, this isn’t great but we can do this.’ But [now, mid-April], we are down 60% and the outlook is worse for next week and the week after.

“Right now, we are hoping that we will continue to get the emergency rush work we usually do from elevator companies, hospitals, essential manufacturing, etc.,” she continued. “In the meantime, we are keeping busy with a long list of chores like painting interior spaces, scrapping and some long overdue organizational projects.”

At City Machine Technologies, new kinds of jobs have come through to keep them busy while more common jobs are put on hold.

“Our business has slowed and some purchase orders and potential jobs have been pulled from us during this pandemic, but we are seeing a decent amount of emergency work,”



Redmond Waltz Electric of Cleveland, Ohio, worked through the coronavirus crisis, and aimed to be a source of support for its workers, no matter what.
—Redmond Waltz Electric photo

Kovach said. “We aren’t as busy as we once were, but for now, we are holding our own.”

Fellow Ohio shop Ideal Electric, based in Mansfield, has faced similar challenges, but remains optimistic.

“We have had a disruption in some of our supply chain, and deliveries have been delayed,” company vice president Nicholas Phillips said. “But we have been resourceful and quick to act to mitigate any impact on our customer’s deliveries. All at Ideal are taking real pride in the work we’re doing to meet expectations and keep moving for all.”

Luckily, the company had a head start on certain remote work tasks, beginning with pre-pandemic measures.

“Fortunately, before the distancing measures, we had thoroughly modernized Ideal’s IT stack, and our cloud-based architecture has meant we have all the tools we need to work anywhere,” Phillips said. “We’ve all gotten pretty good at making Microsoft Teams meetings and have taken the opportunity to improve our backgrounds and lighting!”

Helping hands

Perhaps those familiar with American icon and legend Mr. Rogers will recall his famous adage, told to children in the midst of any crisis: “Look for the helpers.”

During the pandemic, there was no shortage of volunteers willing to dedicate their unique capabilities and manpower to the global effort.

Rea Magnet Wire took notice of the mask shortage in the area, and chose to lend a hand to their local hospital, Parkview Health in Fort Wayne, by repurposing some of their materials for donation.

“We do not manufacture complete masks—we manufacture aluminum strips that are inserted into the nose portion of the mask,” Dunker said. “The aluminum allows the user to form the mask to the bridge of their nose. Our equipment is running 24/7 and we manufactured as much material in March as we did in the first half of 2019. We have donated 25,000 pieces of aluminum for these masks and are planning to donate more.”

While this crisis is unprecedented, Rea’s work with needy causes is not. Similarly, four years ago the manufacturer donated 1,500 bottles of water to Flint, Mich. This isn’t even the first time they’ve partnered with Parkview Health.

“We have an existing relationship with this hospital and have done charitable work together in the past. We did an employee kickball tournament with them to raise money for the United Way. They won, but both companies had a great time raising money for a good cause,” Dunker said. “We had an opportunity to provide some support in this unprecedented time and we were privileged to do so.”

Others, like Ideal, used their unique assets to extend an arm to the broader community.



Mansfield, Ohio-based Ideal Electric saw an opportunity to be a resource to the EASA community through the pandemic, and opened its test floor to all who needed it. —Ideal Electric photo

“To extend EASA shops’ capabilities and footprint to serve their customers in bigger ways, we are opening up Ideal’s immense U.S. manufacturing capabilities—a win-win-win proposition, Phillips said. “We are breaking from the traditional OEM’s ‘closed doors’ position to an ‘EASA-industry-as-a-family’ spirit.”

The company announced in late March that it would open its test floor beyond its typical customer base, in order to serve the electrical community at large. It positions itself as a partner for all EASA-shops, and thinks that now should be a time of help and openness.

“As a third-generation EASA shop owner, Jim Petersen Jr. (the owner and president of Ideal) has found large OEMs are not at all set up to do this well, so the shop and the customer lose,” he said. “By re-engineering Ideal from the ground up as a huge EASA shop extension and OEM partner, not as a win-lose competitor to a local shop, we can serve the EASA industry and customers in a bigger and better way than ever before.”

“We have performed three large jobs in support of EASA shops this month, allowing these shops, and us, to deliver for their customer, and ultimately our great nation, service they would not have otherwise been able to do,” he continued.

Ideal has also made a unique move to continue a hiring search in the midst of the pandemic—odd when others are considering layoffs and furloughs.

“This is a difficult time, and everyone is feeling the pain,” Phillips said. “Many of our friends and family have seen layoffs and furloughs. While our dream would be to hire everyone who has lost a position, we are bringing on strategic people who can contribute to our sustainable growth.”

Please turn to next page

Continued from previous page

Redmond Waltz has also taken the opportunity to look after its own team, considering the broad impact of the circumstances. “We supplied everyone with a ‘gift’ bag to take home that included hand sanitizer, disinfecting wipes, masks, vitamin C, and zinc lozenges,” Ake-Marriott said. “We have committed to replenishing those supplies as we are able.”

Risks and hard choices

Working during these difficult times means incurring risk, of course. Many will be lucky and won’t face the possibility of an outbreak in their business, but that cannot be the case, with everyone in the midst of such a widespread problem.

A number of facilities (especially distribution and manufacturing centers, which typically have more workers in proximity to one another) have reported the presence of the coronavirus in their businesses, including an ABB plant in Rogersville, Tenn. The conglomerate took some time to sanitize the plant, ensuring the public that it followed the CDC’s guidelines carefully, but made sure to remind its workers that the job they were performing was worth it.

“We have deep cleaned the entire facility, enhanced our social distancing recommendations, and established an effective active screening process,” a statement from the company said. “Our goal is to create a safe environment and maintain a healthy workforce. We will keep updating our employees with further guidance and will take appropriate measures to mitigate the impact for our customers.”

Other workers have unfortunately had to face the hard choice of being laid off, or risking their own safety. Further, at the April 8th EASA webinar, some unnamed companies mentioned challenges related to how seriously some employees were taking the crisis as opposed to others who were unfazed by guidelines and tended to business as usual.

The reality about electrical work is that for those doing the most essential tasks, there is not a work-from-home option. At Redmond Waltz, for those who felt uncomfortable being exposed to other people on a daily basis—for health or family concerns, usually, there was a difficult decision to be made.

“We did have some older employees ask to be laid-off, which we complied with. We don’t want anyone to feel unsafe coming to work,” Ake-Marriott said.

Life, post-pandemic

With stay-at-home orders being perpetually extended, and more and more question marks coming to the forefront of the national discourse, many shops were realistic, and yet optimistic about their futures.

“I think the immediate effect will be that companies will behave as they did after the economic crash – hoard cash, limit preventative maintenance, try to bring more services in-house, and make decisions based on economy versus value. That will take a few years to shake loose,” Ake-Marriott said. “But on the positive side, the small businesses that survive will be the ones that were able to be dynamic and more nimble with their service offerings, and were able to be creative in how to meet the needs of their customers in a changing environment. That type of innovation along with business consolidation happened in the crash, and it will happen this time too. People find a way.”

Dunker agrees:

“I think people are resilient and come together in times of crisis and find new ways of doing things,” he said. “I think there will be long-term changes, but it’s nearly impossible to predict what those will be.”

Phillips believes that they are in a unique position to be successful in the crisis, and sees others following their steps in the future.

“Ideal is living our vision – ‘Build the Business,’ Phillips said. “Every week we work to expand our products, services and team to service new and legacy customers in ways our past global conglomerate owners weren’t as interested in. Because of our immense capabilities and independent individual ownership, we’re able to be nimble, which helps us to adapt – pandemic or not.

“That said, we believe this time will shift how business gets communicated, and virtualization will likely speed it up,” he continued. “Adoption of the more collaborative features of our tools has accelerated with all our team members and that won’t end when distancing rules relax.”

While remote working tools are useful, he is looking forward to a more connected time.

“Yet, we believe our friendships and relationships will be more important than ever,” Phillips said. “Ideal handshakes will once again be the gold standard.”

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City Machine Technologies in Youngstown, Ohio, was open and ready to work in spite of a shelter-in-place order mandated in the state. Its work is closely entangled with emergency services, meaning it—alongside other electrical shops—fit the definition of “essential.”

— City Machine Technologies photo