

Ingenuity is the ultimate export

Trading the 3 D's for the 3 H's has refined America's brand

Allow me to just come out and say it. We need free trade. Free trade has become an undeniably essential piece to a healthy relationship with a global economy. It was never a zero-sum game and won't ever be.



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As the CEO of a company that develops, manufactures and markets a mass-market technology product, I once found myself wondering what category our business fits in. Are we a technology and intellectual property company? Are we a manufacturer? Are we a consumer marketing company? The answers are yes, yes and yes.

What I've realized about my company might also be true for many other Northeast Ohio companies, or at least the ones successfully navigating this highly competitive global economy.

Renewed emphasis on thinking

Up until a few decades ago, manufacturers reaped heavy profits in an environment often characterized by the "3 D's" — dirty, dark, and dangerous. But that's not how we compete anymore. Overseas economies have created a competitive advantage fostering policies that allow manufacturers to take on dirtier, darker and more dangerous work for far less cost. Yes, some jobs here were lost during this transition. And dare I say it, but I think that's OK. Here's why.

We are now seeing a good number of manufacturing companies transitioning from those 3 D's by riding the high road on the 3 H's — high tech, high paying and high value. Roles once considered ancillary like researchers, scientists, designers and copywriters are now being emphasized as American companies realize that strategy and thinking are the functions that create differentiation. That

kind of cultural thinking can't be easily outsourced. It's because of this renewed emphasis on "thinking" that we are seeing an incredible surge in American ingenuity. In fact, that's been proven by some of the outcomes of NAFTA.

Refinement of our brand

As you probably know, NAFTA was created 20 years ago primarily to expand trade between the U.S., Canada and Mexico by easing the trade barriers between the 450 million people living in the three countries. I wouldn't call it a perfect agreement by any means and we all have our opinions, but some things are certain. Facts are facts. NAFTA more than quadrupled trade over the last two decades, boosting economic growth and wealth creation in all three countries, according to data provided by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce. That same data shows that even though NAFTA increased the U.S. trade deficit, it still benefited the U.S. economy by increasing exports.

It turns out that even though our manufacturing might now face new challenges, it's been coupled with a reinvigorated emphasis on a new export: forward-thinking ingenuity. We've become really, really good at turning novel technologies and clever applications into products and brands that people not only want, but are willing to pay more for.

Our high technology, our living wages and our tenacity for adding higher value has fostered a refinement of our brand from just "Made in America" to now, "Designed, Developed and Made in America." ●