

## Prefabricated duct saves time, money for contractors, officials say

Tom Ballus is an optimist. Despite a recession, the division manager for Nordfab Ducting in Thomasville, N.C., is confident that opportunities for growth still exist.



Two Wilson Sheet Metal employees on lifts install 24-inch Quick-Fit duct at an Atlanta furniture manufacturing facility.

That's why he spends part of each day talking with sheet metal shop owners about their businesses, what they can do to maintain business now — and how to prepare for the recovery.

"In general, the signs are pointing to an economy that is going to turn around sometime next year," Ballus said. "But across the country, many independent sheet metal shops have had to lay people off, and are struggling to cut costs and find cash flow. That means that when the economy turns around and businesses need to ramp back up, the unprepared sheet metal shop will be at a tremendous disadvantage in terms of workers and materials. If they want to take advantage of the recovery that's coming, it's imperative that they get ready now."

Ballus said that one way that many fabricators have been able to lower their overhead, reduce labor expenses and improve efficiency is by switching some of their traditional fabrication processes to the use of prefabricated products such as Nordfab's Quick-Fit ducting.

### Many uses

Introduced in the United States in 1990, Quick-Fit industrial round ductwork is ideal for dust, mist, fume and smoke collection, Nordfab officials say. Its patented clamp-together design allows Quick-Fit ducting to be assembled in seconds. And because it can easily be adapted to existing ducting systems, Quick-Fit can help cut a project's installation time in half, they add.

A growing number of sheet metal fabricators have added Quick-Fit ducting to their offerings to improve profitability and make their bids more competitive for a wider variety of projects.

Others perceive Nordfab as a competitor. Ballus said that is a misconception.

"Our business model is not to compete with local fabricators for their customers. Customers need a local resource, which is why we don't sell our products to end users," Ballus said. "Instead, we want to be a reliable, knowledgeable partner for sheet metal shop owners who are looking to compete for more types of business, simplify their own installations and make their operation more profitable."

When the economy recovers, many fabricators will be caught short on resources. But no one wants to turn jobs away. Purchasing prefabricated ducting can help them meet the demand, while ramping their operations back up, Nordfab officials say.

Nordfab has two U.S. manufacturing locations and can ship most orders in four days or less. Some fabricators prefer to use their own workers to make the more customized pieces, and only buy-in the basic parts like straight pipe, branches and elbows. This is a good fit for the recovering economy as many fabricators are holding on to their most skilled workers during the recession, Nordfab officials said.

### In focus

"Buying Nordfab Quick-Fit ducting for most of the install allows sheet metal shops to focus on working directly with the customer and their fabrication skills on building custom-fit pieces," Ballus said. "And because we ship direct to the jobsite within just a few days, there are no warehousing or redelivery issues."

Since there is no minimum order required, Nordfab has made it easy for even the smallest fabricators to try Quick-Fit ducting.

"We find that many small shops start with just a few pieces to familiarize themselves with the product," Ballus added. "When they see how adaptable and easy Quick-Fit is to use, they quickly make it a larger part of their product mix. And because Quick-Fit clamps together, eliminating the need for flanges, welds or pop rivets, a Quick-Fit system can be easily moved and adapted to changing plant layouts. This is a key benefit of our product that strengthens a fabricator's relationship with its customers who require ongoing system modifications."

For most businesses, the recession has required them to rethink how to streamline their operations and find new ways and products to increase their competitiveness.

"Those fabricators who have used this time to become familiar with Quick-Fit ducting products and Nordfab support services, find that they have become more price competitive, can bid on a wider variety of jobs and offer their customers a product that will exceed the performance of traditional ducting," Ballus said. "We believe these are the companies that will come out of the recession stronger, more profitable and as recognized industry leaders in their markets."

One contractor who has found success with the system is Charlie "Andy" Wilson, owner of Wilson Sheet Metal in High Point, N.C., who has been doing sheet metal work for 29 years.

"When I started in this business, every piece we hung had to be fabricated in the shop. It cost a lot to buy and warehouse the steel and took weeks to build the pipes, hoods, transitions and elbows," he said. "To win the jobs that are out there, I needed to offer better service and better products, keep my costs down and keep my customers satisfied. With Nordfab's Quick-Fit ducting, I have found a product and a partner that helps me do that."