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Expanding the Market



The Huth Model 1674 Expander is one of the company's latest introductions.



Huth-Ben Pearson International introduced the new Huth HB-20 at AAPEX in Las Vegas. From left are Operations Manager Scott Thielmann, President Kenneth Murray, Marsha Blasengame of sales and marketing, Product Manager Mark Purman and distributor Daniel Litvak from Argentina.

By Jim Wilder
Undercar Digest Editor



The HB-20 bender and tooling package incorporates an electronic controller tethered to the machine that allows the operator to be as far as 6 feet away from the unit.

Equipment Inc. from owners Joe Becker and Tom Hechimovich, who had owned the operation since 2005.

Huth and Ben Pearson are two of the most well-known brands in the industry in relation to shops involved in the craft of making automotive exhaust pipes and related components from straight tubing.

Now the new leader of the company that manufactures Huth and Ben Pearson equipment plans to make those brands popular in more segments of the automotive-repair and performance-enhancement industry, as well as other markets, by continuing to enhance the quality – and by adding new lines of equipment that can help shops expand as well.

On June 16 a newly formed company, Huth-Ben Pearson International LLC, bought Huth

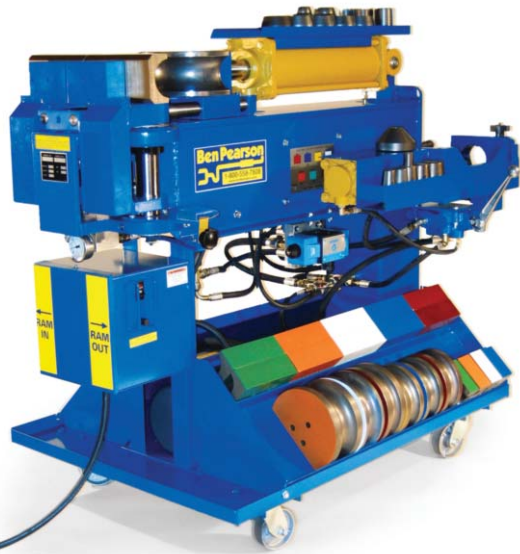
The new company is owned by a group that includes Milwaukee Capital Partners; President Kenneth Murray; and three veteran employees of Huth Equipment – Operations Manager Scott Thielmann, Product Manager Mark Purman and Assembly Lead Joe Takacs.

Murray, who is 57 and calls 60 “the new 35”, had been searching for a company with a strong foundation such as Huth.

“I’m a product marketing guy by training, so I was scouring Southeast Wisconsin. I am very wedded to this part of the country. I am raising my family here and was looking for a business with a strong brand,” said the father of four children.



The Huth Model HB-10 bender is a top seller.



Huth-Ben Pearson plans to continue production of its most popular Ben Pearson bender, the MC-59.



The Huth Heavy Duty Model 2600 Bender



Huth V-Band Segment Set Tooling and a piece of formed tubing.



spoke with shop owners from around the country," Murray said. "When they bought a shop, many times the bender came with it. They were our machines with many of them dating back decades and still doing their jobs."

That's what Murray liked about Huth, making him want to become a part

And brand is something he knows about. During his career he has worked with Johnson Wax, Stokely Foods, and was a vice president at Little Caesars Pizza. Most recently he spent nine years as chief marketing officer for a business-to-business company called San Jamar in Elkhorn, Wis., that makes light equipment for food-service and janitorial markets.

Armed with knowledge of getting products to markets and distributors – and building brands – Murray heard from an associate of Hechimovich that he and Becker might be looking for a next-generation owner.

"So I started working with Joe and Tom over the summer of 2013," he said. "This is a new market to me. I had not worked

with hard metals or the automotive aftermarket, but throughout my career I have worked with new markets and there are a lot of things in common – distribution channels, partnering with distributors and finding ways to make it a win/win for both. When the manufacturer comes up with concepts that are useful for the end user it makes the end users' jobs easier and more profitable. Those things are common in a lot of markets and that's what we plan to do here."

From the very beginning when the Huth bender was developed by founder Jerry Huth, the company's philosophy had also always been to build great machines and then keep them going, Murray said.

"In doing my due diligence I

of it. The pledge for quality continued when Midas bought the rights to Huth in the 1960s; when Huth Equipment bought the company in 2005; and when the company added the Ben Pearson line in 2008.

Murray attributes much of that quality to the professionalism and longevity of team members at the Huth-Ben Pearson facility in Hartford, Wis. He noted that an *Undercar Digest* cover photo of Huth employees published in March 2007 proves the point. All but three of the employees who posed for that photo are present in this month's cover photo.

"Before I walked into the plant, I liked the brand touch points that Huth offered," he said. "Then I met the people. These are great people up and down. It is a pleasure to work with them. I walk



Dennis Fiedler installs a depth-of-bend plate on a Huth bender.



Tony Kreuser paints a Huth HB-10 bender.



(From left) Dave Rohlinger, Pete Held and Jason Graef perform a quality check on components.



Joe Takacs installs a label as the bender reaches completion.

around and talk to everybody every day. And that is really enjoyable. They know what they are doing. They include a bevy of 30-year people and then a group of newer individuals. The blending of that experience, plus a little bit of new thinking, provides the stimulation for great opportunity and new growth."

Murray also attended Auto TECH expo this past April in Chicago and said that even though it was a new group of people it felt very familiar to him because "communities like this exist in other markets where manufacturers and distributors work together to meet the end users' needs. It appears to be a great community and I'm glad to be a part of it," he said.

He is well aware of the changes taking place in the exhaust aftermarket. There are fewer specialty muffler shops, and because OE stainless systems last longer, the trend also is changing with a greater emphasis on performance exhaust and other forms of custom bending. Although many shops still perform custom exhaust, the majority have become general-repair shops.

"Because the operator is getting into broader categories, we have to become broader too," Murray said. "We're just not about benders. We sell expanders and swaging machines for end finishing, and those markets are growing. We continue to offer more

end-finishing options for shops that might not own a bender.

Most recently, Huth-Ben Pearson International introduced V-Band tooling. V-Band clamps/flanges are used in satellite launch systems and auto racing, including high-pressure turbo applications, so they are an excellent choice for normal exhaust and intake systems. Compared to two- and three-bolt flanges, they are typically lighter, quicker and easier to take apart.

"Top fabricators can improve quality and save cost by eliminating welds," Murray said.

He also sees potential for automotive shops involved in metal fabrication that might be getting into other areas of work. The Huth-Ben Pearson Model 3012, introduced a couple of years ago, primarily for non-automotive markets, can bend a full circumference using fewer steps. Murray said it will be followed by even more-advanced equipment for other specialty markets.

One example of a Huth distributor that has expanded his markets is Bruce Van Sant of Van Sant Enterprises, Pella, Iowa. Murray said the former motorcycle racer is an expert in all equipment for tube, pipe and body work in other segments of the market. Murray sees that as being an upcoming trend.

Also, keep in mind that Huth-Ben Pearson International will continue its efforts to help those



Mark Jeffords welds a Huth bender.

who still make a good portion of their profits with custom exhaust bending. For users of Ben Pearson, Murray promised that the popular MC-59 benders, the most-popular model in the Ben Pearson line-up, will continue to be available.

The same goes for the Huth HB-10, the black bender that has the most sales under the Huth brand. However, a new black and orange bender – called the HB-20 – captured quite a bit of attention at its unveiling at AAPEX last month in Las Vegas. It also will be demonstrated at the upcoming Auto TECH expo, set for March 12-14 in Jacksonville, Fla.

The new bender and tooling package incorporates an electronic controller tethered to the machine that allows the operator to be as far as 6 feet away from the unit. This can be advantageous when using a longer stick of tubing that has to be supported, he said. Also, the control box on the HB-20 has been moved to the far left rear of the bender, allowing the operator to get closer to his work in order to view the top of the pipe as it is bent.

Like the HB-10 and the MC-59, the HB-20 incorporates the original geometry that is more advan-



Mary Rusch of customer service takes a call.

tageous because of the power needed, especially for bending 3-inch tubing.

Murray said he and his team are spending more time with the company's distributors and shop operators. He envisions creating new equipment that is helpful to those shops in addition to markets such as the racing industry.

"There is a lot of creativity out there and I believe that creates a lot of opportunity for us by tailoring and creating new machines. The traditional exhaust and bender market is pretty mature. There is a lot to it and there are a lot of important things out there where we have to take care of them. But we have to look up and around because there is a lot to see just around the corner.

"Take performance enhancements," he said. "Cars are very interesting to people and 'souping' them up to make them perform and making them a little flashier is really interesting. Although many shops promote performance exhaust for consumers, he said they may not be promoting their expertise to the racing world. Shops that cater to that need open lots of opportunities from machine and tooling operators like us to service that market.

Huth and Ben Pearson already have a large brand presence in the muffler-shop and undercar part of the industry. Murray believes that brand acknowledgement will grow to reach the more-than 100,000 repair shops that may not be using those brands yet. That

brand awareness will grow among automotive distributors also, he predicts.

Murray noted that information published in automotive-trade publications, such as *Undercar Digest*, already is being complemented by the company's existing website, and he plans to increase awareness through email campaigns. The company also is involved in gaining more attention worldwide. Countries such as the United Kingdom and Australia are big in custom bending, auto performance and racing. He wants to saturate those markets with innovations from Huth and Ben Pearson to help them succeed as well.

With all of these changes in mind, Murray notes that not everything will happen overnight. His plan is a measured and gradual approach that includes brainstorming with his employees, distributors and the shops they serve.

"These are changes that will bring us into the future," he said.



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