

“OUR PRODUCT IS METAL, OUR BUSINESS IS SERVICE”

by Tina Manzer

Metal Supermarkets, a Canada-based franchiser of metal stores that specializes in small quantities and value-added service, caters to sculptors, jewelry designers, tool-and-dye manufacturers, sign makers and, yes, body piercers. With its diverse range of metal products and ability to cut orders to the customers' specifications while they wait, 18-year-old Metal Supermarkets has become a network of successful locations operating in the United States, Canada, and overseas.

What a great idea! But how does it work? To find out, we spoke to the company's vice president of franchise sales, **Andrew Arminen**. He discussed the many ways Metal Supermarkets are meeting the needs of today's metal users, and why the concept is working so well.

Where do artists and sculptors normally purchase metal?

Typically, an artist's experience has been with big service centers that specialize in large-quantity orders (500 pounds and up). That type of store does not necessarily cater to the individual who orders material for personal use. Artists will also go to a Home Depot-type of store where the selection is very limited and the prices are high.

We service the artist commu-

nity by providing small quantities and just pieces, if that's what they're looking for. The metal industry normally requires that customers purchase full lengths, or have minimum order sizes. Customers can experience exten-

sive waits to get their product. At our stores, customers have the opportunity to not only view the materials that are available, they can have it cut to size while they wait. There are no minimums of size or quantity to deal with.



The average Metal Supermarkets store is approximately 4,000 square feet and is equipped with delivery vehicles, saws, and other equipment to service a local customer base. There are over 80 Metal Supermarket locations covering Canada, the U.S., U.K., Austria, Mexico and the U.A.E. "Each store stocks between 1,200 and 1,600 SKUs, with access to another 2,000 to 3,000 SKUs through our supplier/vendor network," explained Andrew Arminen, vice president of the company's franchise division (left). "It enables us to track down and provide almost any type, shape or grade of material within a couple of days."

Who came up with the “metal supermarket” concept?

The company was founded in 1985 by a former large-quantity metal salesperson who saw a niche opportunity for small quantity sales. He felt that there were many people — businesses as well as hobbyists and artists – who needed less than full lengths of metal.

What was the original product mix and proposed market? Has it changed since 1985?

It hasn't changed immensely since the beginning. We still specialize in small quantity metals, in all shapes, sizes and grades, but today we offer more added-value services such as hole punching, bending, and shearing. Each store stocks a unique inventory related to their particular market segment and the demands of their customer base. The original philosophy has been to provide outstanding value to customers looking for small quantities of any metal, cut to size, and ready fast. Since that has been the core of the business for the last 18 years, we continue to embrace it.

What kinds of skills do store staff members have to have?

In each store, employees are trained on metals knowledge and the ability to source within our supplier base for various metals. We have a current base of employees in both the company-owned and franchised locations that is in excess of 300. That number grows monthly.

Where do you get ideas for new products to offer?

A great deal of the new product offering comes from storeowner input and demand from end users. We have our own internal INTRANET system where we update on various product offers, available inventory or unique markets we are servicing.

What's next?

Our plans are for Metal Supermarkets to be in every major market in the U.S. within the next five to eight years. We will continue expanding on the international level as well. ▲



What's been your experience with the art community? How do they use your merchandise?

I took this question directly to the stores, and here are some of the responses I received:

- The Metal Supermarkets in Columbia, South Carolina, sold some simple hot-rolled products to the University of South Carolina's art department. They used it to make stands for sculpture exhibits. USC's theater department also purchases metal for building stage sets.

One particular metal sculptor customer shops there frequently. He makes various pieces (lights, signs, etc.) for commercial applications like restaurants and stores. One of his most interesting creations was a metal dragonfly about 3 feet long for a local retail establishment.

- The store in Utah has sold a local sculptor bronze,



brass and mirrored stainless tube to create a fountain.

- The Calgary store has been selling to the Banff Centre, Canada's famous learning center dedicated to the arts, leadership development and mountain culture, for many years now. The technicians regularly call with the artists' material requests.

Metal Supermarkets has helped artists convert to cheaper, imperial sizes and smaller quantities. Store employees offer help with practical solutions to some of

the wilder aesthetic fancies!

- Metal Supermarkets is regularly asked for Corten, a special steel that reacts to atmospheric moisture, then rusts. The rust forms a protective coating that seals the steel and prevents further rusting. It's often used in outdoor metal sculpture, and bridge building as well.