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Tim Bertram, left, and his cousin, Joe, co-owners of Bertram Dental Lab, stand in front of a metal 3-D printer at their Neenah business.

The BusinessNews photo by Amanda Lauer

Manufacturing smiles

Bertram Dental Lab makes dentists and their patients look good

By Amanda Lauer

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Bertram Dental Lab, Inc. is in the business of making other dental labs, dentists and ultimately, patients with missing teeth, look good.

For 40 years, Bertram Dental Lab, 2375 American Drive, Neenah, has served as a wholesale dental lab, one focused on rapid pro-typing manufacturing, said Tim Bertram, co-owner and digital RPD research and development director for Bertram Dental Lab.

“Every mouth is different, every case is different, yet we can produce a one-off partial dental framework in under 72 hours if needed,” said Bertram, who co-owns the company with his cousin, Joe Bertram. “Although we’re making the same product, it’s not a widget we can just mass produce.”

The frameworks he’s referring to are removable partial denture frameworks (known as RPDs for short). These are the metal portion of removable prosthetics that a patient wears when missing some, but not all, their teeth. The company manufactures these primarily for other dental labs but also some dentists, with accounts in almost all 50 states.

The company was established in 1976 by brothers and business partners, Bill and Tom Bertram and their spouses, Jody and Margie. With humble beginnings in the basement of a small building on Richmond Street in Appleton, Bertram Dental Lab eventually signed a 10-year lease on its current location in Neenah in 1980. At that time, the company had eight employees and “way more space than they thought they would ever need,” Bertram said.

But the company’s growth continued, warranting a 4,000-square-foot addition in 1986, 24-hour production in 1992, its first metal printed in 2015/2016, and in 2016/2017, its own wire EDM in house to remove printed RPDs from print plates as well as a surface grinder to resurface its own print plates to keep all production 100 percent in house. This past year, the company invested in an additional metal printer and is in the midst of transitioning the business from the first generation to the second generation as well.

Technology has been a key differentiator for the family-owned company. While most frameworks are made with the lost-wax casting method (which is very similar to how custom jewelry is made), Bertram Dental Lab’s technology takes a digital CAD design,

creates a file and then uses 3D printing to metal — with no casting involved.

“While there have been great strides in perfecting the casting technique, the overall process has not been interrupted until 3D printing has become more mainstream in the past decade,” Bertram said. He said the company recognizes 3D printing, milling, scanning and casting are 100 percent the future of dental restorations. As such, they chose to develop, pursue and understand metal 3D printing, a four-year-long process to arrive where they are digitally.

“Selective laser melting (SLM) is the perfect complement to our business model and what we have done for 43 years,” Bertram said.

Bertram says the company has built its reputation on making their customers’ lives easier. They know how to design and manufacture frames, a labor-intensive process that requires skill and design knowledge. “Most full-service dental labs prefer to outsource this process, but this is where we can help,” he said.

All of Bertram Dental Lab’s work is performed in-house in its Neenah location and has been since 1976.

Bertram said that most dental labs that try to do RPDs do not do so full time, whereas their team offers it as a key offering. They have several employees with more than 20 years of experience, most of whom were trained from “square one” so that their design know-how is specific to their company. “We have a department of 10 people who exclusively design, and a majority of those people have more than 10 years of experience,” Bertram said.

Altogether, the company employs about 65 full-time employees. The company’s lab was founded from the basis of the workflow they currently have while incorporating increasingly more sophisticated technology. Bertram says the dental industry has significantly evolved in the past five years. CAD design is a huge part of that, and milling is the norm, but there is an increased need to be on the cusp and embrace 3D printing. Dentists now have the ability to perform digital scans of patients’ mouths, whereas they used to have to take an impression, creating a more digital workflow push.

“It’s really amazing, how the workflow is changing and how 3D printing and milling dentures used to be done by hand, waxed by hand, teeth set by hand,” Bertram said. “There wasn’t a lot of change until about 10 years ago.”

In their industry, much is measured not only by revenue but also by how many partial frameworks a company makes in a day. Bertram Dental Lab makes hundreds a day and has maintained steady single-digit growth over the past five years. Bertram said that 2018 has been the company’s best year in the past five years. He doesn’t see that lessening; if anything, it will likely increase as the population ages, the need for partial dentures multiplies and many people opt for that as “it’s always been the cost economical choice,” Bertram said.

A quick turnaround time is important. “Our industry is very time-conscious,” he said “No one wants to be without their teeth and everything feels urgent.”

Bertram said the business has benefited from more recent favorable federal tax laws that help small businesses invest in their future. He said Section 179 has been a game changer for the past three years as the company invests in and adapts to CAD design and metal 3D printing.

“These printers are big — 10-feet long — and seven figures in price, so we’ve obviously invested heavily in and believe in this technology,” he said. “Section 179 allows us to take full depreciation on those assets in one year, which is a huge deal for us.”

Bertram says word of mouth continues to play a huge role in the company’s growth; “it was true 30 years ago and it still holds true. It just moves faster now with social media,” he said. Two of the things he has really strived to do is improve the consistency in the company’s brand image and its online presence, redoing the company’s website, adding a company Facebook page and adding a case tracking system for customers.

Alongside that, the company’s growing investment in technology and the transition of the company from his parents, Bill and Jody Bertram, and his Aunt Margie and Uncle Tom Bertram, are high on the instrumental changes to Bertram Dental Lab as it heads into a new year.

“They founded a company in 1976 with a dream and have the trust to sell the company to my cousin and me,” he said. “I’m really looking forward to seeing where technology and our current team of employees take us. There has always been a Bertram involved in the business. This will be an exciting year of transition.”