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Missouri Bullet Co. 'turning lead into gold'

Sue Sterling
Staff Writer

Kingsville - Brad Alpert says he has figured out how to accomplish "the alchemists' dream of old" - the transformation of lead into gold.

Alpert and his wife, Jo Ann, are the owners of Missouri Bullet Co., a home-based company specializing in casting lead bullets for reloaders.

Started in January 2007 by the Alperets as an experiment in hopes the business would supplement their retirement, Missouri Bullet already has expanded twice, with another expansion planned.

The Alperets said the business will gross more than three-quarters of a million dollars this year, with a projected gross of \$1.5 million next year.

A participant in target shooting competition, Brad said he had been reloading his own ammunition from the age of 14. In the 1980s, when he "was more heavily into shooting," he used 500 rounds of ammunition per week, he said.

He just ended a 30-year career in IT as lead unix administrator with the Board of Public Utilities in Kansas City, Kan. "I loved the work," he said, "but hated the politics and (100-mile) commute."

Brad said, "I've always been entrepreneurial, and in the latter half of 2006, I decided to investigate bullet casting as a way to supplement our income ... and work from home."

Jo Ann already worked from home as a self-employed



BRAD ALPERT removes bullets from one of the four casting machines in his shop in rural Kingsville, where the enterprise turns out 100,000 bullets on an average day. **SUE STERLING/Star-Journal** photos

Web page designer and contract programmer.

They bought some manually-operated equipment and set it up on the back deck of their home in the rural Kingsville area, "while experimenting," because they needed a 220 electrical outlet for the equipment.

They decided the venture "was feasible" he said. "We self-financed the endeavor," Brad said, going \$40,000 into debt on their credit cards to put up a steel building on a concrete pad and buy an automatic bullet caster and a lubrisizer, that sizes and lubricates the bullets.

After the concrete pad was built, it snowed, Jo Ann said. They put up the uninsulated building on top of 3 inches of ice. "It took days to get the ice out of there," she said.

The equipment, ordered three months earlier, arrived in January "when there was still ice in the building," she said.

"We got just a parts list and no instructions," she said. "We had to figure out all the adjustments, and there were a million little knobs."

Jo Ann said, "It took both of us to run just one machine."

Because they both were working full time, they made bullets after Brad got home at 6:30 p.m. and on weekends, putting in 14-hour days on Saturdays and Sundays.

The stress got to Jo Ann, who broke down in tears, stating, "This is not what I expected."

Brad told her, "No crying in the bullet barn."

He said, "I explained, it's like college. It's hard, and it's long hours, but the payoff comes later."

Originally, they sold bullets at gun shows, but they found that did not work well.

"They were always on weekends," Brad said, when they needed to be home making bullets.

Then they turned to e-Bay.

Meanwhile, Jo Ann began to develop a Web page with a shopping cart for the business. They have their own servers, she said. "We are the hosting company."

After news accounts that the Virginia Tech shooter had purchased ammunition on e-Bay, Brad said, e-Bay banned the sale of cast bullets.

They then moved to gunbroker.com, an exclusive auction site "just to spread our name," he said, "and we began getting hits."

Now 95 percent of their business comes from their own Web site, he said, where people can review the products, place orders and even pay.

About 90 percent of Missouri Bullet customers are individuals who buy one to four boxes per sale, he said.



JO ANN ALPERT packs boxes of bullets into a USPS box for shipment to a customer. The company ships up to 20,000 bullets, packed into 500-count boxes, per day.

They also ship to 15 gun stores around the country, including "all the Kansas City-based ones.

Jo Ann said, "We ship to Alaska and Hawaii and all over the U.S."

A few weeks ago, a gun store in Pennsylvania notified them customers there had asked the store to stock Missouri Bullet products, Brad said.

Graf & Son in Mexico, Mo., usually orders a quarter-million bullets at a time, he said, adding, "We're very proud to have been selected by them.... If I had to pick one distributor, it would be Graf."

The bullets are packed in 500-count boxes for shipment to customers via the U.S. Postal Service, which charges a flat rate for boxes weighing up to 70 pounds.

The postal carrier sometimes makes six trips a day to the company, Brad said. Typically, they ship 20,000 bullets per day, he said, with shipments sometimes totaling a ton and a half a day. All shipping is automated, also, he said.

Postage cost is \$56,900 so far this year, and Brad estimates it will be \$80,000 by Dec. 31.

From a single set of machines in 2007, they are up to four casters and six lubrisizers, each pair costing about \$22,000.

Brad and Jo Ann now work full-time at Missouri Bullet and currently employ two full-time workers and one "night person" who works 30 hours per week.

The company does not have a huge overhead, Brad said, since it is self-financed and all the equipment is paid for.

He said because they had incomes from their other jobs, they were able to reinvest all the profits back into the company.

Missouri Bullet Co. now is in the top three bullet casting companies in the world by volume, he said, and is producing 100,000 bullets in an average day, and 50,000 on Saturday and Sunday.

They work two shifts, running equipment from 8 a.m. to 10 p.m.

Brad said most manufacturers offer a single hardness, but Missouri Bullet offers two, including a hard lead and a soft lead. The hardness-optimized bullets reduce leading and increase accuracy, he said. The formula for optimal bullet hardness is available on the company's Web site so customers can determine which they need.

"That's our niche, to control the hardness of lead," he said.

The company also has almost 50 bullets in its line, with prices ranging from 8 to 20 percent below competitors' prices. Discounts are offered to sworn law enforcement officers, active-duty military personnel and registered gun clubs.

Brad said they offer fast shipping, with 75 percent of the orders going out within 24 hours and 20 percent the same day ordered. Other bullet manufacturers may take two to six weeks to ship out orders, he said.

Brad said approximately 3.5 million of the estimated 85 million gun owners in the United States are reloaders, and Jo Ann said that number "is increasing every day."

Brad said the cost of ammunition has tripled in the last three years because of the wars in

Iraq and Afghanistan, pricing it out of reach of people "if they actively shoot."

With more shooters turning to reloading, the Alpert's are looking forward to a bright future for the Missouri Bullet Co.

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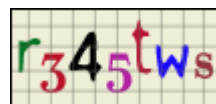
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