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# Tooling maker seeks health in health care

BY SHEENA HARRISON  
CRAIN'S DETROIT BUSINESS

TNT EDM Inc. is turning to the medical industry to help diversify its clientele and restore business the company has lost from an ailing auto industry.

The Plymouth-based tool-and-die shop has begun tooling for such medical components as orthopedic implants and surgical devices, and hopes that industry will become one of the company's most significant segments.

While medical work is only about 10 percent of TNT's business, the company plans to build its medical business up to about 40 percent of its revenue in the next few years, founder and President Tom Mullen said.

"Medical is what we're really trying to push for," said Mullen, whose clients include **Smith & Nephew plc**, a medical technology company based in London.

Mullen founded TNT in 1978, and the company grew over the years by focusing on automotive work. While TNT started out in a 3,600-square-foot facility, the company's growth allowed it to move into and expand a larger building that stands at 77,000 square feet today.

During TNT's peak period between 1998 and 2001, the company reached about \$16 million in revenue and had more than 50 employees. But Mullen said a number of events caused revenue to drop to about \$12 million today and staff to be cut to 35, prompting him to look at creating different revenue streams for his company.

One factor was when Novi-based auto supplier **Key Plastics L.L.C.** — a key TNT customer at one time — filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy in March 2000.

"When Key Plastics went down the tubes, it took us down with them," Mullen said.

Key Plastics was bought out of bankruptcy by Dallas-based **Carlyle Management Group** in 2001, but Mullen said his company didn't regain the business.

Outsourcing also has taken a toll. "We're trying to fill the void of the plastic injection-molding business that went to China," Mullen said.

In 2001, an aerospace company came in to tour TNT's facility and see its processes. That meeting segued into the company's first nonautomotive customer.

"They saw what we could do," Mullen said.

Working with that client allowed TNT to begin seeking other cus-

tomers outside the automotive industry. The company began seeking medical work soon afterward to help diversify its client base, Mullen said.

Automotive work currently represents about 60 percent of business, with aerospace and medical contributing 30 percent and 10 percent respectively.

Mullen said his goal is that automotive eventually will comprise only up to a quarter of TNT's business, with the balance being split evenly between medical and aerospace work.

To help shape TNT's new customer base, the company has created a new sales and marketing team to promote its medical and aerospace work at trade shows, and in trade journals and other media that reach potential customers.

Mullen said designating staff for those tasks has helped TNT to build new customer relationships and establish itself in its new industries.

"For years, we never had a salesperson or representative because everything was done over the phone," Mullen said. "Now you

need a face." Taking on medical and aerospace customers often has included assuring them that TNT plans to keep doing the work even as the automotive industry strengthens — something that Mullen said he plans to do.

TNT is among other tool-and-die shops that are trying not to keep their eggs all in one basket. Daniel Damm, president of Farmington Hills-based shop **The Damm Co. Inc.**, said about 80 percent of his clientele is automotive, although he wants to diversify by doing more aerospace work.

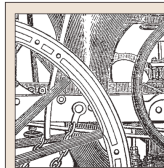
"I'm looking for anything nonautomotive," said Damm, who has been in business for 14 years.

It's becoming more common for tool-and-die companies to look for work outside their traditional industries in order to minimize their risks, said Chuck Hadden, vice president of government affairs for the **Michigan Manufacturers Association**.

"I don't think there's an automotive manufacturer out there that's not thinking about it right now," said Hadden, who cited **Delphi Corp.**'s medical devices division.

Hadden said that kind of diversification among manufacturers is likely to stick around even as the economy rebounds. "I think it's wise to keep a diverse customer base all the time."

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### Reinvention

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Have an idea for a future Reinvention? Send it to Managing Editor Jeff Karoub at jkaroub@crain.com.

**“We’re trying to fill the void of the plastic injection-molding business that went to China.”**

Tom Mullen, TNT EDM

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