

Fire Manufacturers Are Optimistic for a Brighter 2022 but Brace for Challenges

12.1.2021



By Ed Ballam

Who woulda thunk it? Here we are closing in on TWO ACHING YEARS, and we're still talking about COVID-19 and how it has affected everything in our lives, including the fire service business.

Yet, here we are, looking back at 2021 and wondering what the heck just happened. What a long, strange trip it has been. No matter if you think this pandemic thing is a hoax, propagated by a government bent on controlling its citizens, the worst global health crisis in human history, or somewhere in between, we all have to agree that it has affected the way we live and do business.

When trying to assess what happened, what is happening, and what might happen in the future, **Phil Gerace, senior vice president** of sales & marketing for **Task Force Tips (TFT)**, perhaps sums it up best.

"Many of my expectations of what would happen next throughout 2020 and 2021 didn't come to pass, so I really can't predict much about 2022," Gerace says. "I will say, though, that as long as there are closures, travel restrictions, employee and product shortages, and dissention about how to beat this virus, economies will continue to slow down, and there may be less available dollars to fund important initiatives in fire departments around the globe."

To the letter, manufacturers and vendors have said their businesses have been changed by labor shortages, supply chain issues, and health and human resources concerns that have spawned from the pandemic.

Worse, many don't see a way out or any immediate relief. Some even think more of the same is on the horizon.

"This is most likely the start of a series of pandemics that will change the way we live now and in the future," says Paul Darley, president and CEO of **W.S. Darley & Co.**

Despite that less-than-optimistic outlook regarding the disease, Darley says 2021 was better for his company than 2020, and he believes 2022 will be even better.

"New orders for fire apparatus in North America were down 8% in 2020, which, compared to other industries, were fairly modest," Darley says. "The market came roaring back in 2021, and through the second quarter, new orders were up 60 percent for the USA market, Canada [was] up 88 percent. The export market remains difficult and was down 74 percent."

Darley says the future is brighter for 2022, businesswise, and he predicts his family's business will experience growth into the future.

"I believe the market for new orders will continue to be strong in 2022, but there will be supply chain and labor shortage issues that will impact the delivery of these vehicles," Darley says, adding that orders in Darley's pump division are at a record high. He also says that Darley has been affected by supply chain issues, with rising costs from its suppliers affecting costs.

Gerace describes business at TFT in similar terms.

"2021 will have been a year of growth for TFT despite the challenges of the pandemic and a global supply disruption," Gerace says. "We introduced a number of new products that included technology leaps in performance."

The growth and expansion for TFT are reflected in its entry into the air filtration market space for both apparatus and fire and EMS stations. Gerace says the new products help augment the fire service's cancer prevention strategies.

"Since these new TFT products tackle particulates, VOCs, aerosols carrying viruses and bacteria, and even mold, I see great improvements in firefighter cancer mitigation and health as departments integrate these solutions into their SOPs," Gerace says.

And, like many of us already feel, Gerace says: "The new normal is anything but normal." He adds: "We, along with most suppliers in our supply chain, have had to refocus on the critical few activities, like purchasing and logistics."

Nevertheless, Gerace says TFT will continue to experience growth in 2022.

"However, the global supply chain issues from 2021 will endure in every sector through much of 2022," Gerace says. "Electronic chips and board delays may extend into 2023."

He adds that TFT has made efforts to combat subcomponent and raw material availability challenges, but "customers should place orders sooner in the purchase cycle than previously done prior to COVID" to make sure they get what they need in a timely fashion.

Chad Newsome, national sales manager for P.L. Custom Body and Equipment Co., Inc. says he was hoping things would get better as time passed, but the reality is quite different.

"While many thought the end of 2020 would usher in a return to stability for 2021, the reality is anything but," Newsome says. "Additionally, despite yearwide shortages in people, parts, and chassis, our order banks swelled as purchasing approached frenzied levels. We have had to be extremely nimble, adjusting our production schedule daily to account for the challenges posed in 2021."

Newsome sees more of the same for the foreseeable future. "Unfortunately, I don't see any real relief in the coming year, as the challenges posed in 2021 relating to people, parts, and chassis still need to be rectified," Newsome says. "And as production backlogs grow, there is an additional problem. The pricing volatility from suppliers is growing daily; with longer build times, how do manufacturers in the fire service industry properly price their products?"

When asked about the effects of COVID-19 on his business, Newsome is a realist.

"For manufacturers, COVID-19 has decimated, for a host of reasons, the labor workforce," he says. "In a perfect world, we would just hire more people to offset the constant disruption associated with COVID-19. Unfortunately, the people are just not there. Additionally, even if we had the people, we do not have any continuity in our relevant supply chains. It is a vicious cycle."

Kent Tyler, president of REV Fire Group, says the fire apparatus manufacturing business he leads has seen its share of issues over the past year and several months due to COVID and related issues, but he remains optimistic for brighter days ahead.

"We continue to see solid inbound on orders across REV Fire Group and exited our third fiscal quarter with strong backlog," Tyler says. "From a business standpoint, there have clearly been industrywide supply chain disruptions, which created numerous operational challenges. I'm extremely proud of the hard work and incredible attitude that our team members display daily as they tackle these challenges head-on."

Tyler says he's also proud of his team for their ability to innovate and bring new products to market despite adverse business conditions.

"In addition, our teams have been committed to investing, developing, and delivering innovative products that support the firefighting industry," Tyler says. "Examples include our Smart Reach Multi-Stance aerial control system, the ECO-IDLE-TECH idle mitigation system, the Purpose-Built Spartan FC-94, and our recent announcement of an Electric Fire Truck [the first fully electric North American style fire apparatus to be introduced in the market]. We value the voice of our customer, and products like these are designed directly from customer feedback."

Like many others in the fire service business, Tyler says it's difficult to predict the future with any certainty, but he did say federal money has had a positive effect.

"Municipal budgets have been aided by recent rounds of federal stimulus and appear to be healthy," Tyler says. "We have experienced strong order intake and, with the potential of a new spending bill in Washington, we see no reason that industry momentum would not continue into 2022."

Tyler continues: "Specific to REV Fire Group, we have enhanced our commercial activities and dealer network to provide even greater support while expanding our presence. Our hope is that we will begin to see the current supply chain and labor constraints subside so that we can continue to drive throughput and build upon our operational excellence initiatives."

Despite the industrywide malaise in 2021, it was a year of growth for Sutphen Corporation, according to Zach Rudy, Sutphen's director of sales and marketing.

"Despite the continuation of COVID-19, Sutphen Corporation remained strong and stable throughout 2021," Rudy said. "Our family-owned business continued to grow in both sales and production capacity despite the industrywide unpredictability and volatility encountered in 2021."

Like most other businesses on the planet, Sutphen was not immune from the effects of COVID-19, Rudy says.

"COVID-19 remains an unpredictable variable to both business and everyday life," Rudy says. "While we expect a certain level of unpredictability throughout the fire industry, at Sutphen, we feel it is critical to emphasize transparency with our customers. Throughout the pandemic, we have made efforts to continuously provide an unmatched Sutphen experience to our customers, even through unprecedented times."

As for 2022, Rudy says Sutphen will continue to grow, and that's illustrated by the construction of a new 185,000-square-foot facility that combines three of its facilities into one.

"This new facility will retain all of the jobs from the old facilities and add additional jobs while also increasing capacity and production capabilities," Rudy says.

Looking ahead, 2022 will have its challenges, Rudy says. "With continued effects of COVID-19 hammering supply chains, we think that the fire industry will see its share of issues like every other industry. That being said, Sutphen remains committed to finding new sources and outlets to support our customers while remaining transparent and forthright with our first responders and their communities."

At Pierce Mfg., the company was optimistic and was encouraged to see municipal budgets remaining resilient, says Lisa Barwick, vice president, Marketing I Fire & Emergency Segment.

"I can't say enough about the exceptional job our buyers and supply chain team have done over the past year," Barwick says. "They continue to put strategies into place helping position us to best serve our customers."

Barwick points to a list of innovations and achievements Pierce made during the past year as an indication of the company's resilience.

"In 2021, we introduced the Volterra™ platform of electric fire apparatus and ARFF vehicles and put the first electric fire truck in service in North America in Madison, Wisconsin," Barwick says. "This is a real North America style fire apparatus built to the City of Madison's specifications. We look forward to taking on a prominent role in helping municipalities and airports reach their sustainability goals."

Moving into 2022, Barwick says Pierce plans to focus on increasing production capacity with investments in new equipment and additional space.

"In October, we hosted a hiring event with the intent to grow our team by 200 team members to fill skilled production roles," she says. "As we head into 2022, we look forward to continued investment in our facilities and new products."

Barwick says, unfortunately, COVID-19 will continue to be a factor in the fire service business.

"Like many companies, the past few years have forced us to find creative ways to conduct business and continue to build relationships and loyalty among our customer base," Barwick says. "We had to work collaboratively to embrace new communications methods and find ways to stay connected, but face-to-face contact and creating a personalized experience is as important now as ever. We anticipate continued supply chain challenges, and manufacturers will be required to show agility in production schedules to remain as efficient as possible. Nevertheless, we believe these past two years have made us a stronger, leaner, and more nimble company better positioned to support first responders."

For businesses like MSA Safety, continuing operations over the past nearly two years has been important to keeping firefighters and responders safe.

"As a leader in safety, MSA continued to manufacture products for our customers who must work in times of global crisis," says Samantha D'Uva, senior manager, product PR and corporate social media for MSA Safety. "This includes those who are tasked with keeping us safe and, in some cases, directly responding to the COVID-19 outbreak. It also includes doing what we can to help protect those working to keep our critical infrastructure functioning, particularly in times of national emergency."

D'Uva says COVID-19 "has highlighted the importance of being able to monitor the status of our current conditions, even remotely, no matter where we are in the world."

"From a first responder perspective, having the capability for incident command, to monitor any scene to ensure you and your team are okay and not in distress, provides an additional layer of peace of mind," D'Uva says. "And with this technology comes solid data that can enable predictive analytics to help ensure the long-term health of those who protect us."

D'Uva says, "Throughout the pandemic, the need for emergency responders never went away. So, the need of products and services that support them in their role continues. We certainly are positioned, ready and able to continue to support their evolving needs into the future."

Tyler sums it up by saying what many people wish: "We remain optimistic that [COVID] cases will continue to decrease and look forward to getting back to a normal business environment."

Tyler also expressed gratefulness for "the incredible heroes in the fire service industry through this challenging time."

"The challenges we as a manufacturer [face] are certainly great, but they pale in comparison to the challenges our first responders face every hour of every day. We certainly appreciate everything they do to keep us, our families, and our communities safe."



SECTIONS

[PRODUCT CENTER](#)
[TRAINING GUIDES](#)
[MARKETPLACE](#)
[WEBCASTS](#)

TOPICS

[HOME](#)
[APPARATUS](#)
[RIGSPOT](#)
[EQUIPMENT](#)
[PPE](#)
[TECH](#)

ABOUT

[ABOUT US](#)
[ADVERTISE](#)
[SUBSCRIBE](#)
[CONTACT US](#)

[Privacy Policy](#)

Copyright © 2019 - 2021