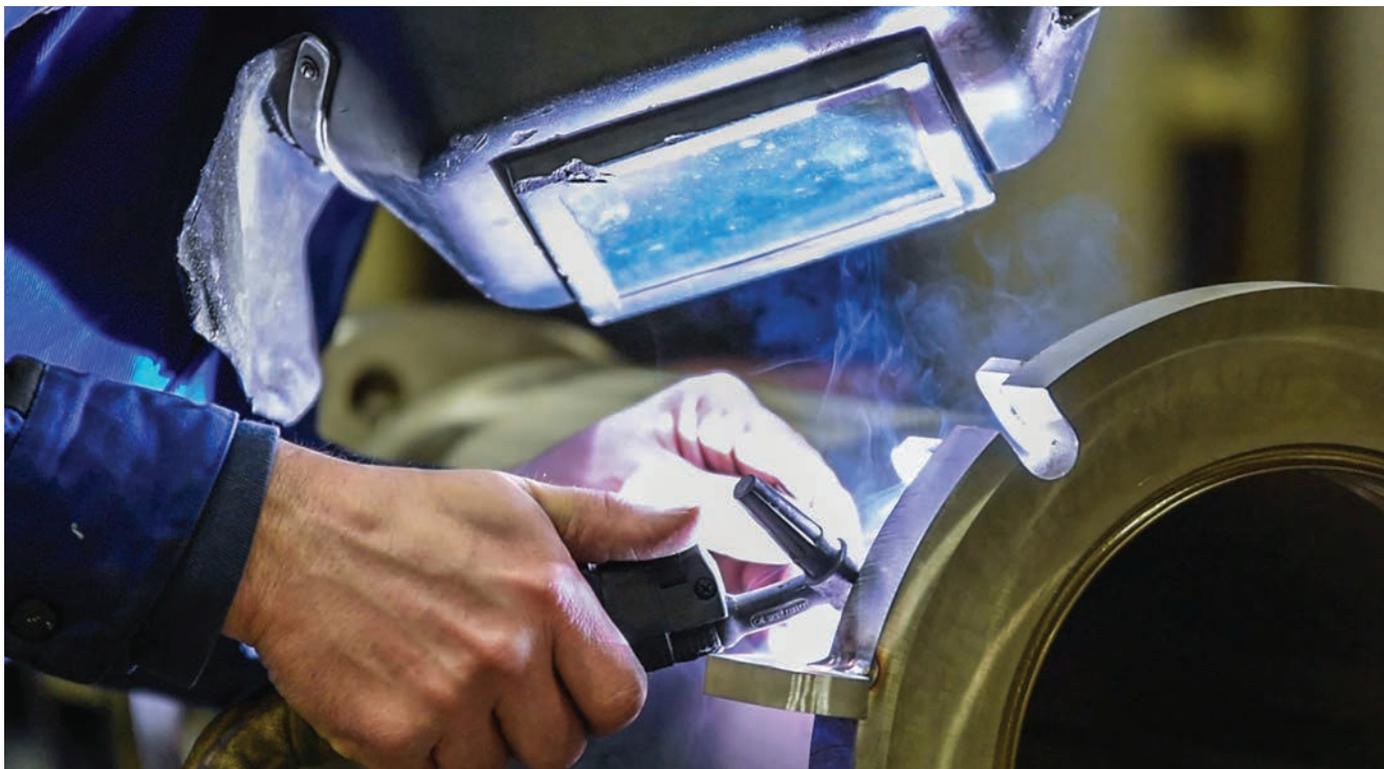


Custom Equipment

Koss Industrial solves problems for its food-processing customers with its customized equipment. **By Mark Lawton**



>> Koss Industrial is “always trying out and testing new welding technologies and evaluating equipment to see if it will improve quality or lead times or efficiency,” Heidi Hilbert says.

Koss Industrial has the insider’s insight on what qualities food manufacturers need in their equipment. “Because our founders started as licensed cheesemakers, they have the mentality and know the challenges that food manufacturers deal with,” Senior Marketing Specialist Heidi Hilbert says. “That mentality holds true today.”

That means Koss Industrial strives to manufacture equipment that is easy to clean and maintain, while figuring out processes that help its customers reduce waste, energy use and overall cost. Engineers at Koss Industrial can identify the best way to recover water for reuse, the right spray head for the most effective cleaning pattern or the most appropriate pump for a customer’s needs, to cite a few examples.

Today, more than 40 years after its founding, the company employs almost 100 people who design and manufacture custom stainless steel processing equipment largely for the cheese, beverage, food and other sanitary industries. Koss Industrial has also done work

for companies in the paper, microencapsulation, transportation, marine and chemical industries.

What the company is best known for is solving problems for its customers. An ice cream manufacturer, for example, was outgrowing its space. “Space constraints were a challenge,” Hilbert says. “We needed to help them compress and automate to be as efficient as possible in a small footprint. We are really good at being able to look at the process line or system and figure out how we can best make it fit into the facility without destroying traffic patterns or worker safety.”

company profile

Koss Industrial

www.kossindustrial.com

Headquarters: Green Bay, Wis.

Employees: 100

Heidi Hilbert, senior marketing specialist: “It’s really great to see people take pride in what they are doing.”

From Cheese to Equipment

John and Joe Koss worked as licensed cheesemakers at their family's Wisconsin cheese plant, Badger State Cheese, until they had an epiphany. "They realized they liked tinkering and building and improving equipment more than they liked making cheese," Hilbert says.

With John's garage as their home base, the brothers began traveling to dairy plants throughout the Midwest to repair and fabricate cheese-processing equipment. They founded Koss Industrial in 1978 and two years later moved to a facility in De Pere, Wis., where they expanded their metal fabrication capabilities and added machining, engineering and electrical services.

In 1992, Koss Industrial expanded again, building a 40,000-square-foot facility in Green Bay, Wis., where it continues to reside, later adding 15,000 square feet of fabrication space. By 2000, the company had begun to offer contract manufacturing services for its waterjet cutting, precision machining, custom fabrication and finishing. In 2016, Jason and Joey Koss, sons of Joe Koss, took over as co-owners of Koss Industrial.

While the company does build a few standard products such as COP tanks and cheese grinders, Hilbert says it's rare for it to build the same thing twice. "We really specialize in the custom aspect," she says.

Koss Industrial custom builds stainless steel processing equipment in a wide variety of categories including cooking, mixing, blending and cutting; product conveyance; separation and filtration; tanks and vessels; cleaning and sanitation; and heat exchange and transfer. It also supplies pumps and valves, plant outfitting products, fittings, tubing and pipe, filters and strainers, heat exchangers, instrumentation and automation products, refurbished equipment, service kits and spare parts.

Over the years, the company has seen a lot of consolidation among food manufacturers, which means larger plants that require larger equipment. Conversely, the farm-to-fork movement – where farmers sell directly to consumers – is leading to an increase in small local producers that need smaller equipment systems.

To handle those changes among both large and small customers, Koss Industrial has hired more engineering staff and uses 3-D modeling to show customers their equipment or system before cutting a single piece of metal.

The company also uses the latest technology for metalworking. "We are always trying out and testing new welding technologies and evaluating equipment to see if it will improve quality or lead times or efficiency," Hilbert says.

Proud Employees

A move among customers to embrace corporate purchasing departments that focus only on price presents a challenge for Koss Industrial.

"We are custom," Hilbert says. "We are not always the cheapest option. But we are an incredible value. It is not unusual to see our equipment running 30 or 35 years after installation. Our equip-

ment won't be sitting in a landfill a decade from now."

The company leverages relationships. Many times, a food manufacturer has multiple locations and Koss Industrial has worked with someone in a different location.

"It's also just trying to sell people on the idea that good quality is a better investment in the long run," Hilbert says. "A lot of companies are getting measured on their sustainability and equipment efficiency."

A tight labor market and a misperception among some that manufacturing is not a good career sometimes makes hiring a challenge. To recruit, the company offers competitive wages and benefits and a work/life balance to its employees. The company has some turnover, but it also has employees who have worked at Koss Industrial from 15 years to as long as 37 years.

Hilbert notes that employees are proud of their work. "We need to take pictures of all our equipment before it goes out the door," she says. "A lot of times employees will say, 'Will you take a photo of me [with equipment] so I can show it to my family?' It's really great to see people take pride in what they are doing." **FD**

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