

IN PROFILE

The harmony of going lean

BY CHRISTINA HALEY O'NEAL

The concept of lean manufacturing struck a chord for Curt Altarac, founder and owner of MusicMedic.

The switch for the Wilmington-based company started with a conversation on a first-class flight with the leader of a local health care group who introduced Altarac to the lean business model.

MusicMedic, a local maker, online retailer and educator in all things related to woodwind instruments and repair, was transitioning from a wholesale-reseller to a manufacturer and retailer.

After working with foreign suppliers and manufacturers for several years, Altarac brought manufacturing some repair tools and instrument pads in-house but was challenged by balancing big backlogs and a large supply with maintaining quality and creativity. He was trying to figure out how to automate certain processes, said Altarac, who is also a saxophonist, saxophone repair specialist and teacher.

But following that flight and a little more research, Altarac in 2014 implemented a lean manufacturing process at the MusicMedic shop.

"We follow that lean philosophy now on everything that we do here," Altarac said. "That's the way that we run the business. And that includes the instruments we sell, the tools that we buy and sell, the tools that we make and the pads we make."

Altarac started his business, providing saxophone repair and selling a saxophone repair kit he created, between graduating college and getting his master's degree in music. He moved to the Wilmington area in 2003 and opened MusicMedic in his home garage, first in Wilmington and later moving to Southport.

MusicMedic today is located inside a 40,000-square-foot building at 901 Martin St., where it has been since 2009.

There are several parts to the MusicMedic business, including its Sax ProShop, online retail through MusicMedic.com, shipping and the manufacturing side, which produces its line of pads and repair tools.

The company's instrument pads are made by hand. Pads are made for flutes, clarinets, saxophones, piccolos and most recently, bassoons.

MusicMedic also uses Computer Numerical Control (CNC) machin-



PHOTO BY MICHAEL CLINE SPENCER

Making music: Curt Altarac, founder and owner of MusicMedic, stands inside the company's Sax ProShop with The Wilmington saxophone.

ing and other machine processes to develop its tools.

MusicMedic sells over 350 tools, 45 of which are made exclusively at its Wilmington machine shop.

Some of its tools and a line of MusicMedic instruments carry the Wilmington name.

"It differentiates the products that we make here in Wilmington from the other products that we sell. And we feel good enough about our instruments to put 'Wilmington' on them. Our highest quality stuff says, 'Wilmington,'" Altarac said.

The company, however, imports its musical instruments, which are then playtested, adjusted and inspected by a technician at MusicMedic's Sax ProShop in Wilmington.

The Wilmington series of woodwind instruments include saxophones, clarinets and flutes.

The firm continues to grow, including its machine shop, and innovates its products.

MusicMedic is diving into making brass repair tools. It is also opening

avenues for distribution. The company partnered with Dawkes Music in the United Kingdom for distribution there and will soon open its own distribution center in China.

The company, which today employs 20 people, has plans to add more staff this year.

Altarac also has a long-term goal to one day manufacture saxophones "from the ground up" at the company's base, he said.

That was part of his decision to start making saxophone necks and, eventually saxophone bells, in Wilmington.

Much of the new machinery recently added to the facility will help the company reach that goal in the next decade, he said.

"All the decisions that we're making, especially in the beginning when I first made the decision to buy the machinery, it was also rooted in part by my desire to just make a saxophone," Altarac said. "And I'd like to revolutionize the saxophone if I could. I think this is the place to do it."



MUSICMEDIC

901 Martin St., Suite B, Wilmington

No. of employees: 20

Year founded: 2003

Top local official: Curt Altarac, founder and owner

Company description:

MusicMedic is a manufacturer, distributor and seller of instruments, repair tools and instrument pads. MusicMedic.com is the company's online source for tools and supplies, instrument sales and repair education.

Products made locally:

MusicMedic manufactures instrument repair tools at its machine shop. It also makes instrument pads for saxophones, clarinets, flutes and piccolos, which are hand-assembled and quality checked in-house.

What made the company decide to make its goods locally?

Altarac: "We switched to a lean style of manufacturing several years ago, and it changed the way we looked at our products and how we offer them to our customers. We realized the inherent waste in importing products, when the quality suffered and certain products couldn't even be distributed and sold ... We realized we could hire local people, make better products, and still turn a profit making our tools and supplies in-house when possible. It also increased our creativity, product development and turnaround times, while eliminating back-order issues."