

Wisconsin made in

Protect Door fills niche for secure doors

BY DEAN LESAR
TRC

A little more than a decade ago, Alan Deiler saw the market was open to a niche product in his industry. The door was open, you might say, to selling doors.

Not just any doors, though, but specialty doors, ones lined with lead, that would serve the health care industry as well as provide security in school buildings and office spaces. Looking to expand the product line he had already established at his Streck-O door manufacturing plant in Abbotsford, Deiler created an offshoot in Spencer that has become a go-to source of specialty doors for architects designing everything from hospitals to government buildings.

Deiler opened Protect Door in Spencer in 2010, and started with one employee making a custom-ordered lead-lined door. Today, the Spencer plant produces 100-150 doors per week, each one of them custom-designed and hand-crafted by a team of 17 employees on the floor and another five in the office. Protect Door's products are opening and closing in amusement parks, prisons, schools, office complexes and elsewhere not only across this country, but around the globe.

Deiler has been in doors for a long time, first as an employee of a Marshfield manufacturer. In 2004, he bought the Streck-O factory in Abbotsford, a family business that dates back to 1940. There he continued building a wide range of doors, all sold through orders from architects for specific building projects. The approximately 50 employees there move from 900-1,000 doors out the door every week.

Along about 2010, Deiler noticed more requests for a very specific product, a lead-lined one to serve a growing need in the building industry. Hospitals were in need of such doors for their X-ray areas, and demand was also increasing for doors that would provide more safety for those behind them. The specialized process it takes to manufacture such doors requires a clean envi-



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A Protect Door employee in Spencer runs a CNC program to prepare a specialty door for outfitting with hardware.

ronment, so Deiler went looking for a new location for his idea.

He found the right place on Highway 13 on Spencer's south side. The former Fiskars manufacturing plant had been vacant for several years, and although it was far larger than what Deiler needed at the time, it provid-

ed other amenities that suited his business plan. Little did he know then, but all that space would soon come in handy.

"I thought, 'It's so darn big. How are we gonna fill this up?'" Deiler said. "Now we're adding on."

What helped at first was that there was only one

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other manufacturer at the time that was making something similar. Deiler designed his lead-lined doors and was able to sell them through architects who were designing and building courthouses and police stations, medical facilities, and schools. As his products became more well-known in the industry, he was able to identify specific new products for which there was a demand, and build them one by one.

“We’ve been on a continual course of creative partnering with other people,” said Protect Door General Manager Gary Johnson. “Whatever it takes to get more products that fit our niche, which is safety and security.”

Bullet-proof doors are one of the specialty products in which Protect Door excels. It has a patented 9-layer design in a door that is the only one on the market certified by Underwriters Laboratory (UL), Deiler said. While most doors on the market will deflect a bullet, Protect Door has a patented product that takes safety a step further.

“Ours captures the bullet and holds it,” Johnson said. “You have to absorb all the energy.”

Protect Door’s bullet-proof models are also known for their aesthetic value. They’re not industrial-looking steel slabs, but wood-veneer covered doors that can be blended into any office design.

“It looks like any other high-quality office door. You wouldn’t know the difference,” Johnson said. “The average person cannot tell that’s a bullet door. When you close our bullet door, it closes like an office door.”

Protect Door saw a surge in orders for bullet doors as a spate of school shootings in recent years caused districts around the nation to upgrade security. More orders for bullet doors have also come in as municipalities are beefing up their protections in facilities like police stations and courtrooms.

“There’s kind of a new trend in mid-sized cities in shared resource buildings,” Johnson said. Those facilities tend to have common entry vestibules and need security doors to enter separate agencies.

“The buildings that we deal with are everywhere from prisons to schoolhouses to fire stations,” Johnson said.

And medical facilities. That’s a main source of



DEAN LESAR/TRG

An employee at the Spencer Protect Door facility strips pieces of wood veneer together to surface a specialty door that may be used for any number of security functions.

growth for Protect Door, and it often ships sets of doors to hospital building sites to protect employees against radiation. It has also done doors for nuclear medicine storage facilities and universities that store isotopes.

“Routine” is not a word that describes many of Protect Door’s orders. It’s not in the business of supplying building projects with the hundreds of doors to common spaces, but those few unique ones that few manufacturers deal with. On a hospital job, for example, there might

be an order going elsewhere for 200 regular doors, but perhaps six that need to be able to withstand radiation.

As Johnson says, any new order can be a challenge. “We really don’t say ‘no’ to anything. We’ll look at it,” he said.

Protect Door also knows that looks are important, so it takes orders for doors with round windows or diamond windows and doors with most any shade of wood

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which it had to place a peephole in an eyeball design.

“We can make any of our doors using virtually any sustainably harvested wood species,” Johnson said.

With that focus on detail comes some extra design time on orders. Johnson and other designers run computer drafting programs to create the look of an order before the craftsmen on the floor go to work.

“We can do whatever an architect can dream up,” Johnson said. “Architects love to put their marks on things.”

As such, there’s also nothing at Protect Door that can be made in a fast-paced, automated assembly-line fashion. In Spencer, an average order involves two employees taking two weeks to do everything to exacting specifications.

“Our jobs are more of the craftsmanship type of job,” Deiler said. “We have very tight tolerances. We’re talking one-thirty-second of an inch or less a lot of times.”

Another door product that’s been growing in popu-



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Protect Door President Alan Deiler (right) and two Spencer plant employees show a custom-ordered over-size door product with a large safety glass area.

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larity lately is a sound-buffering product. Those are used for music rooms to keep sound in, or on buildings near airports, to keep noise out. Rooms in which confidential discussions take place also require specialty doors designed with sound in mind.

Yet another niche product is the anti-ligature door. Those are used in mental health facilities, and are of a design that prohibits a patient from attempting to commit suicide by hanging themselves. It’s not a common door to make, but as Johnson says, “Somebody’s gotta do it.”

Such a variety of door designs/models mean workers don’t get bored making the same thing every day.

“Everything we make is a one-off,” Johnson said. “There’s nothing that’s vanilla. Virtually everything we make is made one-off and it’s made by hand. Our people like that.”

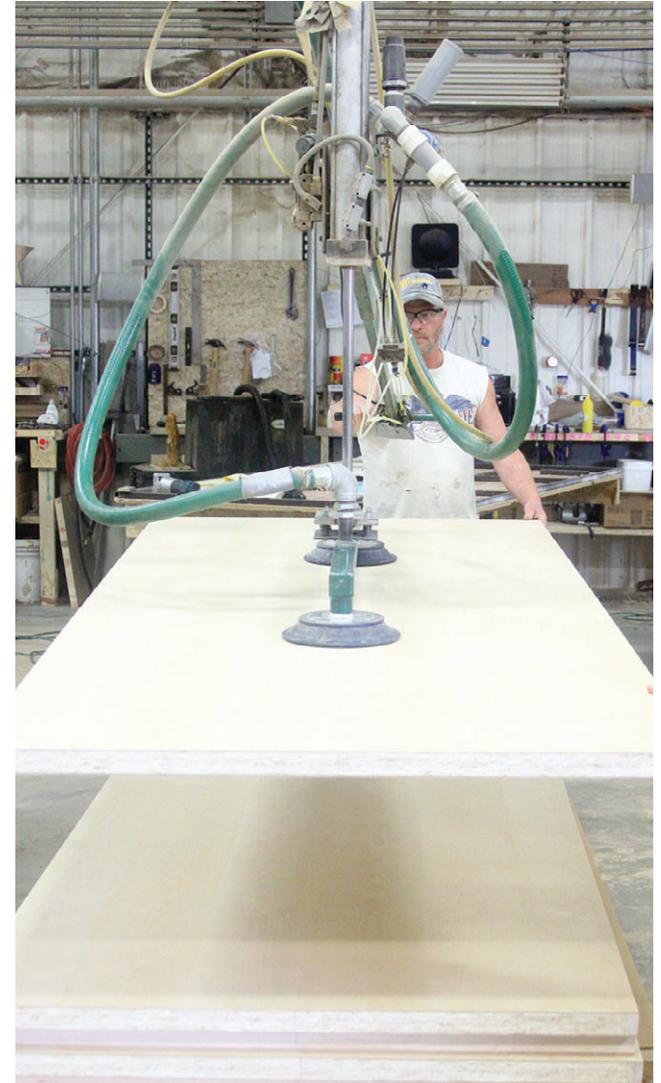
While Deiler said it’s a priority for his company to expand its product line so one product can pick up the slack if sales of others slip, he also knows it’s important for Protect Door to retain its reputation for its ability to respond rapidly to customer needs. As an example, the company recently got a rush order on a hospital building project in South Carolina, and was able to ship 16 doors to the site within four days.

“Our niche is doing things fast and being able to react to customers’ needs really quickly,” Deiler said.

While Johnson and Deiler know some of their doors are as close to home as hospitals in Neillsville, Marshfield and Wisconsin Rapids, others wind up in places they don’t even know. They often ship to distribution centers with the final location of the building projects never revealed. It is world-wide, though, such as an order of Protect Door’s products that recently went to a large medical complex in Qatar.

And all those doors come from a non-descript plant along Highway 13 in Spencer. There are no huge signs, and the company rarely gives public tours because of proprietary information. It’s a small plant with a focus on a specific market.

“Everything we build is in the architectural field but it’s special,” Johnson said. “It’s the stuff the large-volume door plants don’t want to slow down their processes with.”



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Built with lead-line panels or of a combination of wood layers, Protect Door’s products weigh more than typical doors but are built to exact specifications so they appear and close like regular doors.