

Getting a Piece of that Sweet Coupling Pie

Success of oil and gas buoys industry in 'very, very good year'

Erik Schmidt, Assistant Editor

He was out.

Nine years ago, Ross Rivard left the coupling industry for the shimmering new world of luxury automotive components at Lacks Enterprises, where he was immediately enveloped by platinum trim systems and chrome composite wheels. It was glitz and glam and as sparkly clean as the fresh-from-the-dealership cars his products were embellished onto.

But for a self-proclaimed "shop rat" like Rivard, it was all a smidge too hoity-toity and entirely too hollow.

"I like to see how things work and what they do and how they come together," Rivard said. "The product [at Lacks] was shiny - but it didn't do anything. So I was kind of out of my element. It's a great company, really well run with wonderful products and they do very well in the marketplace. It just wasn't my thing."

So after nearly a decade removed from the industry, Rivard decided to return to his grime-covered roots earlier this year and get down and dirty with couplings once more. Turns out he couldn't have picked a better time.

"The industrial sector by itself is doing very well," Rivard said. "It continues to expand and the various sub-segments of the marketplace are doing very well, like energy and gas and oil. Others, like mining, are not doing as well. But overall it's doing very well."

"It was absolutely a good time to return."

Rivard, who became president of Ringfeder Power Transmission USA in Westwood, NJ back in April, moseys back into town as a prodigal son of sorts, both signifying and confirming the undeniable appeal of an industry that has enjoyed robust growth - most of all in 2014 - since his departure.

Fueling the Fire

Figuratively and literally speaking, oil and gas make most things in this world go - and in 2014 the coupling industry was of little exception.

Buoyed by an increased demand in fossil fuels over the past 12 months, the industry as a whole experienced one of its best calendar years in over a decade, according to Lovejoy (Downers Grove, IL) general manager Elliot Wilson.

"It was one of the best years [in a long time]," Wilson said. "Given the economic conditions we did not do a price increase this year, but we still saw significant growth. It was a very, very good year."

While companies remained tight-lipped and opaquely vague

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about specific empirical data and exactly *how good* 2014 was, the general consensus was simple: pretty darn.

"My understanding is that there was a very big demand for oil and gas extraction equipment," said Andy Lechner, sales manager of R+W America in Bensenville, IL. "There was kind of a boom over the last couple of years. It's been especially interesting for R+W here in the U.S. because Houston tends to be the technological center for the world when it comes to fossil fuels and petroleum. So a lot of the engineering and capital equipment gets made - if not in Houston - then somehow Houston tends to be involved in some way."

Of course, getting a piece of that sweet, oil and gas-soaked coupling pie wasn't as simple for a smaller, niche company like R+W as, say, a market power such as Lovejoy. The problem is the monolithic bulwark of carefully constructed guidelines and requirements imposed by the American Petroleum Institute (API) that date back to the 1940s.

As a producer of ATEX-certified, explosion-proof elastomer jaw couplings used on centrifugal pumps packages for over 10 years, R+W was already a player in the oil and gas industry in a limited capacity - but it didn't yet manufacture a product that met the regimented restrictions put forth by the API, and thus is stood on the outside looking in as other companies reaped the benefits of the world's newly accessible fuel extraction.

In mid-2013 Lechner and R+W had the opportunity - and the foresight - to



A production supervisor from KTR Corporation loads a large brake disc onto the vertical lathe machine.

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Ringfeder Power Transmission USA employee Jaime Fiorilo tests couplings.

expand their coupling offering by introducing its Survivor line of disc pack couplings.

“The (API) specifies that a certain, heavy-duty metallic coupling be used in pump drives – and that’s a disc pack coupling,” Lechner said. “There was an opportunity for R+W to expand its reach in the oil and gas market, and that was through the API version of the disc pack coupling. Our [disc pack coupling] uses a pure-friction drive to transfer the power. So we decided we had an opportunity to bring a technical advantage to that field, while at the same time expanding our offering.

“Out of those disc park couplings that R+W developed, one line called the LPA – which is especially intended for API610 pump systems – was made and marketed, and as we’ve gotten a little bit closer to the users of those couplings in the industry we’ve decided to work on a new series that incorporates some new features that we learned would be desirable for those engineers.

“We’re planning on rolling that product out in 2015.”

Like R+W, Michigan-based KTR Corporation decided to up its metaphorical ante in 2014 in order to fully tap into the thriving oil and gas marketplace.

“I think in general, and you’ll probably get the same response from everybody, is that [2014] was stronger than in years past,” said Chris Hatseras, KTR’s engineering and marketing manager. “Couplings service many different industries; you’re never in the same industry, so it’s just a mix of

different markets coming back up – oil and gas being one of them.”

Though Hatseras said that most of the new products KTR released in the United States over the past year were not technically designed to “spring-board” them off the swelling wave of oil and gas sales in 2014, the company did introduce the Rigiflex-HP – an

API-approved coupling used on turbo compressors, high-speed pump drives, generator drives and turbine drives – overseas in late 2013 specifically to capitalize on the oil and gas boom that carried over into last year.

KTR also released the ROTEX line of couplings with T-PUR improved polyurethane material, as well as the BoWex GT line, in 2014.

“These [products] were more complementary,” Hatseras said of the T-PUR and BoWex GT. “In some years we will introduce something that’s new. For instance, in oil and gas we introduced the [Rigiflex-HP] this year, but not in the U.S. So that’s an example of saying, ‘Here’s a new product, here’s a bunch of new sales and we’re really going to go after it.’ Typically, we’re a little more conservative on how we innovate.”

That last sentiment, though subtle, is a telling one. Even a company priding itself on conservatism, like KTR, found reason to exert itself beyond its normal means in 2014 – an irrefutable sign that

this past year was a grand one indeed, and also a grim revelation that perhaps 2015 won’t enjoy such fortuitousness.

“Oil and gas prices have gotten so low, how can there be a continuing need for this volume of capital equipment, like fuel pumps and so on?” Lechner asked rhetorically.

It’s a question that doesn’t have to be answered just yet, as most companies still seem to be riding high off the euphoric successes of 2014. Yet it’s out there, nonetheless – hovering ominously beyond the gilded sheen of cartoonish Scrooge McDuck money bags and vertical arrows exploding out the top of display charts.

“We think [the coupling industry] is going to be maybe not as strong in 2015 [as in 2014],” Hatseras said.

Reinventing the Wheel

One company that didn’t seem all that infatuated with the rampant rise of oil and gas, nor the (alleged) impending down year to come, was Lovejoy – a giant in the industry that seems to keep churning its massive legs no matter how flat or hilly the horizon.

“We saw an uptick [in 2014] pretty much across the board,” Wilson said. “There were industries that were down, like in the coal industry, but we were encouraged by seeing growth in multiple areas. It wasn’t really limited to just oil and gas.

“One thing about our company, probably more so than a lot of multinationals, is we are U.S.-centric. When you look at the global economy, the U.S. is doing really well right now. Our flexible coupling and our jaw couplings, these are products that go into a tremendous amount of industries;



Pictured are KTR Corporation’s ROTEX coupling and T-PUR spider products, released in 2014.

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they're multiuse couplings that go into everything from devices at home to factories all over the country - and those products were up solidly for us.

"So we saw strength universally across the country."

While several companies have recently come out with innovations specifically targeted towards hopping on the oil and gas bandwagon, Lovejoy - already firmly entrenched in the industry - spent 2014 stripping down the

wagon itself and completely reinventing the wheel, so to speak.

"We took a two-year deep-dive into trying to reinvent the gear coupling," Wilson said. "The gear coupling was created long, long before there was proper analysis and modern software. So we used countless optimization techniques and came up with the industry's best gear coupling..."

"...the HercuFlex is what we're calling it."

It's certainly an ambitious name for an ambitious product, and while it doesn't exactly conjure up images of a chiseled Greek demigod lambasting serpentine monsters with a heavy wooden club, the stout, platinum coupling is still a fairly Herculean engineering feat, according to Wilson.

"This is a truly new product," Wilson said. "This is a clean slate approach where we gave

our design engineers a blank canvas and said, 'look at everything out there and come up with what is absolutely the best gear coupling in the marketplace.'"

According to Wilson, the HercuFlex offers "increased torque and bore capacity, combined with a robust design that increases service life."

"There are a lot of people, and we're the same way, where you do little spins or little tweaks and call it a new product or innovation," Wilson said. "I can't tell you the last time the coupling industry saw a clean-slate, newly optimized solution. I've been in the industry five years and I'm not sure I've seen it."

Going Global ... and Beyond

In a loopy, roundabout way, this brings us back to Rivard and Ringfeder, who didn't revolutionize the world of couplings with any bold new products in 2014, but made one of the industry's most audible splashes nonetheless.

For Ringfeder, a global enterprise with a reach expanding from America's East Coast to the literal Far East of Ji-



Pictured are several products from R+W's EK line of elastomer couplings.



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Ringfeder Power Transmission USA employee Wanda Boguslawski assembles a metal bellows coupling.

slightly in the rigid disc couplings. It allowed us to penetrate new markets where we had previously played on the fringe.”

And while Ringfeder sets its sights on broadening its global position in 2015, R+W has slightly loftier goals – goals that expand past the constrictions of man’s earthly domain and up towards the heavens.

“Our company is actually branching off into a number of other areas, including torque limiters and couplings for aerospace equipment,” Lechner said. “We’re working on projects for NASA... and we’re in the process of pursuing a certificate called AS90120, which is an aerospace-quality certification that we’re hoping to have wrapped up here in the next six months.

“I wish [I could tell you more], but I’m afraid it’s top secret stuff.”

angsu Province, China, the big news over the past 12 months was the acquisition of Tschan, a German-based producer and developer of shaft-coupling technology.

“It expanded our product line, giving us a full-complement,” Rivard said. “That’s the exciting thing for us.

“We acquired it in June of 2014, and what it did was expand our capability in the elastomer couplings and

So there it is – as 2014’s lucrative year comes to an end and companies look ahead to days and months that are likely to be less fruitful due to falling oil and gas prices, among other depressions, there remains reason for great optimism.

Couplings in space? It doesn’t get any more fulfilling than that.

Yeah, Rivard was right. He came back at the perfect time. **PTE**

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