

Manufacturing Means Jobs — Mike Arms

Mike Arms and I usually meet and say hello at the East Tennessee Economic Council meetings each Friday morning at 7:30 a.m. This unique meeting of leaders from most all of the primary organizations working to promote economic development in the Oak Ridge area gather here weekly.

When he sees something in the weekly Y-12 history articles that he likes, he always mentions that to me. He even suggests ideas for the articles. But never has he been as enthusiastic about the articles as he has been since the Oak Ridge Centers for Manufacturing Technology (ORCMT) series began.

Every week he has made time to discuss what is being revealed by the people who actually participated in that unusually successful effort. I asked him often to give me some input, and he said he would think about it. Finally, he agreed to write something from his perspective. His input:

“In follow-up to recent articles about the history of the Oak Ridge Centers for Manufacturing Technology, this piece relates the role the Centers played in a unique and very effective state-wide partnership.

“By the mid 90’s ORCMT was actively engaged in outreach to help small businesses, with a focus on manufacturers. It developed a well-earned tagline: ‘We solve tough manufacturing problems.’

“However, ORCMT had very limited marketing capabilities. Although the Department of Energy had designated some funding for ORCMT to provide manufacturing technical assistance to small businesses on a limited basis, an effort was needed to make industry aware of ORCMT’s capabilities. This awareness was generated through a unique partnership.

“While ORCMT was starting to achieve a series of success stories in manufacturing assistance, the State of Tennessee’s Department of Economic and Community Development (ECD) was setting some lofty goals for statewide capital investment and job creation. The leadership of ECD was heavily stressing capital investment in manufacturing since it was a sector generating not only high-paying direct jobs but also outstanding secondary jobs in supply-chain support and other related areas.

“This effort was the driving force behind a partnership that marketed itself under the brand ‘Manufacturing Means Jobs.’ The partnership involved ECD with a statewide business retention, recruitment and expansion effort. ORCMT, with its capabilities to solve tough manufacturing problems, was one part of the partnership. The University of Tennessee’s Center for Industrial Services, with field agents calling on industry in all three grand divisions offering technical support and specific training such as lean manufacturing, was another. And, the Tennessee Board of Regents, with its Community Colleges providing skilled workforce development on a statewide wholesale basis, was another.

“The four partners all promoted the ‘Manufacturing Means Jobs’ brand. ‘MMJ,’ as it was called, was even the theme one year of the Tennessee Governor’s Economic Development Conference.

“MMJ lapel pins and posters were included in registration packages. MMJ banners were seen at numerous statewide functions and events. An MMJ exhibit was set up in the legislative plaza in Nashville to make sure state elected officials were aware of this partnership and its initiative to grow manufacturing jobs from Memphis to Mountain City.

“Throughout this effort ECD was keeping a running score card in total statewide capital investment and job growth. The Governor and the Commissioner of Economic and Community Development were quoting those growing numbers on a routine basis with every plant expansion and ribbon cutting.

“MMJ played an important role in this success story and ORCMT was recognized as a key anchor in the MMJ partnership. It also had another value-added benefit for us: It showcased Oak Ridge and the unique technologies and capabilities it had to offer many Tennesseans all across the state.”

Now there is a unique perspective that touts the partnership that developed between education, the state government and the federal government. And, it was a whopping success! Yet another model from yesteryear that is being pursued again today as we form partnerships between Y-12 National Security Complex and the University of Tennessee and are seeking yet other partners.

Thanks to Mike for pointing out the value of the Manufacturing Means Jobs brand. That is also something that we must think about now. What is the “brand” to best promote our current emerging efforts? I know a strategic planning effort is getting under way, and I am sure these concepts and ideas will be included in the development of the plan for a path forward.

With the amazing abilities of social media, high-speed computing, and access to technology that did not exist just a few years ago, the potential for quickly getting the word out about a rejuvenated Work for Others Program at Y-12 should make more progress than that of ORCMT or other previous efforts. It will be fun to watch and learn what works best in today’s environment and what will be the best approach for tomorrow’s rapidly changing environment.

ORCMT touched all states in the nation. We may just touch them again, and as we are already in many foreign countries with nonproliferation activities, we are international already! We just need to pick up some Work for Others activities in those countries.

I can’t help but wonder what the brand will be this time around? Any ideas?