



SBDC Success Story **Prairie Rivet**

Modernizing a Successful Small Business

Metal rivets, semi-tubular and solid, are permanent fasteners that go in everything: cars, windows, cookware, electronics, and boots, to name a few. So when Jon Hepner and Coye Harrett purchased Prairie Rivet in Markesan, Wisconsin, in October 2020, they stepped into a business with hundreds of customers who have been well-served with quality product and strong delivery times since the company's founding in 1957.

Hepner and Harrett had been planning for several years to buy and grow a small business. They spent months putting the word out to their professional networks that they were interested in buying a company that had been in business for over 15 years and was profitable. Prairie Rivet checked those boxes, with the added benefit that the company makes its rivets in-house.

"We're betting on a long-term view of American manufacturing," says Harrett. "We don't need to reinvent the machines in the shop; we can add organizational efficiencies and help this company take off."

Formulating plans with help from the SBDC

Hepner learned about the services offered by the Wisconsin Small Business Development Center at the University of Wisconsin-Madison (SBDC) in the spring of 2020, through his role as a Director of Development for Gebhardt Development. Then, with the recommendation of his friend Taralinda Willis, co-founder of Madison-based Curate, he connected with SBDC director Michelle Somes-Booher as a business consultant.

Now, Harrett and Hepner have logged upwards of fifteen meetings with Somes-Booher.

"Michelle and the SBDC were able to help us take our energy and motivation and put it in a direction," says Hepner. "She's been an invaluable resource, and I've already recommended her to other friends of mine who are small business owners or are looking to start companies."

Somes-Booher led Harrett and Hepner through the process of developing their business plan and applying for a loan.

"The business plan template that Michelle gave us was head





Jon Hepner

Coye Harrett

and shoulders above anything else,” says Harrett. “When we submitted it to our bank, they were blown away by how prepared we were, how professional our numbers were, and how clean and organized everything was. They went out of their way to comment on it. It gave us a leg up with our lender.”

Now, Somes-Booher is helping Harrett and Hepner make new hires, handle PR and HR, and maintain internal relationships within the company.

Hepner says that no situation is identical but that the issues that come up for small companies are similar enough that SBDC consultants can use their vast experience to help each business.

“Michelle helped us to make sure we were doing the right things at the right time, with

regard to putting priorities in place,” Hepner says.

Next steps

Now that the operations arm of the business is up and running, Hepner and Harrett are ready to launch their new marketing and sales strategy. They are engaging their existing customers and learning more about them via what Hepner calls “good, old-fashioned phone calls.”

They recently introduced themselves to the mayor of Markesan and sat in on a city council meeting, where they shared their story and their plans to grow the business and hire locally.

Hepner and Harrett are developing a new website that will allow them to collect analytics on who’s visiting the site and for how long, as well as allowing customers to place orders online. Hepner says inbound marketing strategies will draw the attention of existing and new customers to Prairie Rivet.

“We’ll leverage Google Analytics and blog posts,” says Hepner. “A website that lever-

ages AI allows us to gain customer leads without a lot of additional leg work. It’s working while we’re not.”

After they connect with their existing customer base, they plan to target new industries.

“We’re planning out about five years,” says Harrett. “Outside this business, we have other visions for ourselves that include keeping this company, too.”

To learn more about this success story, visit sbdc.wisc.edu/about-us/success-stories/

The UW-Madison Small Business Development Center supports businesses in Dane, Sauk, and Columbia Counties.

