



by Libby Maurer

Wood and steel complement,
not complicate.

You wouldn't know it, but almost three years ago Pat Shugrue's Bama Truss in Shelby, AL wasn't sure they had a future with light gauge steel trusses. Shugrue, president since 1985, "never thought this company would grow to this size." Understandable for a guy who spent most of 1975 to 1985 working for component manufacturers that are no longer in business. All of a sudden Shugrue and Bama management were considering a full-blown steel operation.

Three years after taking the initial plunge, steel is paying off in ways they never imagined.

Enter Michael Balliet, extreme sports enthusiast and equally extreme salesman. Prior to the start of his employment with Bama four years ago, Balliet's career was headed in a very different direction. Sales manager Joe Odgers shares a similar story; he worked in construction prior to joining Bama, but never with building components. Together Odgers and Balliet comprise 40 percent of Bama's total sales force, but they've undoubtedly contributed significantly to Bama's near quadrupled annual sales numbers since the steel line was implemented.

Servicing the multi-family residential and commercial construction industry in not only Alabama, but also Kentucky, West Virginia, Florida, Georgia and Tennessee (single family accounts for only ten percent of their sales, most of which Balliet handles), it turns out Bama did have the market clout to fit steel truss manufacturing into their big picture. Three years after taking the initial plunge, steel is paying off in ways Odgers' sales department never imagined.

at a glance

- ❑ Bama Truss & Components manufactures both wood and steel trusses for the commercial and multi-family building construction industry.
- ❑ When they first introduced their steel line in 2002, they made drastic changes in their design and manufacturing departments to separate the functions of the wood and steel divisions.
- ❑ The company has experienced more benefits than drawbacks as a result of expanding their operations to include steel trusses.

Steel Truss Manufacturing: Fish or Cut Bait

At one point three years ago, Odgers was granted only six months to determine whether the company had enough business to support a full-blown steel truss manufacturing division. The company had "dabbled" in the steel truss business in the past, but the time had come to decide once and for all if a permanent move into steel would be more lucrative than doing random jobs on an as-needed basis. Shugrue charged Odgers with doing some market homework to figure out whether and where Bama could fit in with the steel business. Odgers said he started by probing his regular general contractor customers, but soon realized he was talking to the wrong people. "Talking to general contractors was the wrong approach, because in most cases, they weren't the ones who could determine what kinds of

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Metal connector plates are hammered into place on a wood truss.



A steel gable end sits on a table in the steel shop. Bama's wood and steel manufacturing operations are housed in separate buildings and there is no cross-over of production staff.

Bama Truss Does It All

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steel packages and other materials the framing contractors on these big commercial jobs might need or want on site. Once I started approaching the framing contractor, he was able to tell me whether he would be interested in a steel truss package and which specific elements they'd have to contain to serve their needs," he explained. It was soon clear to Odgers that there was a demand for steel truss packages among their existing customers; it was simply a matter of approaching the right people about the extent of their needs. Six months later, Odgers' recommendation was to give steel a go. Shugrue and Waymon Rasco, vice president of operations, agreed to give steel a one-year trial.

"A Totally Different Animal"

After the decision had been made, changing the business structure to accommodate the differences between the sale, design, and manufacture of wood components versus steel components needed to be implemented in short order according to Odgers and Rasco. "Steel manufacturing was a totally different animal," Odgers said. "We reacted quickly to

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make sure those differences didn't stand in the way of the company's success."

First, Odgers decided each member of the sales staff would handle both wood and steel customers, even though there was a learning curve to becoming familiar with steel. "It just made sense to have all salesmen service the same people," he said.

Next up was the design department. "We had a problem when we first started because we were having technicians flip back and forth between wood and steel jobs," Odgers recalled. It didn't take long to realize the department would be more efficient and better organized if it was separated. "Steel truss design generally takes more time than wood, so we freed up two technicians to devote their time strictly to steel," he said. Five full-time technicians now handle all of Bama's wood projects.

Finally, management decided that the steel manufacturing operation should be a completely separate entity from the wood truss shop. "Along with that came the decision to keep the workers separate too. From a job task standpoint, it just made sense for the steel people to be doing only steel and for the wood guys to continue doing their thing," Rasco noted. It also seemed easier from a logistics and scheduling standpoint to not mix wood and steel production staff. Odgers pointed out that because they chose to house steel manufacturing in a separate building and hire brand new production staff their initial investment was pretty high. "But the material and equipment investments were not huge, so that helped to balance us out," he said, noting that compared to wood, light gauge steel manufacturing is quite an easy process. The addition of David McDowell as the steel shop manager rounded out the changes on the production side. With the line between wood and steel clearly defined, Bama felt they were maximizing their sales, design, and production expertise.

The fact that loyalty in the production department has resulted in a near-zero turnover rate helped during this potentially rocky transition. "Many on our production staff have been with us for 15 years. We just don't have problems with turnover," Shugrue said.

The Untapped Value of Steel Manufacturing

It didn't take long for Odgers to realize some of the unexpect-

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ed benefits of adding steel to their sales repertoire. In fact, it turns out wood and steel complement each other more than they compete. "The first thing we found was that most of our existing wood customers were also in the market for steel," he remembered. That newfound diversity within their customer base actually reinforced their wood business instead of creating internal competition. "It enabled us to get on a broader range of bidding lists," he added.

Another key advantage of offering both materials is a built-in safety net when either lumber or light gauge steel prices are volatile. "When steel prices went out of sight a few years ago,

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Bama's light gauge steel inventory is kept separate from their lumber supply.



Wood floor truss chords are fastened together with metal connector plates and stacked before they are transported to the floor truss set-up tables. The floor and roof truss assembly stations are housed in one large building.

Bama Truss Does It All

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we were able to convert a lot of steel jobs to wood. And when it comes to an often nightmarish change from steel to wood (or vice versa) mid-stream in a project, Bama can easily supply the other material and the customer doesn't have to go elsewhere for the necessary components. "So it's rare for us to lose a job because of a design change," Odgers noted.

The company has kept a close eye on changes in sales since adding their steel line, and the numbers speak for themselves. The percentage of Bama's steel truss sales—as compared to their total combined annual wood and steel sales—has increased steadily each year since the operation began; steel sales climbed from one percent in 2002 to 19 percent in 2003, and more than doubled in 2004 to 44 percent. Although their 2005 sales numbers were unavailable at this printing, it looks to be another promising year for the Bama steel division.

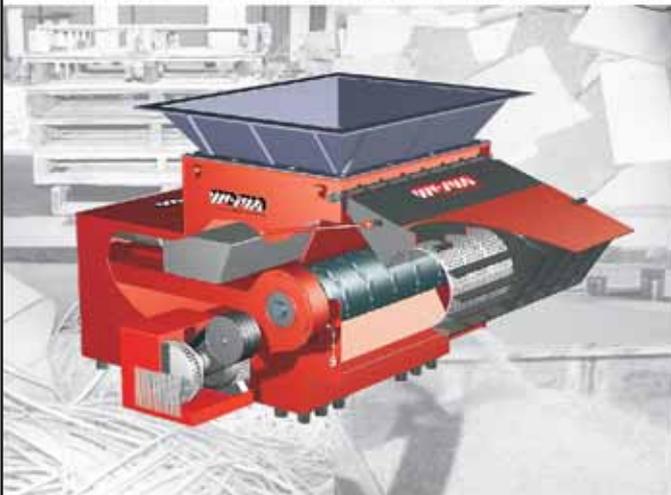
Do Your Homework

If you are interested in what it takes to add steel to an existing wood operation, take note of some important details to

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Wood wall panels are stacked in order, banded, and prepared for delivery. Bama's panel shop is separate from their wood and steel manufacturing facilities.



A section of pre-sheathed light gauge steel roof trusses are hoisted into place at a commercial jobsite in Birmingham, AL.

Steel roof trusses are carefully banded together and rest on wood blocks before being loaded on a trailer. According to Rasco, steel trusses have more of a tendency to shift during shipment (compared to wood trusses), so the wood blocks are attached to minimize movement and damage.



Two first shift production workers from the wood truss shop assemble a floor truss.

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Bama Truss Does It All

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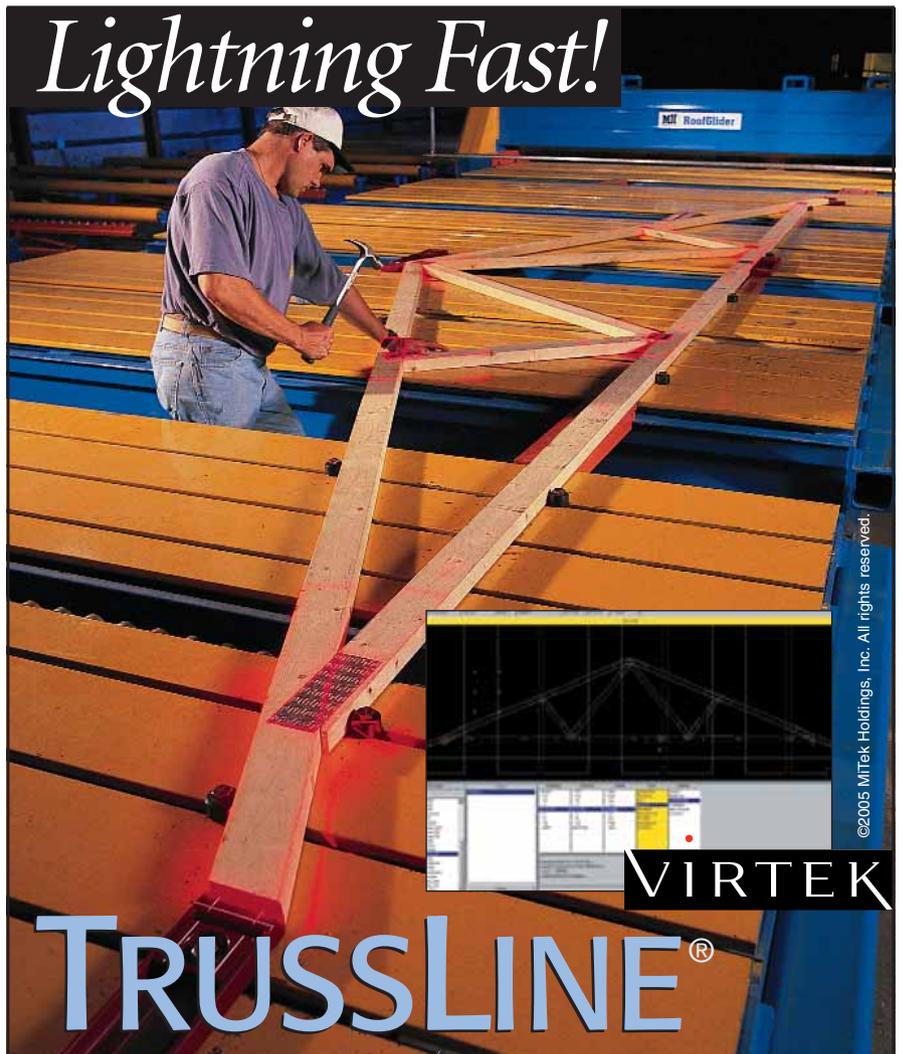
consider first. As previously noted, understand that steel is different. "And the earlier you realize it, the better off you are," Odgers advised. Don't rule out separating the two operations; the investment may be worth it. In addition, expect the process from bidding to design to take far longer than traditional wood jobs. "The lead time between quoting and actually starting the project is so different than [with] wood," he noted. Odgers said he's seen as much as a two-month negotiation process for commercial steel projects.

Be aware that steel is sometimes viewed as a "green" building material. Due in part to market pressure to prove their commitment to green building, Bama's steel plant has achieved certification through a national building council that promotes sustainable building practices and materials. Odgers said seeking certification was a relatively simple process. "We've started to see it being specified more and more," he noted.

Bama recommends making life easier by considering a software package that is closely related to or affiliated with your existing wood truss design program. This was a smart move on their part, saving their technicians many headaches in the transition process because the software and layouts were very similar.

On the Horizon

For as much past success as they have to be proud of, Shugrue's team has even more to look forward to. The next step is to build a new three-story office building expansion on their 30-acre lot. But like everyone else in this growing industry, he faces the challenges of a small business owner. The hardest thing about owning and growing a small business is the people, said Shugrue. "Both finding and training the right people to do this kind of work is a challenge," he added. "I like to think our success is due to our commitment to service and quality," he said proudly. Maybe so. But striking a mutually-beneficial relationship between their wood and steel operations certainly didn't hurt. **SBC**



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Bama's Joe Odgers, Pat Shugrue and Waymon Rasco, along with Aegis Metal Framing President Tom Valvo, accept the 2004 Associated Builders and Contractor's Excellence in Construction award, which is the highest honor given at the regional level. It was awarded for a job at the Valley Creek Waste Water Treatment Plant in Birmingham, AL which presented some very unusual challenges. For instance, Bama's installation crew had to work around a 100-foot pit under the building.

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