

SASKATCHEWAN: MANUFACTURING SUCCESS

Local resources and economy fuel Great Western Brewing

Successful brew

BY TED DAVIS

The natural advantages of conducting the business of beer making in Saskatchewan – the cultivation of nearby barley crops, the proximity of a world-class malting facility, low overhead costs – have all paid dividends for Great Western Brewing Company of Saskatoon. But another factor, which can only be defined as a growing confidence in the economic future of Saskatchewan, is also playing a role in the success of Great Western.

“There is an expanding of belief in ourselves, and it can be found in many different business and industry sectors throughout the province,” says Ron Waldman, president of the company. “People here increasingly have the mindset that, whatever it is, we can do it here as well as anywhere in the world.”

Great Western has proven this by being repeatedly recognized for brewing some of the world’s best beers. It has, for instance, won nine Monde Selection gold medals, four World Beer Cup awards and two

Midwest Brewers Festival gold medals for its libations. “We benchmark our products against the international competition,” says Mr. Waldman. “We’re not interested in being the best among a mediocre group.”

But maybe more gratifying has been the local and regional attention accorded to Great Western beverages. This has been achieved through a marketing policy of earning brand loyalty “one bottle and one customer at a time,” says Mr. Waldman. It is an approach adopted by the company in the face of mass marketing domination by Canada’s major label brands. “We are in a highly competitive market, and the big guys are very good at doing what they do.”

Given this, Great Western has been especially pleased to see two of its premium brands take off with sales “like a prairie fire.” Within the last six months, the Western Premium Pilsner and Western Premium Light brands have become two of the top-10 selling brews in Saskatchewan. “Very few regional brewers have two top-10 beers, so this is a

huge milestone for us,” says the president.

To put this in perspective, Mr. Waldman points out that today’s beer drinkers are faced with hundreds of choices when shopping for their favourite suds. As such, the ascent of Great Western onto the menus of so many consumers is even more significant, he says.

But being a regional player also gives Great Western the opportunity to tighten its relationship with its customers – an advantage generally not enjoyed by the major brands. The company gets involved with Saskatchewan communities through, for instance, the sponsorship of local softball and hockey teams, as well as through fundraising for hospitals. “Besides, our products are ideally suited to socializing. It’s harder to meet your customers if you specialize in making shoelaces,” says Mr. Waldman.

This synergy of corporate credos – a dedication to high-quality brewing standards, an incremental customer strategy, employee pride and confidence – has done more than bring Great Western healthy



PHOTO: STUART KASDORF

Great Western Brewing Company president Ron Waldman is proud to say his company competes with the best. Among their accolades, Great Western’s beers have earned nine Monde Selection gold medals and four World Beer Cup awards.

sales and a basketful of beer quality awards. It has also earned the company recognition for management

excellence. It has evolved into one of Canada’s 50 Best Managed Companies, and has earned three

Saskatchewan Chamber of Commerce ABEX Business Excellence awards. ■

Home and cabinet-building businesses thriving

BY TAMMY LABER

SRI Homes Inc., Canada’s largest builder of manufactured, modular and park homes, is demonstrating the way of the future. “No one builds roof trusses, windows or cabinets onsite anymore. Modular units are simply larger components built offsite and

delivered the day a contractor requests them,” says company president Robert Adria.

SRI’s original manufacturing facility opened in Estevan, Saskatchewan, in 1963, under a predecessor company. It has been building in Estevan under the trade name Shelter Home Systems since 1978.

“We’re a private, Canadian com-

pany, unlike our competitors who are mostly U.S.- or Japan-based, and we are 100 per cent employee-owned,” says Mr. Adria.

He says most of SRI’s homes from its Saskatchewan facility are sold in Alberta, but that Manitoba, Ontario and B.C. are also important markets. “We pay more on shipping being located in Estevan, but we

have a core of long-serving employees with a good work ethic, and that’s very important. We’ve also been able to employ new immigrants, and that’s worked out well.”

SRI, which also has operations in Alberta and B.C., recently celebrated building its 25,000th home.

Another Saskatchewan-based business that has carved a solid

niche in the wood products sector attributes its success to its workforce.

Family-run Superior Cabinets treats its employees like family, too. “My husband started the company in 1980. I’ve been actively involved in the business from the start and when he died, I carried on,” says Linda Larre, company president. Ms. Larre says Saskatoon was always the Larre

family home, and the natural place to start Superior Cabinets. The city has proved a successful base.

“We have 97 dealers in the U.S. and Canada, as well as three corporate stores in Saskatoon, Edmonton and Calgary. The majority of our market is in Alberta,” she says.

Like successful businesses elsewhere across Canada, one of Superior’s challenges these days is to find enough workers to keep up with its growing demand. Ms. Larre says her focus is to offer newly arrived Canadians opportunities to join Superior’s corporate family. ■