

Making Manufacturing Cool Again

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When people ask me what industry I work in, they're usually surprised to learn that it's manufacturing. Why? I'm a New York City native who never learned any sort of manufacturing skills. I went to school for publishing and print, and then received a job at a marketing agency. But then I found myself at THOMASNET, a company steeped in manufacturing and supply chain history. And it's here, writing for all of you every week, where I discovered something.

Manufacturing is incredibly cool.

And not cool in a flashy technology or dime a dozen trend kind of way. Not the popular kid in high school destined to be forgotten once they leave cool. No, manufacturing is the classic movie, timeless music, ahead of the curve sort of cool.

So many developments in this world are thanks to this industry. The current bandwagon trends of 3D Printing, automation, and the Internet of Things have been around for decades. These technologies have risen from obscurity and made their way to buzzword fame. Yet somehow we haven't gotten the credit we deserve. Somehow, we lost what made us special in the public eye.

Which is baffling. This country has reached its greatness partially by its deep investment in the industrial space. We have a whole time period named after our advancements, introducing textiles, steam power, mechanics, and countless others. In the last century alone, we have had innovations as small as the transistor to as out of this world as the Mars Curiosity Rover. So what happened?

Partial blame can be put on public perception and media promotion of the industry. It is believed that factories are unsafe and undesirable compared to an office job, which is simply untrue. We have to work to change perception. Companies like GE have been doing a great job at tackling this, addressing issues from manufacturing job opportunities to utilizing technology. The public should be more aware that their smart phones, wearables, computers, automobiles, and any number of other technologies could not exist were it not for the manufacturers and engineers who

make it possible every day.

While some companies are educating the public through marketing, another tactic is to educate and support the next generation of manufacturers. This can be done through implementing STEM curriculum across all education levels. There was a time when shop class was something students looked forward to, and STEM curriculum is an updated way to recapture the interest of students who would have taken those courses. We have to encourage students to take these classes and develop their interests so they pursue them at advanced education institutes. (Side note: We also have to stop saying manufacturing is a good alternative to college. That's not helping.)

Additionally, supporting competitions, conferences, and experiences around the industry can help elevate its status to the upcoming generation. For instance, THOMASNET is sponsoring the Seaford Robotics Club to participate in the FIRST Robotics Competition. The sponsorship will allow the team to purchase the parts they need and allow for a fun environment where they are also learning. Get involved by presenting opportunities to students, which could lead them to develop interests in vocational careers. It's a great way to give back, raise the public interest, and support the future of the industry.

Like many of the challenges the industry faces today, this is not an easy fix. The solution is for every member of this community to pitch in and help turn the tide. Manufacturing shouldn't be a secret hidden away due to misconception. It should be celebrated and seen as a viable career option to those entering the workforce. Together, we can make it happen. (Zachary Smith, ThomasNet)