

with **Chip Brettell**
Founder and President, LeCount, Inc.



GS: *Could you tell me a little about your background and how you came into this industry?*

CB: As a teenager, I worked summers at a company called Tool Tech Corporation (TTC), which was a small machine shop. I saw what they were building, in terms of tooling, and I became interested in becoming an engineer. I went to the University of Vermont, where I earned a bachelor's degree in mechanical engineering. I then went to work for AT&T as a process engineer for a few years. From there I went to Brigham Young University, where I did graduate work in the field of computer integrated manufacturing. Then, in 1990, I bought the assets of TTC and started LeCount, Inc.

GS: *Most entrepreneurs name their companies after themselves, why didn't you?*

CB: One of TTC's assets was the line of LeCount Expanding Mandrels, originally patented by William J. LeCount in 1847. Since I planned to build my business with this product, and knowing that it had a good reputation in the gear industry, it made sense to me to name the company after the product. Without much more thought than that, LeCount, Inc., ended up on the title page of my business plan, which I then took to the bank.

GS: *How have you incorporated what you learned in college into your business?*

CB: Wow, that's a big question. My undergraduate and graduate studies, combined with the experience I gained while at AT&T, helped me transform a small shop filled with early sixties vintage machines—your basic mills, lathes, and grinders, and not a computer to be found—into a small shop filled with CNC machines. Computers are now used in almost every aspect of running this business, and we've been able to quadruple sales with just twice the workforce.

GS: *How many employees do you have, and what do they do?*

CB: There are six of us here, including me, and we do everything that needs to get done in order to ship high-quality products to our customers in a timely manner. We each have our primary responsibility, and there's a lot of cross-training. Our week starts with a Monday morning meeting, where we look at the "to-do" list, provided courtesy of the computer, and we decide as a team what our secondary responsibilities will be for the week. Our rule of thumb is that, if you need help, ask for it, and if you have extra time, offer it. Primary responsibilities include sales and marketing, process engineering, assembly and inspection, engineering, and accounting. And machining, of course.

GS: *What about representation in the field?*

CB: We don't use reps at this time. We do direct sales to end users and tool supply companies. We also have a number of distributors, both here in the United States and in Europe, Asia, and South America.

GS: *With customers scattered around the world, how do you connect with them?*

CB: Most of our contact is via telephone, fax, and e-mail, but we have traveled to Europe and Japan a number of times. In fact, we've been able to attend JIMTOF—the major machine tool show held every two years in Japan—four times at the invitation of our distributor. Also, our Japanese distributor has sent several of its sales engineers to visit us here in Vermont.

GS: *What, exactly, are the markets you serve?*

CB: Most of our customers manufacture gears, so I guess the power transmission industry is the market we serve. That would include gears made for cars, tractors, trucks, motorcycles, hand-held power tools, printers, exercise machines, airplanes, and machine tools, just to name a few. Within this industry, our standard product, the LeCount Expanding Mandrel, is used in the gear inspection process.

GS: *The original design for the expanding mandrel was patented in the mid-1800s. How have you improved on that design?*

CB: We've made it more precise and manufacturable, by redesigning the components as well as the process, and we've broadened our product line to incorporate what were frequent requests for "specials." Over the years we have acquired the facilities needed to manufacture our custom hydraulic arbors, which are tools that can be used in both manufacturing and inspection. This provides us with a great opportunity to grow the business. Along with the line of custom hydraulic arbors, we have also developed a nice little hydraulic chuck, with interchangeable tooling so that an inspection can be set up from one job to the next without having to retrain your tooling. We're planning to show that at the next Gear Expo, in fact (booth #729).

GS: *Of what accomplishment are you proudest?*

CB: Staying in business, and keeping it going all these years! It's not easy to keep a small business running, and I'm proud that we have a tight team that makes a highly respected tool. When a customer comes up to me at a trade show and says that they like our tools and know they can depend on them, that gives me a great feeling. 📷

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