ADVANCED MANUFACTURING GROWTH CENTRE

MEMBER PROFILE

Austeng

Based in Geelong, Austeng embodies some of the noticeable transformations within Australian manufacturing industry.

Established in 1984, and after its first decade, revenues were 100 per cent from the automotive sector, supplying specialty production equipment to Ford Australia and other car companies. By 2010, more than half of their business was still from automotive. The 2013 announcement that Ford would end production, with the other two big car makers following suit, was a serious fork in the road for Austeng's strategic direction.

It forced the firm to reexamine what they should offer.

"The turning point was really Lyn, my business partner and wife, saying we've really got to do this differently," explains Managing Director Ross George.

Austeng now refers to itself as "a tech enabler," explains Lyn George, the company's Corporate Manager. It has become in some circumstances the catalyst between inventors and universities, helping turn promising ideas into prototypes and commercial production thereby attracting investors.

"We see our role as helping them through that commercialisation valley of death," adds Lyn

Nowadays Austeng is a visionary, shining example of how a company can adapt to changing circumstances by focussing on what it does well, seeking out worthwhile, collaborative endeavours, and working incredibly hard.

It currently works closely with universities, especially Deakin, on several projects. An important milestone was establishing a plant for Deakin spinout Cytomatrix. This world-first in manufacturing novel nanofibres won a Victorian Engineering Excellence Award for Research & Development/Innovation in 2014. Deakin then recommended Austeng to establish a pilot plant for graphene startup Imagine Intelligent Materials in 2016, earning another Engineers Australia excellence award for another world-first project.

"There were number of articles in local media," says Lyn. This publicity resulted in positive momentum earning us a reputation in this space which then tended to attract other startups and now we've become a bit of a magnet for startup companies."

This reputation has not stopped growing. Nor has a list of projects that is impressively varied and lengthy, especially considering Austeng's small size. The company of 20 has been described as a "mini manufacturing hub for startups".

Austeng still makes special purpose equipment for industry, as it did for the auto sector, but is now also playing an important role in both Geelong's transformation into a cluster for advanced manufacturing excellence, and in turning university research into viable businesses. This is a topic Lyn feels strongly about.

"We've got some fantastic universities in Australia and they've got amazing research that often just sits in the bottom drawer of academics' desks" she offers.

"We really need to foster more industry-university collaboration, and that is starting to happen but we can do so much better."

Austeng is itself proving that collaboration – both across private companies and between companies and academia – can be a fruitful, mutually beneficial exercise.

Ford might not assemble cars in Geelong anymore, but there is a bright future for manufacturing here that perhaps doesn't get the attention it deserves.

While there are companies such as Carbon Revolution, Quickstep and MHD Glass that are reasonably well-known, says Ross, there are numerous small, early-stage ventures ready to step up. "And some of these companies will emerge over time and be quite considerable in the town," he says.

Of the Advanced Manufacturing Growth Centre, the Georges believe it's playing an important role in advocating for the sector.

"They're putting the spotlight on manufacturing, and creating a blueprint for the way forward for advanced manufacturing in an ever-changing global context," Lyn adds.

"It is crucial that the success stories in the sector are highlighted in order to combat the stream of negative stories that seem to suggest that manufacturing has little future in Australia."

AMGC
ADVANCED MANUFACTURING GROWTH CENTRE LTD


We really need to foster more industry-university collaboration, and that is starting to happen but we can do so much better."
Lyn George, Corporate Manager at Austeng