

Onshoring Opportunities: A new trend could lead to a vibrant construction market



By Brad Robeson

Bipartisan support isn't something that comes easy these days; but there is national unanimity urging companies who have been outsourcing to bring their manufacturing and operations back home to the United States.

There are many factors causing firms to re-think this trend. They all speak to the technological advancement, energy independence and innovative spirit within the U.S.

If you're thinking, "What does this have to do with me?" you need to explore outside the box on this one. As major corporations such as Apple, Caterpillar, Wal-Mart, Boeing, Coleman and others participate in onshoring, they will be looking for manufacturing facilities, retail space and possibly expanded regional and national headquarters.

Our industry is well positioned to meet the needs of businesses in this pursuit because we offer single-source total building solutions. Companies in the metal building systems arena are wise to follow who is coming onshore and get involved in helping them define building solutions. One way we outperform traditional construction is through an integrated design, engineering and manufacturing delivery system.

Why Onshore?

Offshoring profitability is down. Labor costs, shipping expenses, tariffs and supply chain logistic costs (for operations, management and personnel) are all on the rise in China and other countries. Reputation and customer service also seem to be suffering for some offshored companies. This is linked to inconsistent overseas standards that have brought down product quality; a lack of quality obviously affects sales and branding. Image also can be damaged by the pure fact that a company offshores because "made in the USA" matters to many consumers.

For those who believe that we, as a nation, are in a major transformational period, consider the turmoil in China and other overseas manufacturing markets. The labor may be cheaper, but what do

manufacturers have to go through from a political standpoint to secure that labor? For many business leaders, the efforts are turning out to be less beneficial. Add to this that other governments do not always protect intellectual property rights and you can see why onshoring is trending our way.

Why Metal Buildings?

Metal building systems give clients what they want quickly and efficiently. Metal buildings can be erected in one-third the time of conventional construction because they can be built year-round and there is predictability to metal building construction. Site preparation and fabrication can occur at the same time, which isn't the case with other types of construction framing. The industry saves additional costs by eliminating wasted materials and time, as well as adding essential spacing qualities to a building.

Stores, for instance, can be configured to reflect branding and corporate models. Headquarters with a mix of mezzanines, offices, cafeterias and meeting spaces are easily laid out. And manufacturing facilities that require cranes and open spaces are not a problem because of metal building's structural flexibility. The building manufacturer and design-builder can and should remain vigilant throughout the specification, design and building phases to ensure design details meet a building owner's individual expectations.


Exteriors can be enhanced to further reflect a company's brand and style because metal buildings can be clad in materials such as glass, masonry, stone, EIFS and metal wall panels. Roofing options are just as numerous. Metal building manufacturers typically offer architectural and structural metal roofing and wall panel systems to complete their building solution. In addition, solar panels are relatively easy to install during construction or any time after the building is complete and in use.

The strength of steel cannot be overlooked; steel adds stability, fire resistance and durability

to a building. The Metal Building Manufacturers Association (MBMA), Cleveland, has led product research and testing to aid its members and the industry in discovering the strength of steel. Manufacturers can design their buildings to exceed the minimum performance standards set by the ICC Building Code, ASHRAE 90.1, and the International Energy Conservation Code. The owners can decide what level of performance they need and the manufacturer can design to it.

MBMA has coordinated recent fire tests that benefit owners by increasing their design options. For example, new fire wall designs allow owners to increase insulation levels to address future energy code requirements that will require greater insulation. The tests also led to UL ratings that now address fiberglass and rigid board options. Material selections today can actually prepare owners to meet the energy codes of tomorrow. In addition, these new fire-rated designs allow girts to be spaced as far apart as 7 1/2 feet; multiple buildings can be spaced closer together; and separation walls for fire and code requirements can have more flexibility.

Why Not?

While preparing this article, our country was enveloped in excitement and pride for Team USA during the 2014 Winter Olympics. The U.S. may be getting another rallying cry for bringing jobs, manufacturing and profits back to this country with onshoring. The potential construction growth tied to this shifting trend could be aided by metal building systems because they are professionally custom-engineered steel structures that provide cost-effective and efficient building solutions in low-rise, nonresidential construction. The onshoring trend may just lead us to a different kind of Team USA pride. 

Brad Robeson is chairman of the Metal Building Manufacturers Association. More information about the association is available at www.mbma.com.