



# State campaign seeks to reverse negative perception of manufacturing work

## Enrollment in technical college programs is critical to meeting workforce demand

---

By Haley Jorgensen • 11/09/05

---

**Fond du Lac, Wis.--** Careers in manufacturing are high-wage and high-tech. Yet, a future workforce shortage may be on the horizon. It appears a negative public perception - one that brings to mind low wages, assembly-line work and lay-offs - is thwarting young adults from pursuing manufacturing careers across the country. This despite a projected need for 10 million new skilled workers by 2020, according to the National Association of Manufacturers (NAM).

In Wisconsin - the second-most dependent state on manufacturing in the United States - a multimedia marketing campaign is giving manufacturing a needed boost statewide. "I am Wisconsin Manufacturing," a two-year campaign adopted by the Wisconsin Technical College System (WTCS), is aimed at correcting misconstrued perceptions, boosting enrollment in technical college programs focused on manufacturing, and ultimately, meeting workforce demand.

Launched just a year ago, the campaign is already making a difference, according to Sharon Holmes, vice president-marketing and college advancement at Moraine Park Technical College in Fond du Lac. Alarmed by workforce shortfall projections and declining enrollments in its manufacturing programs, Moraine Park's administrators, deans, faculty and manufacturing partners worked together to develop the "I am Wisconsin Manufacturing" campaign, she said. It was later embraced as a statewide initiative.

### Declining Enrollment Spurs Action

At Moraine Park, with campuses in Beaver Dam, Fond du Lac and West Bend, manufacturing program enrollment slid by 34 percent from 2003 to 2004, according to Holmes. "This sent up red flags," she said. "Deans, instructors, advisory groups, and the manufacturers with whom we work so closely, were immediately concerned."

If students weren't enrolling in the programs today, explains Holmes, the industry might face trouble down the road.

Sixty-two percent of the 1,000 manufacturers recently surveyed by WTCS expect to boost employment - adding 8,700 positions - during the next two years, according to Holmes. "Highly trained manufacturing professionals are in demand," she insists. "Yet enrollment has dwindled. We saw the need to try to change the image of manufacturing immediately. We knew we needed to start here at Moraine Park."

With college deans and instructors backing the idea of a comprehensive, two-year multimedia marketing campaign, "I am Wisconsin Manufacturing" was born.

### Developing a Campaign Targeted to Changing Public Perception

Moraine Park developed the marketing campaign based on findings on public perception toward manufacturing. Institutional research revealed "young adults between the ages of 18 and 25 perceive manufacturing as low-wage, assembly-line work," said Josh Bullock, Moraine Park institutional advancement partner.

"Actually, the average manufacturing occupation pays 20 percent more than the average service profession," said Bullock, "and requires highly trained professionals."

The National Association of Manufacturers concurs. Today, manufacturers employ skilled professionals trained in the latest computer software and technical equipment. In Wisconsin, much of that training is delivered via the technical colleges, according to Bullock and Holmes.

### **A Theme and Target Audience**

Through his research, Bullock also discovered that high school students and adults in their early 20s - Moraine Park's target audience - valued relationships and the ability to balance work and hobbies. They respected the opinions of influencers, including high school guidance counselors, parents and teachers, but didn't trust most advertisements. "That's where the dichotomy of work and play came together," said Holmes, of the campaign's theme.

"I am Wisconsin Manufacturing" adopted the slogans: Earn More: Play More and Great Career: Great Life.

"One is instantaneous; the other is a longitudinal attitude emphasizing a future career and great life," said Holmes. "In order to pull it off, we knew it needed to be a multimedia campaign and that the components of it were going to be costly for the college."

Holmes admits it's not common for a technical college to back such a huge campaign - one dependent on relaying messages and images via television, billboard, radio, newspaper, poster and direct mail.

But while still in the development stages, WTCS and its other 15 technical colleges got word of Moraine Park's campaign - one in which the elements could be adapted for the other colleges to use statewide. At the time, WTCS was in the throes of developing "Advanced Manufacturing Solutions," a large initiative aimed at capturing, training and graduating more skilled manufacturing workers. It wasn't long before the two initiatives joined forces and Moraine Park's marketing campaign became available to all the colleges.

### **Piggybacking on a Great Idea**

"The Moraine Park campaign was right on target," said Kyle Schwarm, director of statewide marketing at WTCS. "After a few discussions, a partnership was created between Moraine Park and WTCS to make the campaign available to the other 15 technical colleges around the state."

The partnership meant Moraine Park received a grant to modify ads, direct-mail pieces and posters to fit the needs of the other 15 technical colleges. Mercury Marine, a manufacturer in Fond du Lac, Wis., offered provide a gift-in-kind for most printing costs. The result, said Holmes, was a truly cost-effective program.

Northeast Wisconsin Technical College (NWTC) is halfway into a yearlong version of "I am Wisconsin Manufacturing." "We are sharing costs and pooling resources," said Sandy Duckett, vice president of college advancement at NWTC. "Not only do we have to entice the high school graduate, we have to change the mindset of parents and counselors." A consortium of colleges, including NWTC, Moraine Park, Fox Valley Technical College and Lakeshore Technical College, are sharing overlapping media costs related to the campaign, including TV and radio advertising. "We couldn't do this by ourselves," said Duckett.

Designed to last two years, "I am Wisconsin Manufacturing" aims to change public perception of manufacturing via posters in high schools, classrooms, fast food restaurants and places of entertainment. Advertisements on cable TV stations were designed to reach targeted demographics; billboard ads worked to change how influencers, such as guidance counselors and parents, perceived manufacturing; and direct-mail postcards, mailed monthly, worked to influence high school juniors and seniors. This spring, radio spots commenced.

Among the most critical components of the campaign, according to Holmes, was development of a new website - a central portal with quick access to every manufacturing program and course available through WTCS. Visitors to [www.iamwimanufacturing.com](http://www.iamwimanufacturing.com) can tap into courses, training workshops and programs offered by all 16 technical colleges. And of course, every campaign element - poster, billboard, TV commercial and advertisement - points to the portal.

### **Making an Impact in Wisconsin**

Perceptions seem to be changing in Wisconsin, according to Duckett and Holmes. At NWTC, Duckett reports an overall enrollment surge of 336 students from 2004 to 2005 - a hike she credits to the campaign. At Moraine Park, enrollment in manufacturing programs grew by 15 percent since the campaign's inception in August of 2004. Simultaneously, in just 12 months the new I am Wisconsin Manufacturing website has experienced a 700 percent increase in unique visits, according to Holmes. "It's a good sign the campaign is working," she said, "and we're just a year into it."

---

> Haley Jorgensen is a Wisconsin based writer. She is a frequent contributor to a variety of publications representing an array of industries, including insurance, education, corrections, real estate and laundry, among others.