



By Patrick Lapinski

Life is all about balance – and so is business. Just ask the experts at Hawkins Inc., because balance and precision are both at the heart of everything they do.

This company, as its website explains, is “a formulator, manufacturer, blender, distributor and sales agent for thousands of industrial chemicals and reagent grade laboratory chemicals sold to municipalities and businesses throughout the Central United States.” Its three primary business segments are the Water Treatment Group, Industrial Group and Health & Nutrition, and within those areas, Hawkins Inc. has a broad product line and a strong commitment to safe distribution and application.

Hawkins Inc. serves thousands of municipalities and businesses throughout the Central United States. And these clients rely on the company’s professional and operational staff – including chemists, engineers, trained technicians and drivers and customer support specialists – to provide the chemicals they need to serve their own customers.

Today, the company – which is headquartered in Roseville, Minnesota – has more than 300 employees and 30 branches in 20 states: Arkansas, California, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Kentucky, Minnesota, Missouri, Montana, Nebraska, New York, North Dakota, Ohio, Oklahoma, South Dakota, Tennessee and Wisconsin (in Superior and Fond du Lac). Hawkins Inc. also has an extensive network of warehouses and its own fleet of tankers, trucks, trailers and tractors to deliver products.

THE BUSINESS OF BALANCE

FOR MUNICIPALITIES AND COMPANIES THROUGHOUT THE CENTRAL U.S., HAWKINS INC. IS THE CHEMICAL SUPPLIER OF CHOICE

THE HAWKINS STORY

Located at 2026 Winter St. behind the Superior Ice Arena, the Superior branch was formerly home to Arrowhead Chemical, owned by Carl Marion before Hawkins Inc. acquired the business in 1985. Brenda Wiisanen's father (Marion), who launched Arrowhead Chemical, was actually a Hawkins customer. After the purchase, Hawkins added another building around 1992 and expanded the Superior facility again in 2019. Brenda and Jerry Wiisanen stayed with Hawkins from 1985-2010.

The company's corporate roots date back long before that. Hawkins Inc. was founded as a chemical distributor in 1938 by Howard "Curly" Hawkins and initially offered 12 products. Since then, it has grown exponentially to serve a broad and diverse range of customers. In 1955, it expanded its range of products and services when bleach maker Vel-Tex Chemical joined the company. In 1976, Hawkins purchased Feed-Rite Controls, a firm specializing in water treatment chemicals and equipment.

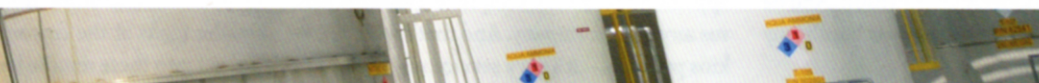
A decade later, Hawkins expanded yet again, this time with the acquisition of Arrowhead Chemical's Superior distribution center, which added the large mining, paper and power industries to its customer base. And in 2007, the company expanded into the food industry with

the purchase of Trumark, an antimicrobial product manufacturer.

Today, growth opportunities continue to enlarge the Hawkins Inc. portfolio of products and services. The Industrial Group supports end markets such as food processors, pharmaceutical, industrial manufacturers, oil fields, surface finishers and agricultural operations. Within this market, Hawkins focuses on food ingredients, plating, energy, electronics, oil and gas and chemical processing. Sales figures projected for 2020 are in the range of \$275 million.

The Health & Nutrition Group "provides a broad spectrum of high-quality ingredients that support dietary supplements, functional food and beverage, pharmaceutical and pet food products." Product lines within this group includes energy, immunity and cognition ingredients, amino acids, antioxidants, botanicals, enzymes, green foods, minerals, oils/oil powders, fibers, probiotics, plant proteins and vitamins.

The Water Treatment Group was anticipating sales in the area of \$159 million for fiscal year 2020. Its focus is on municipal water, but also includes breweries/wineries and agricultural treatment for poultry, swine, dairy, citrus groves and other farm crops.





THE SUPERIOR TEAM

The Superior branch is part of Hawkins Inc.'s Water Treatment Group, which distributes and custom blends chemicals for water treatment for municipalities, drinking water, wastewater, commercial pools, boilers and cooling towers. And Superior Branch Manager Marc Franta has the full support of Hawkins Inc. behind his team as it delivers and supports the highest quality products. "We blend and we make up the majority of all of our products," he said.



TODAY, THE COMPANY – WHICH IS HEADQUARTERED IN. ROSEVILLE, MINNESOTA – HAS MORE THAN 300 EMPLOYEES AND 30 BRANCHES IN 20 STATES.

Franta grew up in the Minneapolis/St. Paul area and throughout his life, he keeps moving north. His father worked for Hawkins Inc. for 44 years in one of the terminals in the company's Operations Division. And he learned growing up that there was hardly any turnover at Hawkins.

"Guys come in and they stay; it's a great company to work for. When a position opened up, I was like, 'Yep. I want that, so when I first started here, I was commuting every day,'" Franta said. At that time, he was living in Sturgeon Lake, south of Cloquet, but was initially reluctant to move to the Twin Ports.

"When I got the branch manager position here, we [he and his family] decided, all right – I'm done commuting,' Franta said. "I tell you what: It was one of the best moves we ever made. I really like Superior. I think it's a great city, a great town and I enjoy the people. I've lived here for a little over nine years, and I can't think of anything negative to say about the town. I like the school district, I like the community. It was a great move."

Franta said that Hawkins Inc.'s service approach is centered around technical sales representatives. "We don't have a sales guy-delivery guy approach," he explained. "The guy that talks to

you about your chemicals, your chemistry, your feed equipment, everything – he's the guy that's delivering it and helping you with the application of that product. It's a different approach that's very unique to Hawkins versus any other company. And that's what Hawkins provides – it's very service oriented."

MINING, WATER TREATMENT AND MORE

Technical Sales Representative Ryan Hanson is one of the "new guys" on the team. He's been with Hawkins for nine years – but no one's really counting yet, because many of the Hawkins crew members count their careers by decades. Employee longevity and loyalty are assets to this company.

It's rare for Hanson to be in the office for more than a day or two during the week, other than the time he spends loading his truck (yes, he does that himself). So he's a warehouseman for an hour in the morning, but that gives him time to think about what he has going on that day. He'll be heading up to his territory, the Iron Range in Northeast Minnesota. The two other technical sales representatives work in Northern Wisconsin and as far east as Houghton in Michigan's Upper Peninsula. Loading the truck is one of seven or eight hats Hanson says he wears on any given day. Other duties include route sales, chemical feed equipment installation and maintenance, commercial driving, handling HAZMAT (hazardous materials) and customer relations.

Today, as he's being interviewed for this article, Hanson is walking through a power plant on the Iron Range. This is his beat: power generating plants, taconite processing mills, municipal water treatment plants, waste water treatment plants – and even some swimming pools tossed in during the year. Hanson delivers and transfers chemicals to customers via his dual-axle straight truck, which he says can reach some rather remote locations.

"Our competition can't really do what we do. We have what's called a mini-bulking capability," he explained. "We can pump hundreds of different chemicals from our trucks into smaller tanks at the customer's facility. So we can get into these remote locations. We can fill

tanks ranging from five gallons to 5,000 gallons, based off the customer's need. We have the product knowledge, along with the mechanical skills, that allow us to work one-on-one with our customers from start to end."

Why is it important to treat the water we get from the ground or a lake? If water looks clean to the naked eye, it must be clean – right? Not so, says Hanson. Even water from plant to plant within his territory is different, so it all must be analyzed before a treatment plan is developed and implemented. It's in these technical processes, like chemical analysis, where the full support and expertise of Hawkins Inc. leads to solutions for customers.

BACKED BY HAWKINS' FULL CORPORATE EXPERTISE

"We want to help people with whatever problem they have, even if it's something that we need to do some homework on. I think that makes us very unique," said Regional Manager Scott Kinsella. Leveraging Hawkins Inc.'s technician teams and state-of-the-art laboratories for the best and quickest analysis possible provides technicians like Hanson

with reliable, accurate support. So while it may seem to a casual observer that the Superior branch may not have a big footprint, nothing could be further from the truth. Hawkins Inc. has a big corporate footprint, and each location is backed by its corporate resources and expertise.

Kinsella – who's been with Hawkins for 37 years – began as a technical sales rep in Fargo, a role he served for 17 years before becoming the Fargo branch manager in 2000. He has an innate curiosity in tracking how chemicals developed by scientists in the lab actually work in the field. Over time, for example, he's been closely watching the development of "bioaugmentation" – which can be defined as "the practice of adding cultured microorganisms into the subsurface for the purpose of biodegrading specific soil and groundwater contaminants."

"They'll use it for fat, oil and grease removal. They'll do it to keep their wastewater system healthy, whether it be ponds or a wastewater plant," Kinsella explained. "So basically, what they're doing is adding what we would call 'good bugs' to offset the 'bad bugs.'"



"THEY'LL USE IT FOR FAT, OIL AND GREASE REMOVAL. THEY'LL DO IT TO KEEP THEIR WASTEWATER SYSTEM HEALTHY, WHETHER IT BE PONDS OR A WASTEWATER PLANT."

– REGIONAL MANAGER SCOTT KINSELLA



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Bioaugmentation can be used by municipal wastewater plants and then in their sewer and storm system via manholes. Hawkins Inc. also sells chemicals for wastewater treatment “and, of course, water treatment in all the markets we’re in,” said Kinsella.

“We’ve also gotten into the boiler cooling business a lot stronger than we had been in the past,” Kinsella noted.

In addition, he said, “We have a brewery line that we developed about two years ago. We sell products that they need within their process, and then Hawkins also has developed sours [brewery souring agents] to make the sour beers. As far as I know, we may be the only company that develops sours.”



The sours idea started with Surly Brewing Co. in Minneapolis, he noted. Introducing wild yeasts and/or bacteria into the beer creates the sour taste. And according to a March 2020 Forbes article, the sour beer market is

booming; sour beer sales increased by 40 percent in 2019.

“We were selling some commodities to breweries, but we didn’t have a specialty product line to go along with those products,” Kinsella said. “And now we do.”

SUPERIOR WATER QUALITY

So how is the water quality in our region’s largest source, Lake Superior? “It’s fantastic,” Franta said. “Lake Superior water is very, very good water. A lot of times, water plants have to make it dirtier before they can make it cleaner. Because the particles that need to be removed from the water are so small, they’re almost too small to filter.” For that reason, Franta explained that extra products are needed to bind smaller particles together and make them bigger, so they can be filtered out in the water treatment process.

“OUR COMPETITION CAN’T REALLY DO WHAT WE DO. WE HAVE WHAT’S CALLED A MINI-BULKING CAPABILITY ... SO WE CAN GET INTO THESE REMOTE LOCATIONS.”

– TECHNICAL SALES REPRESENTATIVE RYAN HANSON



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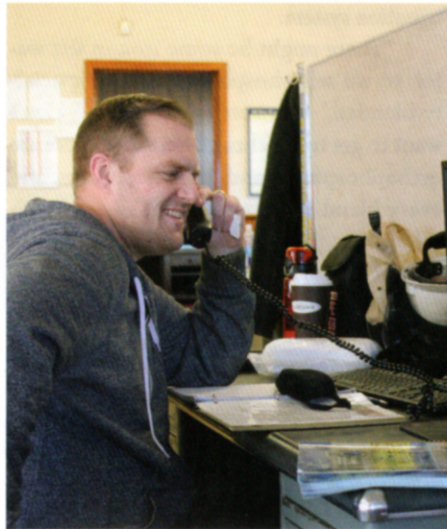


SINCE THEN, IT HAS GROWN EXPONENTIALLY TO SERVE A BROAD AND DIVERSE RANGE OF CUSTOMERS.

Hanson noted that in water treatment, pH levels and disinfection are the primary areas of concern, so Hawkins Inc. manufactures or blends 200-300 different chemicals to address those concerns.

“There are municipal towns that don’t have actual water filtration plants, where they

have well houses,” he explained. “So the difference is that in a water plant, the water is chemically treated to oxidize out iron and manganese. A coagulant is fed to help settle out organics, and then it’s run through filters, disinfected with chlorine and sent out to the distribution system.”



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Water filtration plants cost millions of dollars – money most small towns simply don't have. Instead, they have well houses and utilize a different process. Water is pumped up through the ground and comes into the well house building, where it is treated with chemicals before being sent out into the distribution system.

"There might be some iron in the water, so we sell phosphates that are specialty-blended," Hanson explained. "I don't want to get too technical here, but there are orthophosphates and polyphosphates, and every blend in between. And one [chemical product] treats iron and manganese and the other one treats corrosion." In total, he says, the treatment process is like putting a coating on the pipe to prevent corrosive water from attacking lead and copper.

Customers can also be certain that the work Hanson performs, and the products Hawkins Inc. provides, meet stringent, complex city, county, tribal, state and federal regulations.



"There's definitely protocols, especially on the wastewater side. Those are monitored by the EPA [U.S. Environmental Protection Agency], and we deal with the MPCA [Minnesota Pollution Control Agency] quite a bit," Hanson said.

Franta concurred: "There's lots and lots of regulations. In fact, Hawkins Inc. has a separate department that closely monitors and reviews many different regulations on a daily basis. "We've got the DOT [U.S. Department of Transportation], the EPA, OSHA [Occupational Safety and Health Administration], NSF [National Science Foundaion], Homeland Security," Franta said. "You've got your states and counties. Yeah, it's a lot."

BIG RESPONSIBILITY – BIG SATISFACTION

While Franta and his team work hard to ensure customer satisfaction with Hawkins Inc. products and delivery, their charge goes far beyond that – because safety is both a top priority and a necessity. When a customer orders something, "We just don't go out and deliver it and drop it off. We make sure you're using it properly – the safety aspects of it," Franta emphasized.

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For all of these reasons, he is proud of the company's versatility and its team of experts. "We deal with a lot of engineers," Franta said. "And a lot of engineers come to us when designing a new water plant or a new wastewater facility [to consult] on how to put in the chemistry feed equipment, and how much and what chemicals to use."

Hawkins' business model and business philosophy, he added, "has a different attitude than most. We just go about

things differently. If somebody says, 'Oh, what do you do?,' the easiest thing to say is I sell chemicals. But it's way more than just selling chemicals. It's the whole process of where that chemical goes, what it's being used for, how to use it, and how to properly test. We do all the water testing and make sure all the levels are good."

Hawkins deals with a great deal of complexity and responsibility. Most of us likely don't stop to think about what must

be done to ensure clean water, safe food and pharmaceutical production, efficient industrial company operations and so much more. It's good to know that companies like Hawkins Inc. are doing just that – every single day. **PS**

Patrick Lapinski is a freelance writer who grew up in Superior.



"WE'VE GOT THE DOT, THE EPA, OSHA, NSF HOMELAND SECURITY. YOU'VE GOT YOUR STATES AND COUNTIES. YEAH, IT'S [REGULATIONS] A LOT."

– BRANCH MANAGER MARC FRANTA, HAWKINS WATER TREATMENT GROUP



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