

# Team Synergy licensee Zoofactory Open for Business

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B. Candace Beeke, lead reporter

Kalamazoo, Michigan - Chris Bridges and Matt Moilanen last month formed a new manufacturing company in Oshtemo.

What do they think this is - 1985?

But the two young men won't be deterred from their start-up ceramic coating business, playfully dubbed ZooFactory. They believe a niche product and two potentially wide-open industries could float their business where so many small manufacturers now are sinking.

"It's short for 'Kalamazoo factory,'" said Bridges, who does most of the talking and has most of the experience in the coating business.

Bridges, a one-time salvage diver for Louisiana oil rigs, grew up in Niles and has returned to Michigan to start a business that builds upon his knowledge of automotive racing. Through stints selling aftermarket parts for high-performance automobiles, then selling thermal coatings to race car drivers, Bridges discovered a more promising market for ceramic coatings.

"It's also got some industrial applications, which is what we're really focusing on," he said, from the office of Architectural Glass and Metal Inc. on Oshtemo's rural 8th Street.

ZooFactory is leasing a 4,000-square-foot plant from Architectural Glass that sits just a short jog downhill from AG&M's building. Right now, the plant, brokered by Jane Fette at Grubb & Ellis/Paramount, houses only a few large pieces of equipment and a dozen silver robot chassis that stand at attention.

"We just had our first order arrive today," Bridges said. "We've got 11 robots we're coating."

The robots come from Pennsylvania, where a tier-one government supplier will forward the search-and-destroy mechanisms on to the federal government. ZooFactory was tasked with figuring out how to disperse heat from the electronic

## "Start-up may weather recession with a warm coat"



Matt Moilanen and Chris Bridges are ZooFactory's operators (also pictured Holly Bridges).

creatures that squeeze into tight desert spaces to disarm bombs - under direct sunlight, the inner workings of the robots quickly become overheated, Bridges said.

ZooFactory applies a thermal coating to the top and bottom of the chassis, then a thermal dispersing coat on the sides. The top coating reflects the sun's heat upward, while the dispersing coat pulls heat out of the robot, Bridges explained.

The same thermal dispersing can be used in race cars, which right now represent 80 percent of ZooFactory's potential work, while 20 percent is expected to come from industrial applications, he said.

"I'd like to flip that 80-20, unless we can get in touch with OEMs," Bridges said. "We had a call from an OEM this morning.."

While ZooFactory already has 60 accounts with professional racing teams in the Midwest, Bridges believes the key market to tap for the company's ceramic coatings is industrial.

"Ceramic coatings have not been used in the industrial realm in large scale," Bridges said. "We've seen the capability of the material and think from an industrial standpoint, there's nobody" selling to industrial.

The men also have an industrial backer. ZooFactory has been named one of 15 applicators worldwide for Team Synergy Coatings, based in Orlando, Fla., which manufactures ceramic coatings largely for high-performance auto, Bridges said. The owner, George Tarbuton, who lives in the Kalamazoo area, wants to focus more on industrial applications and has agreed to move his research and development operations to ZooFactory's space next year.

ZooFactory will handle the R&D of Team Synergy's coatings for the industrial realm, along with a few more employees by then, the owners



ZooFactory's application facility is located in Oshtemo Township within the Architectural Glass & Metals complex on South 8th Street.

hope.

"We'd like to see five to seven by mid to end of next year," Bridges said.

Right now, the men have invested some \$100,000 in equipment and setup of their space, which remains largely open a couple weeks after start-up. Equipment includes the paint booth, an environmental chamber for testing, a large oven for baking on the coatings and a vibratory polisher filled with Team Synergy-made ceramic beads.

"They get a better shine than any other ceramic coating out on the market today," Bridges said, dipping his hand into the vat of small, white beads. "It'll polish a watch very quickly."

Better shine means better protection, he added, removing his hand.

Moilanen retrieves a twisted strip of decorative metal fencing, half of which is shiny silver, the other half a dull rust color. The piece will be returned to a Muskegon custom fence maker interested in cost-savings and durability associated with ceramic coating, Bridges said, turning the piece in his hand.

"Ceramic coatings, they're not new but they're becoming accepted," he said.

While the applications for ceramic coatings may be diverse, including medical and military uses, ZooFactory likely will focus on auto and industrial, where lower costs and higher ability carry significant weight. Through internal applications of coatings, "we're able to drop the internal temperature of (a) vehicle 30 degrees," Bridges said. "That's something that's really spiked interest in the commercial trucking industry."

"Matt and I are big proponents for auto," he said.

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