



# CASE STUDY

Gamber-Johnson LLC



## TECHNOLOGY TRENDS LEAD WISCONSIN MANUFACTURER TO GLOBAL EXPANSION

Over the years, Gamber-Johnson LLC, a leading supplier of rugged computer mounting systems and vehicle mounting components, has built a reputation for providing quality, innovative products. The company was founded in Stevens Point in 1954, and at the time, manufactured wooden stereo cabinets. Along with advancements in technology came Gamber-Johnson's transition to supplying vehicle mounting components and computer mounting systems. From the beginning, the company's success can largely be contributed to its ability to change with the times, adapting to new technologies and market opportunities.

In the late 1970s, Gamber-Johnson began designing and manufacturing mounting hardware to safely and securely hold electronic devices inside vehicles. Initially the hardware was designed for radios in law enforcement vehicles. But the company continued to innovate its designs and expand its market, and by the early 2000s, Gamber-Johnson became a

leading supplier of vehicle laptop mounts, docking stations, printer mounts, forklift laptop mounts and vehicle mounting components. The products were developed not only for law enforcement workers, but also other first responders and people in telecommunications, the oil and gas industry and the military.

During this time, Gamber-Johnson noticed a growing trend of increasingly mobile and connected workforces in markets around the world. Whether in New York or Dubai, police car fleets became equipped with far more technology than radios and batons, including computers for checking warrant databases and printers for printing citations. Forklift operators around the globe needed information about inventory and orders placed at their fingertips as they maneuvered giant warehouses. Once again, Gamber-Johnson adapted to new market opportunities, addressing the need for mounting equipment in overseas markets.

### BUSINESS NEED

In 2011, Gamber-Johnson began to notice a global trend in mobile and connected workforces, but had not yet developed an international growth strategy to address this market. Gautam Malik, director of operations for Gamber-Johnson, described the company as a "reactive exporter" since the company only began to sell overseas once it started receiving orders from this market.

However, the bump in revenues provided by overseas sales led the management team to initiate an international growth strategy. Today, the company's approach to exporting is as systematic as its innovation and design methodology. "We don't just have a bunch of standard

components that we cobble together into a mounting system," said Malik, who has been with Gamber-Johnson for 11 years. "This is a very dynamic industry."

Adapting to the specific needs of the company's customers helped Gamber-Johnson develop a similarly disciplined approach to exporting, drawing upon information and guidance available from the Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation (WEDC), the Wisconsin Manufacturing Extension Partnership (WMEP) and the U.S. Department of Commerce. "We realized we didn't have all the answers," Malik said.

## SOLUTION

In 2012, representatives from Gamber-Johnson, including Malik, participated in ExporTech™, a three-session training program that helps small- to mid- size manufacturers rapidly develop and execute a successful export strategy. The export accelerator program is delivered throughout the state in partnership by WEDC, WMEP and the Northwest Wisconsin Manufacturing Outreach Center.

“Expotech helps businesses determine the most profitable international markets for its specific products or services,” said Lora Klenke, VP International Business Development at WEDC. “Gamber-Johnson took the proper steps in developing a detailed exporting plan. Through the program, the company learned country-specific insights to identify where it would be most successful.”

The sessions were invaluable to Gamber-Johnson, according to Malik. Company representatives received real-world testimonials from seasoned exporters who explained the high-level strategies behind trade financing, legal compliance, market research and identifying and managing channel partners. The sessions also provided a series of how-tos: how to protect intellectual property; how to position the company’s website and marketing materials; and how to make the most of time spent in target markets.



“The speakers and sessions at ExporTech showed us the value of having a strategically crafted export expansion plan,” Malik summarized.

After researching overseas market opportunities for Gamber-Johnson products, and developing a strategic business plan, the company received additional assistance from WEDC in initiating its plan. WEDC provided Gamber-Johnson with International Market Access Grants, State Trade and Export Promotion funding as well as overseas market intelligence to help inform the company’s international growth strategy.

“WEDC is a very easy organization to work with,” Malik noted. “The grant will help us grow our exports, and the process to get the grant funding was streamlined and organized.”

For its initial exporting push, Gamber-Johnson identified three target countries: the United Kingdom, the United Arab Emirates and Brazil. Through its research, Gamber-Johnson understood that it couldn’t simply export products sold in the North American market. Vehicles are different—smaller vehicles are more common as are driver’s seats on the right side of the vehicle. He noted that the products are also used differently; for example, in Europe it is more common for two police officers to be in a squad car. Also, laws and regulations are different. As a result of the company’s international growth strategy, Gamber-Johnson has enhanced its design processes.

“It is an advantage for us to design one product that can be used anywhere in the world instead of region-specific products,” he explained. “So criteria such as product footprint, ambidextrous usability, green materials and emissions are critical for us to investigate for any product to have a chance of being sold outside of North America. We invested a lot of time understanding our export markets’ needs.”

## SUCCESS

The investment of time and effort into an international growth strategy has paid off for Gamber-Johnson. Exports are making a solid contribution to Gamber-Johnson's overall sales. According to Malik, the company's exports grew 650 percent between 2011 and 2014.

That success has attracted the attention of the International Trade Administration in the U.S. Department of Commerce. In May 2014, Malik traveled to Washington, D.C. to accept a President's "E" Award on behalf of Gamber-Johnson. The award recognizes firms, individuals and organizations that contribute significantly to the effort to increase U.S. exports.

With the help of state resources such as WEDC, Gamber-Johnson continues to expand its export strategy, adding more international markets every year. WEDC is currently assisting the company with finding an offset partner in India. The organization also



continues to provide Gamber-Johnson with grants and market intelligence that can be used toward accessing international markets.

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The Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation, the state's lead economic development agency, partners with a network of more than 600 regional and local entities to help businesses start, grow and locate in Wisconsin.



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