

Berkshire Threaded Fasteners Company

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This case is reprinted from Cases in Cost Management, Shank, J. K., 1996, South Western Publishing Company. The case was adapted by Professor John Shank, with permission from the author from an earlier case written by J. P. Culliton, Harvard Business School. The case was originally set in the mid 1970's.

In February 2000, Brandon Cook was appointed general manager by Joe Magers, president of Berkshire Threaded Fasteners Company. Cook age 56, had wide executive experience in manufacturing products similar to those of Berkshire. The appointment of Cook resulted from management problems arising from the death of John Magers, founder and until his death in early 1999, president of the company. Joe Magers had only four years experience with the company and in early 2000 he was 34 years old. His father had hoped to train Joe over a 10-year period, but the father's untimely death had cut this seasoning period short. The younger Magers became president after his father's death, and he had exercised full control until he hired Cook.

Joe Magers knew that he had made several poor decisions during 1999 and that the morale of the organization had suffered, apparently through lack of confidence in him. When he received the income statement for 1999 (Exhibit 1), the loss of over \$70,000 during a good business year convinced him that he needed help. He attracted Cook from a competitor by offering a stock option incentive in addition to salary. The arrangement was that Cook, as general manager, would have full authority to execute any changes he desired. In addition, Cook would explain the reasons for his decisions to Magers and thereby train him for successful leadership upon Cook's retirement.

Berkshire Threaded Fasteners Company made only three lines of metal fasteners (nuts and bolts) - the 100 series, the 200 series, and the 300 series. These were sold by the company sales force for use by heavy industrial manufacturers. All of the sales force, on a salary basis, sold all three lines, but in varying proportions. Berkshire sold throughout New England and was one of eight companies with similar products. Several of its competitors were larger and manufactured a larger variety of products. The dominant company was Bosworth Machine Company, which operated a plant in Berkshire's market area. Joe Magers had heard many people describe threaded fasteners as a "commodity" business. But he had also heard a speaker say once that the term is only used by losers in a business.

Price cutting was rare; the only variance from quoted selling prices took the form of cash discounts. Customarily, Bosworth announced prices annually and the other producers followed suit. In the past, attempts at price cutting had followed a consistent pattern: All competitors met the price reduction, and the industry as a whole sold about the same quantity but at the lower prices. Demand was very "inelastic", at least in the short run, for a "derived demand" product like metal fasteners. Eventually Bosworth, with its strong financial position, again stabilized the situation following a general recognition of the failure of price cutting. Furthermore, because sales were to industrial buyers and because the products of different manufacturers were very similar, Berkshire was convinced it could not individually raise prices without suffering substantial volume declines.

During 1999, Berkshire's share of industry sales was 12% for the 100 series, 8% for the 200 series and 10% for the 300 series. The industry-wide quoted selling prices were \$2.45, \$2.58 and \$2.75 per 100 pieces, respectively.

Upon taking office in February 2000, Cook decided against immediate major changes; he chose instead to analyze 1999 operations and to wait for the results of the first half of 2000. He instructed the accounting department to provide detailed expenses and an earnings statement by product line for 1999 (see Exhibit 2). In addition, he requested an explanation of the nature of the costs including their expected future behavior (see Exhibit 3).

To familiarize Joe Magers with his approach to financial analysis, Cook sent copies of these exhibits to Magers. When they discussed them, Magers stated that he thought the 300 series should be dropped

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Roman Wölfel



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