

Overall business conditions have improved this year, but recovery has been slow and patchy. The *Winston-Salem Journal's* business team spoke to a range of small companies — the engine of the local economy — about how they did in 2003 and what they expect in 2004. Snapshots by Richard Craver, Fran Daniel, Brian Louis and Jeanne Sturiale.

Holding Their Own

Endless Embers

Now that cold weather is here, business is starting to heat up for a fireplace tool designed, manufactured and marketed by a Tobaccoville couple.

Karen and Paul Marley, who operate Endless Embers LLC, began selling the KoalKeeper this year. It is a shovel-shaped tool with a grid that allows ashes to fall through while retaining the live embers. The embers then can be used to ignite a new supply of logs within minutes.

The Marleys have applied for patents for the tool in the United States and Canada.

"Sales have been slow in recent months because it's been warmer than normal, but now that winter's here, we expect to do much better," said Paul Marley, the tool's inventor.

"This is the only product of its kind in the marketplace we know of, and we hope it will become the fifth tool on the standard fireplace-accessory set. Diligent use of the KoalKeeper will allow a user to safely keep a fire going as long as they want without relighting."

The Marleys are selling the KoalKeeper through independent hardware stores in North Carolina and Virginia, including two in Winston-Salem and three others in the Triad. It also is available on the Internet at www.koalkeeper.com. The price ranges from \$9.95 to \$12.95.

"We are shipping the KoalKeeper to consumers in the United States and Canada, including as far away as Alaska," Paul Marley said. "We have customers in the Amish communities, and those who live off the grid. People also use it on camping trips."

The idea for the KoalKeeper came from Paul Marley's chilly childhood memories of having to restart a fire in the morning and his expertise as an Eagle Scout. After flirting with the concept and prototypes for 10 years, Karen Marley moved forward with the tool in the summer to provide a second income as a stay-at-home mother.

"We looked at the KoalKeeper as some-

FIRE TOOL: Endless Embers is marketing the KoalKeeper, a tool designed to help keep a fire going.



thing that would give people more options in this time of high-energy costs by making fire maintenance simpler," Karen Marley said.

The Marleys hope that a recent mention of the KoalKeeper in *Log Home Design* magazine, as well as advertising in 2004 outdoor catalogs, will enable them eventually to hire sales and marketing personnel.

— Richard Craver

Stolle Technology

Business developments in 2003 have generated a wave of optimism at Stolle Technology Inc., a Winston-Salem designer and manufacturer of plastic-injection molds.

"Our customers are feeling freer about making capital investments in new equipment than they have in years," said Manfred Stolle, a co-owner of the business with his wife, Barbara. Stolle's customers are in a range of industries — from automotive and aerospace to electronics, home and garden, and medical.

The company, founded in 1997, received a financial vote of confidence in January from the Winston-Salem City Council with a \$15,000 grant and a \$135,000 loan.

Manfred Stolle said that the company has spent some of that money on state-of-the-art software to make it more competitive in an international market. It also has taken on three of the 10 employees that it has committed to hiring by 2008, which would expand its work force from 20 to 30.

"I can definitely see signs of a better 2004 for the company," Manfred Stolle said. "Anybody wanting to increase their business has to go ahead next year with new products, and a lot of new products require new molds."

Stolle said that the business has weathered the patchy economy of the past year because of its diversified customer base.

"While some of our competitors have 90 percent of their orders coming from one customer, no customer represents more than 15 percent of our order base," Stolle said.



KAREN MARLEY



PAUL MARLEY