

# SPOTLIGHT ON: UNITED VALVE

*Established in 1961 by Leonard Johnson — father of the current CEO, Greg Johnson — United Valve is a full-service valve repair and modification facility with state-of-the-art CNC machines within a top-notch testing facility. Having been in the industry since WWII, Johnson originally ran the company with the main operation of selling valves. From there, the company ventured into valve repair, which further morphed into the factory-authorized modification of valves. Since then, they have come full circle, with repair once again functioning as their largest area of business. The company moved to its present location in 2008, and a second 40,000-square-foot building was added in 2015 — which houses its repair and engineering testing departments — giving United Valve a total facility size of 104,000 square feet.*

*Fugitive Emissions Journal had the pleasure of speaking with Greg Johnson, CEO, about the present rewards and future aspirations involved in leading a third-generation family business along an evolving industry horizon.*

**By: Kelly McLaughlin, Editor**

## Honesty: the bedrock of success

Established on a foundation of honesty and integrity, United Valve's core mission is "to provide the highest quality of products and service delivered on time and at a fair price." Inspired by Christian ethics, the company's management is centered upon "doing the right thing and taking care of people," says Greg Johnson, CEO. The reach of this philosophy is made apparent through the company's vastly loyal client base — their customer list contains 42 valve manufacturing companies from around the world, with end users including the largest refineries, petrochemical, chemical and power companies in the United States. Key industry valve supply and distribution firms are also among United Valve's strong list of customers.

In the midst of the company's evolution, United Valve has expanded into areas such as engineering testing, with a focus on fugitive emissions testing and cryogenic testing. In addition, they provide OEM support, which includes manufacturing components, and they possess a large CNC machining department that assists the company in the manufacture of components so that they can weld, make parts for almost any type of valve and conduct R&D work. To say the least, their services are exceptionally broad-based.

## Diversity, scope and reach

United Valve also provides installation service and support for the manufacturers with which they work. As the company is a lead

instructor for the Valve Manufacturers Association (VMA) Valve-Ed training program, members of their staff have been involved with the training of over 1,500 people over the past seven years. In terms of services, the company focuses on the following: 1) valve repair, both onsite and in the shop, 2) factory-authorized modification of new valves, 3) OEM manufacturing (machining, welding, assembly and testing) and 4) engineering testing, which includes fugitive emissions testing, cryogenic testing, fire testing, burst testing and failure analysis. In conjunction with their engineering testing, United Valve provides customers with design solutions and upgrades, if required. They also provide custom-engineered solutions for both new valve and repaired valve applications. "The key is to try to diversify our products and services across the spectrum of the industry, as opposed to just being a valve repair or testing company," Greg explains.

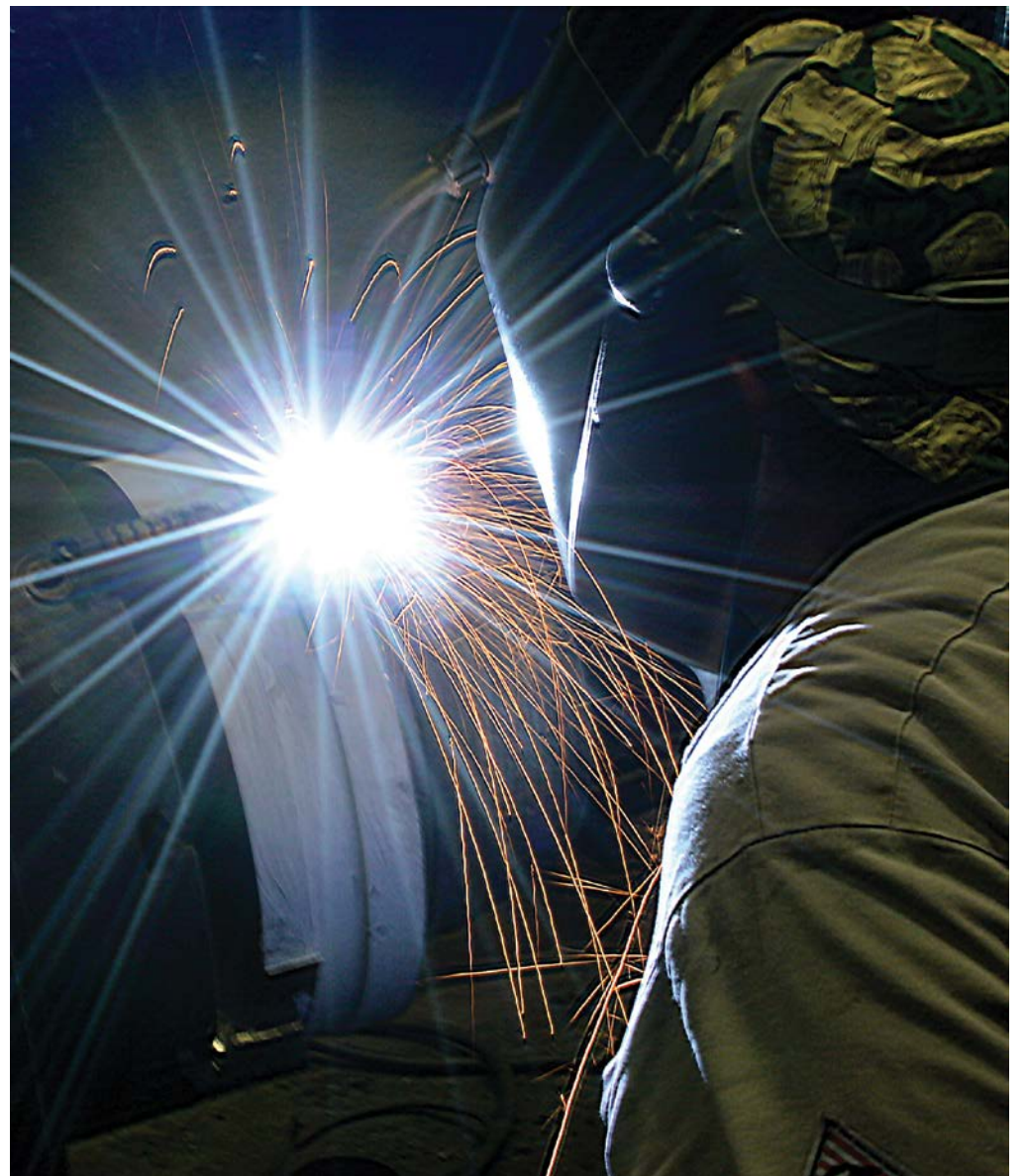
With five degreed mechanical and industrial engineers on staff, plus a welding engineer, as well as the capability to handle valves and components of up to 40 tons and machine components up to 20 feet in diameter, United Valve stands its ground when it comes to competition. What truly sets them apart in Greg's mind, however, runs deeper than technicalities. "Our combination of 57 years of experience, unique equipment and facilities, along with our strong engineering capabilities, make the difference," he notes.

## Technical roots sprouting creative branches

Unbeknownst to many is that after a childhood spent surrounded by valves, Greg's route to engineering featured especially creative interludes. "I grew up around valves from an early age. So, as I got older and was getting ready to go to school, the last thing I wanted was to have anything to do with them," Greg laughs. Instead, he received his degree in Journalism and Photojournalism, wherein he worked in the industry for eight years before coming back to the family business. At that point, he

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became keenly interested in further working with United Valve and decided to return to school for engineering.

This dynamic background has allowed Greg to place his focus on conducting the writing, photography and presentations for the company, rather than working closely on the day-to-day operations. That's where Greg's wife, Paula, the company's CFO for the past 25 years, his daughter, Kelly, and her husband, Matt, come in; United Valve's management is especially unique in that its third generation has stepped up to the plate as the keystones of the future of the company. "They're both very passionate about what they're doing, and good at it, too," Greg affirms. "Along with them, we have a great nucleus of young engineers and technicians from their upper-20s to mid-30s, and the company's in very good hands with them."

Despite the company's tenure, Greg believes that there's ample benefit to incorporating the younger engineers' enthusiasm and knowledge into the company's culture. "Sometimes, the understanding of the younger generation can be a bit daunting for us older people; but my daughter and her husband, being of that generation, completely understand, so they're handling the changing of the guard to the younger folks. We've given that a lot of leeway and responsibility, and it's working very well. My philosophy is to hire the best people and get out of the way."

## Global presence and ecological duty

United Valve's presence resonates globally; not only do they provide their services to companies headquartered around the world,

their products have been used in global projects, as well. Many of the manufacturers with whom the company works are in China and India; as such, it's important to United Valve that all of their customers, both in the U.S. and abroad, know of the company's capabilities and feel confident in their ability to provide accurate testing and evaluation services.

The reputability of the company name is particularly significant when it comes to engineering testing and fugitive emissions testing. United Valve is heavily involved with the standards-writing side of the industry, with Greg having personally been involved for almost 30 years. Additionally, company personnel have been active committee members and chairmen of various API committees and workgroups over the past 25 years, participating in the development of many key valve standards, including API's fugitive emissions testing documents. Additionally, company management has served in leadership roles as president and board member for the Manufacturers Standardization Society (MSS). Giving back to the industry, whether through committee work, writing articles or presenting at conferences, is an important ideal of the company.

Greg's vantage point while working with these committees has granted him the opportunity to incorporate their insight not only into fugitive emissions testing, but also into the end user experience. In addition to conducting their own testing, United Valve is involved in the standards and procedure writing, and works closely on the committees with end users who then have the opportunity to reach out for consulting help. Greg believes that being present when the documents are





written — as well as being involved in the networking and interfacing with the groups that have to adhere to those documents — helps to set United Valve's experience apart. "These organizations are the melting pots in which the manufacturers, end users and service companies all come together," Greg explains. "They're where the interchange of needs, desires, urgency, applications and solutions all come together. Being in the thick of that helps us because we know the problems almost before they happen, and we're there to help provide solutions."

Regarding fugitive emissions, Greg mentions that he is proud of the situation's development over the past 30 years. "Having lived down here on the coast, depending on which way the wind was blowing, we could tell what was coming from the area of the ship channel where all of these dozens of plants are located," Greg divulges. "But, it's amazing how the air has cleared up in the last 30 or 40 years; the end users are sincerely interested in actively decreasing fugitive emissions. These people live here, and it's their environment, as well. We're very proud of the way that the industry has responded to cleaning up the air in the last 30 or 40 years."

The development of government legislations over that period of time have affected business for the better, according to Greg. Stricter EPA regulations and the requirement for more stringent testing has provided more testing and consulting opportunities, and the creation of the documents themselves from the API side was the impetus for getting United Valve involved in fugitive emissions testing. As a result of changing rules and regulations, the company's activities have become directed toward expanding their testing capabilities to meet the needs of the end user and the valve manufacturer.

In addition to the fact that United Valve's customer list features the most prominent refineries around the country, the relationships created in the API meetings have led to the company's conviction that their client base knows what United Valve stands for and what they're capable of providing. From off-the-record recommendations to indicating which manufacturers are forward-thinking in their fugitive emissions approach, the company immerses itself in testing for end users beyond what a manufacturer might typically ask for. "We're very much involved in a 'where the rubber meets the road' way," Greg adds.

In terms of their client work, United Valve largely deals in problem-solving — a skill for which they receive numerous requests. "Because we do a lot of testing, sometimes the results are not what manufacturers would

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expect," Greg indicates. "But we have so much expertise in how valves operate, how they go wrong and what doesn't work. So, tied together with our experience and expertise in the actual standards, we can then work with them and say, 'this is what we can see in terms of why your product didn't pass the test. If you go back and change this dimension or alter this manufacturing process, I think you'll solve your problem.'" Greg believes that taking that extra step differentiates United Valve from other companies that strictly conduct tests. Technically — both ethically and legally — Greg says, the testing stops at the end result; however, a new chapter can begin when companies request their advice on how to proceed going forward. At that point, United Valve can conduct an evaluation of the product to see what went wrong, as opposed to solely providing a pass or fail grade.

#### Research and development

Perpetually working to improve their testing equipment scope and efficacy, United Valve's freedom to design and fabricate their own equipment has worked greatly to their advantage. The process enables the company to easily and rapidly create new testing equipment components and fixtures; if they receive a request for a component or piece to be tested for the first time, their designers will create the necessary fixtures and instrumentation.

Additionally, the company recently expanded its capabilities for large valve work. With an NRG repair building standing at almost 60 feet tall and possessing the capacity for valves up to 80,000 pounds, United Valve's focus on expansion is showing no signs of slowing. Having also just opened an actuator repair facility in Corpus Christi, TX, the company will be expanding the scope of their operations in the coming year as a contribution to their overall goal of constantly improving their products and services. Though the Corpus Christi location will ultimately function as a test bed for purposes of future expansion, its interim focus is set on actuation, actuation repair and field service (with field service technicians working all over North America).



#### Onward and upward

With a finger on the pulse of the changing industry, Greg acknowledges the recent move to larger valves in multiple applications, as well as an increase in focus on engineered valves and specialty valve work. In addition, he anticipates that the API will strongly consider the creation of a true type-testing standard to help confirm the quality and operational capabilities of valves used in refinery and chemical plant applications. In the near future, however, he expects the primary areas of growth to be pipeline valve work (due to the expansion of pipelines in the U.S.), as well as LNG valves and cryogenic testing. "The need for more feedback on critical valves is going to create more smart valves and actuated valves," Greg explains. "We're becoming more involved in that area because we see that as the way of the future." As for what's likely to fade from the forefront? Greg believes that we'll see even less repairing of "commodity" valves due to the fact that it's "too cheap to replace them instead of repair them."

With regards to eliminating fugitive emissions and finding better sources of energy, Greg believes that hydrogen fuel cells (or something of the like) will be created in the

next 25–30 years. As this development would reduce certain areas of United Valve's work, the company is open to taking on new directions in order to adapt to the future. As for United Valve's role along the growing horizon, and Greg's place within it? He admits that although it can sometimes be difficult to transition to the second or third generation in a family business, he feels incredibly fortunate. "We've got such smart and passionate people, and we're looking forward to where they take things, because they're full of new ideas," Greg assures. He adds that although some people who run a family business have trouble stepping back, he's confident in doing so. "My goal is to hire smart people — people who are smarter than I am — and then give them the reigns, step back, and let them go."

This philosophy has empowered United Valve's next generation to remain anchored in its humble roots while moving forth with ambitious reach. "I used to be the captain, and I determined the direction in which we would go. Now, however, I'm giving other people the ability to make the important decisions. I say, 'The training wheels are off. You've got this, and I have faith in you and our company's values; so...go to it!'"

