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## The hunt for opportunity at ALAW

Before one session at last week's **ALAW Laser Applications Workshop**, a fabricator stood in the back of the conference room at the Inn at St. John's in Plymouth, Mich., just outside Detroit. He peered at the small sound board that controlled the microphone at the podium and noted the metal brackets and enclosures, as well as the nameplate.

"I'll have to give them a call," he said.

This underscores the decidedly different tone at this year's event, co-sponsored by the **Fabricators & Manufacturers Association (FMA), International**, and the **Laser Institute of America**. Launched as the Automotive Laser Applications Workshop 17 years ago, the conference has since broadened its scope to include contract manufacturing and other industrial sectors. Like in previous years, the conference offered two tracks, one focusing on the automotive industry and another on general metal fabrication.

Overall, speakers focused less on the latest and greatest of lasers, though there was still talk of solid-state technology, including the future of fiber lasers in metal fabrication. Instead, many focused on what's top of mind for many during the downturn: gaining efficiency, getting more competitive, and—like that fabricator eyeing the sound board in the back of the room—getting more work in the door.

Gregg Simpson, president of **Ohio Laser**, Plain City, Ohio, talked about his company's new building and fabrication operation that not only respects the environment (for instance, recycling everything from the metal skeleton to even the dust left over by the laser), but also makes life easier for the worker. The facility makes smart use of overhead skylights, so on sunny days there's no reason to turn on the overhead fluorescent lights. Talk about giving new meaning to the phrase "lights out."

Mike Pellicchia, sales engineer for **MC Machinery Systems**, Wood Dale, Ill., talked about smart material handling before and after the laser, including towers and other systems used for both raw stock and finished-part inventory, as well as automated work flow. For instance, he mentioned **Ncell**, a third-party software that can work with an MRP or ERP system. "The system actually looks at your order entry, determines from that order entry what's going to be needed, finds the finished DXF files for the parts, will automatically look at your schedule, determine when those parts need to be produced, pull them out, clean them up, and automatically nest them.

"I know this sounds like a fantasy," he added, "but there are companies out there running six machines and multiple automated systems with a programmer—one person."

Bob Lewinski, vice president of sales and marketing for **VIL Laser Systems/Wayne Trail Technologies**, Fort Loramie, Ohio, talked of a future when manufacturers would be, in essence, ready for any work that might come down the pike, from automotive B-pillars to heavy equipment to wind tower components. He talked of beam-switching technology that would allow a flexible laser cell to switch optics and processes to match customer demand. One day the cell could perform laser cladding, another day laser welding, and laser cutting the next.

"We see this concept being embraced," he said. "It's evolutionary, and I think it's the right way to go."

This kind of vision may help fabricators gain market share and emerge from the current economic doldrums stronger than ever. True, with the **Fed reporting** last week that factory capacity utilization sank to 65.7 percent in April, and that steel mills reportedly are operating at only **40 percent of their potential**, getting work in the door is now top priority for most. Still, according to conference attendees, the best fabricators out there are using this time to become more efficient and increase their competitive advantage. The more fabricators work to increase efficiency, the more market share they may be able to grab.

The market pie may be smaller now, but that means it might be a good time to take another piece. As the economy rebounds, that small piece could grow into quite a revenue stream.