



Upon Reflection

Turning The Corner

One can feel the sense of relief as the year comes to a close. It has not been an easy year for anyone or any business.

We've come through it, but we've all been shaken as we've witnessed the highest number of bankruptcies in history. While the Thanksgiving holiday focused our thoughts on our families, we could not help but to think about our "work families" as well, and to feel the loss of our "work family" who were no longer gathered around "the work table" after so many rounds of layoffs.

But the good news — the news that bodes well for the coming year — is that *America's small businesses are hiring again*. No less a source than *The Wall Street Journal* ran a page one story documenting the rising rate of hiring by small businesses and explaining why this underreported number is one of the very most positive early economic indicators. *The Journal* presented their belief that because small can't afford to carry any marginally-productive staff, when business begins to pick up they have no underutilized staff on hand to pick up the new work. As a result, just as soon as business begins to pick up, small shops must immediately hire additional workers to take on the additional business. At the same time, because larger manufacturing firms have so much inertia, as the economy begins to pick up, the larger firms tend to *job out increased work to small outside shops* until they are certain that it is "safe" to staff up again. We see the up tick in business prospects, not in massive rehiring at General Electric or Boeing, but in *our* job shops in *our* industry. And, from the constant buzz that we heard around the show floor in Indianapolis at Coating 2003, this is exactly what is happening right now.

We've tightened our belts and toughed out the bleakest business winter that most of us can recall. We face massive challenges in the year ahead, but we're seeing the beginning of the thaw. I'm ready for the springtime.

Douglas Stivison

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Editor and Publisher
Douglas S. Stivison
d.stivison@elsevier.com

Managing Editor
Patti Ann Frost
p.frost@elsevier.com

Organic Coatings Editor
Ron Joseph
rjrojo@aol.com

Publisher Emeritus
Eugene B. Nadel

Art Director -
Production Manager
Susan Canalizo-Baruch
s.canalizo@elsevier.com

Advertising Sales Manager
William P. Dey
w.dey@elsevier.com

Advertising Sales Manager
Lawrence A. Post
l.post@elsevier.com

Administrative Assistant
Eileen McNulty
e.mculty@elsevier.com

Circulation Manager
Helena Bartosinska
h.bartosinska@elsevier.com

Metal Finishing
360 Park Avenue South
New York, NY 10010-1710
212/633-3100
FAX: 212/633-3140
<http://www.metalfinishing.com>

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