

## CASE HISTORY

# A coater ushers in a new era by relying on innovation and quality

A Midwestern finishing pioneer has built an empire that provides a host of coating technologies, including powder applied on 12 lines.

Fifty-one light poles strategically positioned along a street that parallels Interstate 15 and serves as a shortcut to Caesar's Palace and other casinos in Las Vegas may seem like mundane infrastructure to most. But when they enhance the memory of a beloved blue-eyed crooner, the lighting earns a new significance on the street named Frank Sinatra Drive. And while Ol' Blue Eyes, may have liked to throw the dice between gigs in his adopted home of Las Vegas, the selection of B.L. Downey Co. to supply those light poles was no gamble.

In fact, it was a safe bet, because B.L. Downey Co. has made a name for itself, during the course of its 52 years in business, as a place where innovation and technology come together to solve vexing problems involving the protective and decorative coatings of all types of metal products. In the case of the Las Vegas project light poles were fabricated by B.L. Downey Co., shot blasted, and then powder coated with a special color to provide a top-notch, long-lasting finish: a fitting tribute to an American icon.

From carbon steel to magnesium to aluminum and beyond, B.L. Downey Co. has developed processes that allow fabricated metal products to be cleaned, masked if needed, and coated with either an electrocoat (e-coat) or

a powder coat, or both, depending on customer requirements.

The company can handle almost any size project from large, oddly shaped pieces—measuring up to 50 feet in length and weighing up to 10,000 pounds—to tiny parts sent to the com-

pany by the tens of thousands. As an example, B.L. Downey Co. recently coated a curving, decorative Gone-with-the-Wind-style wrought iron staircase that measured two stories tall. At the same time, thousands of 1-inch- to 16-inch-long roofing screws were going through the e-coating pro-



*The company coats metal products that are embedded in roadways, bridges, and parking facilities. Because moisture laden with road salt permeates concrete in many states, coated metal products, such as rebar, effectively last longer.*



cess at its plant in Broadview, Ill. "With 325,000 square feet under one roof, 12 powder coating lines, five e-coating lines, ISO certification, and 175 employees, we have the experience, flexibility, and the capability to meet any customer needs," said owner and president David Wasz. "We're a well-kept secret, but we want to change that. We want to make people aware that we're here, ready to handle the largest—or smallest—projects."

### Abounding with finishing services

In addition to powder coating, e-coating, and light-pole fabrication, the company also offers nylon and plastisol polyvinylchloride (PVC) dipping. With 17 production lines, tight turnaround projects aren't a problem for B.L. Downey. "We have the capacity to meet our customers' production requirements, including any emergency situations," said Wasz.

The company recently did a same-day turnaround project to help out a customer who got behind on a manufacturer's product run. The same-day response by B.L. Downey Co. got the project back on track, saving the manufacturer an expensive line shutdown while the parts were coated, and saving B.L. Downey's customer's reputation.

In addition to working with manufacturers, B.L. Downey Co. also works in the transportation sector. The company is a certified epoxy-coater for the Illinois Department of Transportation and several other state transportation departments throughout North America. The company was called upon recently by a customer working with the Minnesota Department of Transportation to supply epoxy-coated steel spiral reinforcements to repair the I-35W Bridge that collapsed there in 2007.

The company has been providing coating services for metal products that are embedded in roadways, bridges, parking facilities, and pre-cast products for decades. Because moisture laden with road salt permeates concrete in many states, metal products that are coated effectively last longer even when totally entrenched in concrete.

While it supplies coating for metal products that become part of roads and bridges, the company also works with customers who make the vehicles and machines that use and build such infrastructure. B.L. Downey-coated parts go into Harley-Davidson, Honda, BMW, and GM vehicles as well as the workhorses made by John Deere, Caterpillar, Navistar, and others. "We've been coating steel parts for vehicle manufacturers for years," said Wasz, "Interestingly, over the past several years we've been working frequently with magnesium parts."

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*B.L. Downey Co. applies anti-graffiti coatings that can be easily cleaned in the field.*



*B.L. Downey Co. finishes automotive components on its powder and e-coating lines, including these convertible rooftop components.*

Indeed, magnesium casters have developed new techniques to make magnesium a desirable metal for vehicle parts. And B.L. Downey Co. finds itself in the enviable position of having developed a proprietary process for e-coating magnesium that even allows a powder topcoat, if desired. This protects the magnesium from the elements and allows a manufacturer to select from a wide variety of colors for the finished metal. The result is a real winning combination—an attractive and durable finish coupled with the lightweight and high strength characteristics of magnesium. Examples includes steel shot blasting the metal with one of four shot blast machines at B.L. Downey Co. “We believe shot blasting, in many cases, is the optimum method to properly prepare the metal surface for coating,” said Wasz. “We feel fortunate to have the existing complement of shot blasting machines which enable us to handle a wide variety of shapes and sizes.”

In other situations, B.L. Downey Co. is able to use chemical cleaners to prepare the metal surface for coating, if necessary. “A properly prepared surface is one of the keys to a high-quality finish,” noted Wasz.

As the leader in the coating industry, B.L. Downey Co. often collaborates with industry partners to develop custom techniques to meet unique requirements. As an example, a recent magnesium part for an auto-maker required a special masking technique to prevent the powder coating from penetrating an engine connection component. B.L. Downey Co. worked with its long-time partner, Chicago-based Mighty Hook, and the

include hardtop convertible roofs, engine components, and rearview mirrors.

It’s a problem solved for this alloy that is as strong as steel, and as light as aluminum. “Auto manufacturers are discovering that magnesium can reduce weight and boost fuel efficiency of any vehicle,” said Wasz. “Our coating process makes magnesium parts last longer and they look great.”

Fencing and wrought iron fabricators have also found B.L. Downey Co. to be a reliable vendor. Metal products are susceptible to corrosion caused by salt, as well as the relentless freezing and customer as its needs evolved, over the course of several weeks to meet the auto engineers’ requirements. Together the companies developed ideas to streamline the coating process. Tests were run until the masking fixture achieved the desired results at an affordable price.

Not resting on any past laurels, the company continues to innovate. It’s currently implementing Kanban (pronounced Con Bon), a Japanese concept, which puts in place signals to alert inventory needs triggering just-in-time ordering and production. Kanban keeps business humming and reduces costs and waste.

Wasz and his business partner Michael Doan recently bought B.L. Downey Co. from founder Bernard Downey, a coating industry legend known for his innovation and leadership. Downey, 84, works with Wasz and Doan daily to ensure a smooth transition for the company he founded and nurtured for the past 52 years. Wasz and Doan bring strong manufacturing, engineering, customer service, and financial

thawing cycles of winter. “The volatile Midwest weather really wreaks havoc on untreated metal,” said Wasz. “It blisters improperly applied coatings right off metal products such as light poles, fencing, and railings. Our coatings are tested to rigorous standards to prove they can withstand the punishment.”

Architects and developers are usually concerned about using decoratively coated metal for fencing and balconies in tropical, warm climates with very strong ultraviolet-light exposure. The proper mix of e-coating and powder coating enables metal fencing and balconies to be beautiful, decorative, and durable in all types of climates. But a meticulous and careful application is required: All crevices and joints must be thoroughly cleaned and coated for the process to work effectively, something B.L. Downey Co. has been doing for years.

#### **Innovating from start to finish**

One key to the company’s success is its keen focus on surface preparation to ensure a high-quality finish on the coated product. In many cases this

backgrounds to lead B.L. Downey Co. into the future. “We’re excited about the possibilities for this company,” said Wasz. “It’s been a leader and innovator in the coatings field. It’s like a family. Employees average 20-plus years of experience with us. We had an employee who recently celebrated his 50th anniversary working here. You just don’t find that in American business anymore. It’s a great working environment. We’re all about meeting customers’ needs and being flexible, efficient, and professional. We can’t wait to see what challenge comes through our doors each day.” **PC**

#### **Editor’s note**

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