

Get a Grip

**SAF-TEE SIPING RUNS A SLICK BUSINESS
KEEPING CARS FROM SLIDING.**

Surprisingly, for a company dedicated to taking the hazards out of driving, Monticello-based Saf-Tee Siping has never actually tried to appeal to drivers. That may seem like an oversight, but owner Wes Sprunk is more of a hands-on mechanical master than a promotional whiz, so he focuses on tire dealerships, trusting word-of-mouth testimonials for the success that has propelled his company to international acclaim, with more than \$2.5 million in annual sales.

Saf-Tee Siping is part of Tire Service Equipment Manufacturing Company (also headquartered in

Monticello), which has annual gross sales of \$6 million. Other machines the company makes are for tire regrooving and shredding. But siping machines represent its chief profit center.

A siping machine cuts precise little grooves, or sipes, across the face of a tire. Almost imperceptible, the tiny slits aren't deep enough to damage the tire, but they enhance the tread's ability to grip slippery road surfaces by adding thousands of tiny toeholds. Some new all-season tires have sufficient sipes, but many other tires, including those designed for

longer wear or higher performance, have larger tread blocks and are made from harder materials. Those are prime candidates for siping. Independent traction tests conducted last winter showed that siping can improve tires so they reach or surpass the traction capability of very good all-season tires. The siping process itself costs as little as \$10 a tire.

Saf-Tee Siping's machines have given tire dealers—including large nationwide chains such as Discount Tires and Les Schwab—the chance to add another service. All told, Saf-Tee Siping operates through 3,000 tire dealerships in North America, and 75 others in several European countries as well as Brazil.

Sprunk got into the business in the early 1980s, rebounding from failing automobile dealerships in Montana. He ran a siping operation for a friend, who based it in Mississippi. Sprunk soon bought the firm, moving it to Minnesota.

"If I hadn't come to Minnesota, I don't think I would have made it," says Sprunk. "Minnesota has a lot of snow and ice," making it the perfect setting to demonstrate "siping's "number-one benefit of improved traction."

Saf-Tee Siping's business skyrocketed during the 1980s, when Sprunk drove all over the U.S. pulling a trailer filled with a half-dozen siping machines, and stopping at every tire dealer he could find between trade shows. He and partner Ray Schmidt built a large manufacturing facility in Monticello. Sprunk later bought out Schmidt's share, though Schmidt now manages the facility.

These days, Sprunk spends most of his time in Arizona—far from Minnesota's icy roads. But he's still keeping a firm hand on his company's wheel. And thanks to him, drivers are keeping a firm hold on the road. ■

—John Gilbert