As 2014 comes to a close, we are taking time to reflect on a year of extraordinary accomplishments. Our team has met the challenges associated with our growth in both revenue and facilities. Our suppliers and strategic partners have done a wonderful job supporting our aggressive growth curve, as well.

We owe a tremendous thank you to our customers, who have had faith that we could accomplish the scalability and capabilities enhancements we are now delivering.

And, as exciting as 2014 has been, 2015 promises to be an even more eventful year as the projects launched this year begin to ramp to volume in our global network of facilities. From our Firstronic perspective, the best is yet to come!

I’d like to personally wish everyone a Merry Christmas and a healthy and prosperous 2015.

John Sammut, President & CEO
Firstronic added an IBL CX600 vapor phase reflow soldering system to its Juarez, Mexico operation in November.

“The broader process windows, mitigation of defects common to convection reflow and the experience of our Mexican production team with vapor phase technology all influenced our decision. As a company committed to leadership in Lean manufacturing processes we also like the fact that vapor phase requires zero wait state between products and requires far fewer profiles than the typical convection reflow oven,” said Steve Fraser, Firstronic’s Vice President of Operations.

While the facility also has convection reflow capability, Fraser said that Firstronic plans to continue to invest in vapor phase soldering technology since it represents a robust solution to a number of challenges convection reflow doesn’t address as well. In addition to the advantages stated earlier, the system also produces cleaner solder joints at lower temperatures. The vapor blanket immersion process ensures perfect wetting and void-free, high quality solder joints.

“Convection reflow oven stabilization can add as much as 15 minutes to a changeover process. With vapor phase, there is no changeover wait state. This capability also broadens our ability to support customers with dense printed circuit board assemblies (PCBAs) that include fine pitch technology,” added Fraser.

One other advantage is lower energy costs.

“When people think of low cost labor markets they often fail to understand that all costs are not equally reduced. Utility costs are often much higher than those of the U.S. Plus, our geographic location in Southwest translates to summer temperatures that routinely exceed 100 degrees F. Vapor phase technology uses about one-tenth of the energy used in a convection reflow oven. The vapor blanket is inert, which means we don’t need to use nitrogen. And, since the machine expels less heat than conventional reflow processes, we don’t have to spend more on cooling in the summer,” Fraser said.
2014 Was a Year Full of Significant Accomplishments

The Firstronic team accomplished much in 2014 and we felt it would be valuable to recap some of the highlights.

Growth

Firstronic’s revenue grew more than 50 percent year-over-year from 2013 and included the ramp-up of three significant programs: a new seat actuator, an antenna controller and a new shifter. Employment increased by 30 percent from the prior year.

Expansion

We added a third SMT line to our Grand Rapids, Michigan facility which increased available capacity by over 30 percent. We also launched a new facility in Juarez, Mexico with two SMT lines and the capacity to add an additional five lines as that business grows.

Capabilities

We enhanced our quality and efficiency with the addition of 3-D solder paste inspection (SPI) and in-house high speed programming. We’ve also begun adding vapor phase reflow technology plus set up a strategic alliance with DASI Solutions that puts us in the forefront of additive manufacturing technology innovation. The Grand Rapids team rolled out a comprehensive training program at the beginning of the year to ensure all employees shared a strong core skills foundation plus the specialized skills needed for the functions they perform. Supply chain management efficiencies were enhanced and inventory turns doubled.

Recognition

We received the Global Trader of the Year award from Automation Alley and a Supplier Recognition award from Hirschmann Car Communications. Firstronic was named one of three finalists in the Manufacturing Category of the Grand Rapids Business Journal’s News-makers of the Year Awards. Our accomplishments have been covered in a wide range of industry publications this year, including Industry Week and Circuits Assembly.

In short, we’ve had an auspicious year where we’ve met or exceeded our commitments and strategic plan. We look forward to an equally comprehensive set of accomplished milestones in the coming year.

Photos in order: a training class in Grand Rapids, the Juarez, Mexico facility, a 3-D SPI system in Grand Rapids and the Automation Alley Global Trader of the Year Award.
When the word recycling is mentioned, blue or green bins filled with paper or plastic and glass bottles are often the first thing that comes to mind. However, walk through an electronics factory and you’ll find there is a significant amount of recyclable waste generated in production operations. The team at Firstronic did just that at the beginning of 2014 and the programs they started this year are saving $65,000 a year in garbage pickup costs alone. These programs are also eliminating waste from landfills which helps reduce Grand Rapids’ overall garbage disposal costs.

Firstronic began by recycling plastic packaging waste through the City of Grand Rapids. The team then found that by separating the different types of plastics used in component packaging media, they could actually sell those plastics to a third party recycling firm. Further analysis showed that the best revenue levels could be achieved by selecting recycling firms by commodity to be recycled, since firms that specialized in certain types of products tended to pay higher prices for those products. Paper and cardboard is recycled through one supplier. Printed circuit board (PCB) waste, such as the rails removed from panelized boards, is recycled through another supplier. Solder dross, wipes and tubes are recycled through a specialized supplier. Open top coating buckets containing non-hazardous materials are crushed and sold to another supplier, who also takes pour-top buckets which can’t be crushed with in-house equipment.

“We are continuing to look at opportunities for increasing the revenue and the cost savings associated with recycling. We find that some operations, such as compacting our trash, aren’t cost effective when cost of the equipment and space required is considered. The beauty of this focus is that we can make money and be socially responsible at the same time. That is truly a win-win for all parties,” said Steve Black, Firstronic’s Process Engineering Manager.

Firstronic’s Recycling Efforts Result in Excellent Paybacks

Hirschmann chose to recognize our team for that accomplishment,” said John Sammut, Firstronic’s President & CEO.