

**For Immediate Release:**  
February 8, 2008

**For More Information Please Contact:**  
Jack Healy  
MassMEP Director of Operations  
508-831-7020

**FOR CHECKERBOARD LTD., LEAN WAS IN THE CARDS**

*MassMEP Takes Top Stationary Company Through the Workings of Lean, Produces Larger Volume, Increases Revenue, and Improves Delivery Times*

**WEST BOYLSTON, MA** – If you're one of the millions of Americans who will send out holiday cards this year, you may order those cards through a company like Checkerboard Ltd. in West Boylston. Checkerboard is one of the top social stationary printing companies in the United States. They design and manufacture custom invitations, announcements, stationary and note cards for personal and business use, using the most up-to-date technology along with the ideas and skills of their 154 team members.

While the company continues to experience growth, they also experience spikes in business depending on the season, and to remain competitive they needed to increase production speed. Micah Chase, Checkerboard's President, chose the Massachusetts Manufacturing Extension Partnership (MassMEP) to help them learn to operate more efficiently.

“The MassMEP team started us out with a basic overview of Lean. Each Checkerboard team member participated in their Time Wise® Lean 101 training. Employee teams were formed to learn additional Lean techniques and spearhead work throughout different areas of the company,” said Chase. “The Lean training gave us important tools to get started and showed us how to adjust our process flow and utilize problem solving skills.”

Value Stream Mapping (VSM) was part of that Lean training. VSM helps determine areas of waste and inefficiencies in areas from manufacturing to catalog and order processing. Kaizen events were held to help focus on flow, and the stock room and other locations throughout the company were cleaned and organized.

“We helped them form work cells and implement some visual signals and tools to help with some work processes,” said Kevin Smith, MassMEP project manager. “The company produces 60-page catalogs to distribute to customers. The catalog contains each card design in its finished state, complete with enclosure cards and envelopes glued into the catalog so customers can touch and feel the product. In the past, it has taken seven months to complete this project. We helped improve and shorten the catalog making process by introducing visual signals, reducing batch size and creating better flow.”

Catalog was moved to the main manufacturing floor. By relocating Catalog and adopting the MassMEP suggested improvements, material travel distance was reduced from about 1553 feet per page to 82 feet during the catalog making process.

By implementing the Cellular Flow system, Checkerboard can now do a larger volume of business in a small space, to give better service and meet client demand. Checkerboard teams continue to change and improve the cells, and by doing this they can address the quality issues faster and are working to perfect processes and remove problems. Because of the successful formation of the work cells, delivery has also improved. Shipments are almost always 100 percent on time each month. The 3-day delivery goal is even being met over the busy holiday season when volume is three times normal.

“Reprints are down, too, and I believe this is due to improved communication between employees because of the cross-functional work teams. Leaders are emerging. There’s been a cultural change here at Checkerboard where teams take responsibility for the customer’s happiness rather than performing a task. The MassMEP Lean training has even helped with employee retention and in getting new employees. You know you are doing something right when employees bring their family members in to work at Checkerboard.”

“Checkerboard is now considered one of the top three in their industry. Sales have increased and clients are voicing their satisfaction. The company as a whole has been

very open to suggestions and ideas from not only us at MassMEP but to each other,” added Smith.

“Anyone who thinks two years is all it takes to “do lean” is crazy! But, anything we have done so far has more than paid for itself. We have so many tools and improvements,” added Chase. “Checkerboard could not have picked a better partner than MassMEP. A huge part of our success was their willingness to work with us and to keep coming back to help. Kevin and other staff members came in before, during and after projects and helped us tweak and rework as needed along the way. They are always very receptive. I would highly recommend MassMEP.”

The MassMEP is an affiliate of the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) under the U.S. Department of Commerce. The national MEP system is a network of manufacturing extension centers that provide business and technical assistance to smaller manufacturers in all 50 states, the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico. Through MEP, manufacturers have access to more than 2,000 manufacturing and business “coaches” whose job is to help firms make changes that lead to greater productivity, increased profits and enhanced global competitiveness. For more information, please visit [www.massmep.org](http://www.massmep.org), or phone 1-800-MEP-4MFG.

**-END-**