

Chambers' engineering firm strives to do what the big guys can't

By Judy Royal

Not all engineers strive to work for companies with dozens of employees.

"It was a dream coming out of college to have my own firm," said Tony Chambers, PE, a North Carolina State University graduate.

After working for five years at a manufacturing plant and five years at a mid-size engineering firm, Chambers' dream came true. He started Chambers Process Engineering, or CPE, in Wilmington seven years ago.

"I saw the possibility of being a more cost-effective option (for clients) with a smaller firm," said Chambers, who describes himself as an "architect for chemical plants." "My focus is really to look out for the client - to provide simple, robust, cost-effective design."

Expansion, automation, modernization, process optimization and environmental compliance projects are Chambers' specialties. He has worked with KoSa, International Paper, Fortron Industries, Archer Daniels Midland, BASF and DuPont and spends 80% of his time on site at the plants.

The other 20% of the time Chambers spends in his two-room, upstairs office at 711 1/2 Princess St.

CPE employs nine people, including Chambers - who is the only engineer - two office support staff members and

six designers. "A big part of my success has been my designers and their ability to generate high-quality documents for engineering construction," he said.

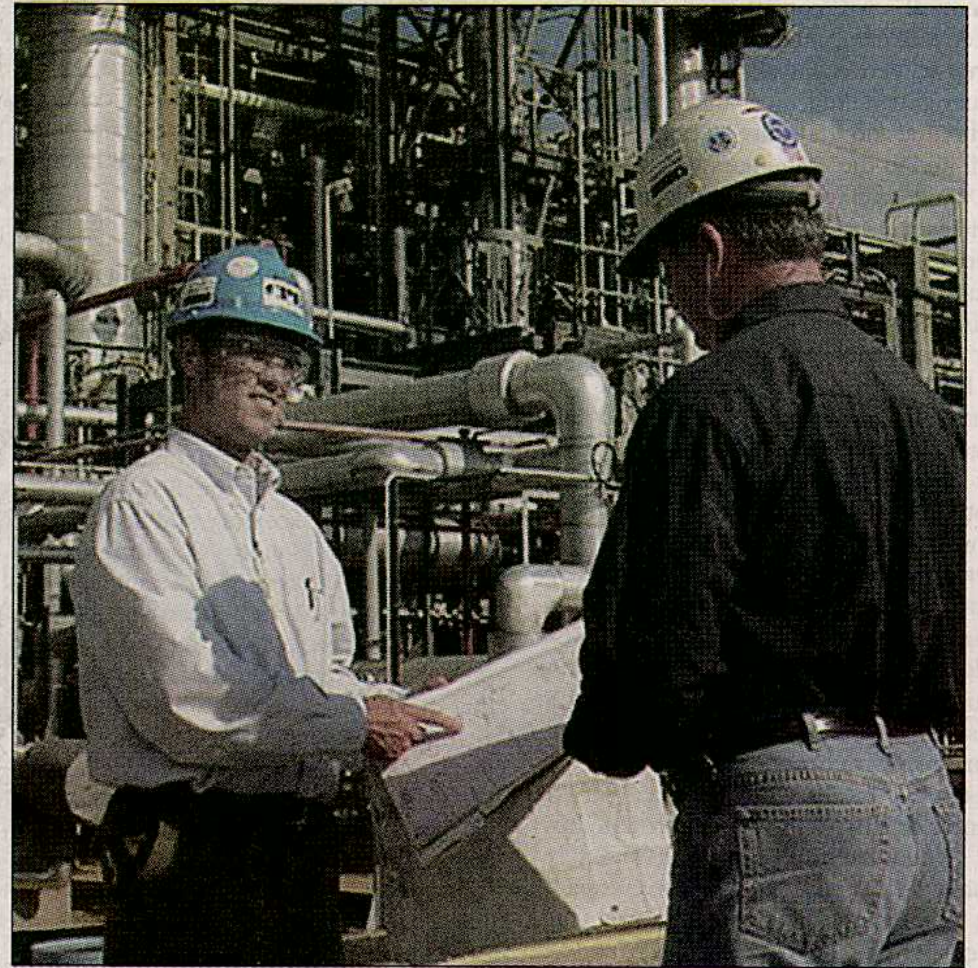
The current corporate climate has helped business, Chambers said. "As the large companies downsized, a lot of them have gotten rid of on-site and corporate engineering support," he said. "The tremendous spike in the economy, we felt that dip, but the last 10 years in general have provided more work for contract engineering firms."

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When the dip was too much to bear, Chambers found a way to cope. In spring 2002 he traveled to Russia to work with the U.S. Department of State as a consultant to evaluate fermentation plants that were set up in the 1970s and 1980s to convert to biological weapons manufacturers. The United States government was hoping to modernize the plants so they would become financially viable enough to discourage workers from selling their biological weapons production knowledge.

Chambers, who stayed overseas until the following November, said he would make the trip to Russia again despite his unfamiliarity with such a political atmosphere. "It was a very different environment for me," he said. "It was much different than a strictly engineering environment."



Photograph courtesy of Chambers Process Engineering
Tony Chambers (left) and pipe designer Greg Priest develop equipment arrangement for a facility upgrade at Fortron Industries. Expansion, automation, modernization, process optimization and environmental compliance projects are Chambers' specialties.