PURDUE UNIVERSITY | Manufacturing Extension Partnership

Client Success Story

SWEETWATER

FORT WAYNE, INDIANA

Valerie Jackson
Director of Product Photography Operations
Sweetwater

> "Robotics is a new technology for Sweetwater. Purdue MEP helped us prove out the technology through a real-life on-site concept feasibility study. This simulation eliminated any hesitation to pursue and implement the photo cobot. Without the assistance of the technology adoption program, the photo cobot would have been a tough concept to visualize for the organization."

Picture Perfect: Robotics Drive Growth and Productivity for Sweetwater

Through a collaborative robotic (cobot) integration, Sweetwater boosted guitar photography output by 250% and eliminated photographer fatigue, in turn streamlining operations, saving $100K annually, and creating new tech roles.

With support from Purdue MEP, Sweetwater not only scaled production but also created new technical roles, showcasing innovation in both operations and workforce development.

While Sweetwater is widely recognized as a leading retailer of music technology and instruments, it is also backed by robust manufacturing, distribution, and repair capabilities. Its team of seasoned electronics technicians delivers expert repairs and custom modifications for audio and studio gear, ensuring exceptional quality and reliability. The company's centrally located, state-of-the-art distribution center in Fort Wayne, IN, provides shipping across the United States.

The Challenge:

Supporting its retail division, Sweetwater photographs over a thousand guitars daily, each requiring eight or more detailed shots. The original process relied on heavy nine-pound cameras, causing significant fatigue for photographers and forcing rotations every four hours to combat this issue. With four guitar photography studios operating at full capacity and no space to expand, Sweetwater faced a critical challenge: how to increase photo capacity and efficiency to meet growing demand without compromising quality while still ensuring photographer safety.

The team celebrated the cobot's first anniversary. On day one, it photographed 167 guitars in 5 hours with a single operator, boosting studio capacity by 33% and cutting labor by 50%.

The Solution:

Purdue MEP helped Sweetwater evaluate and assess their current process, then connected them with the right technology partner. With Purdue MEP's support, Sweetwater was able to conduct a one-week, on-site trial of the cobot within their actual process. This trial period gave Sweetwater the confidence and data needed to move forward with full implementation.

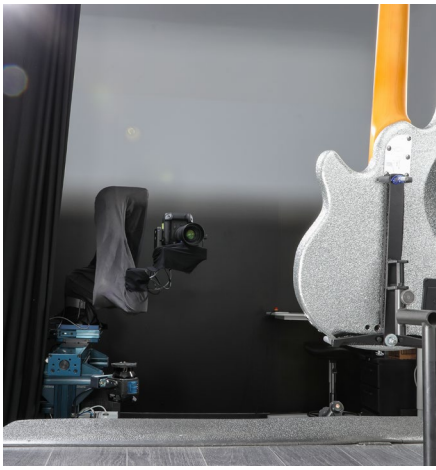
The Results:

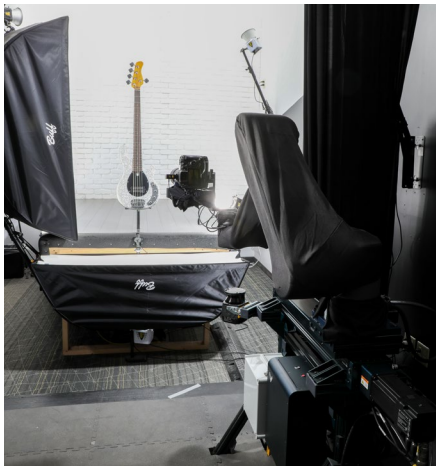
Sweetwater successfully deployed a cobot into its guitar photography process. The team not only eliminated fatigue but gained new technical skills, becoming cobot programmers while preserving their artistic role in the process and ensuring the quality of every image. "This program has made a difference in the lives of our photographers by reducing the amount of fatigue and stress on them. We were also able to gain a 250% capacity increase in our guitar photography studios, which positions us perfectly for future growth," states Troy Haynes, Vice President of Service Operations for Sweetwater.

With this success, Sweetwater is already planning to implement a second cobot in the near future to handle the high-volume instruments and further scale production.

Impacts:

- **Eliminated** photographer fatigue
- Cobot implementation has **increased production output by up to 2.5 times** compared to the manual method
- **Annual savings of $100,000** based on improved throughput
- Run rate for the guitar photography studios has been **elevated by 250%**
- Sweetwater **created 2 new roles**, Cobot Specialist and Development Photographer, leading to workforce expansion and technical skill development





ABOUT MEP

Purdue Manufacturing Extension Partnership (MEP) provides high-value solutions to help Indiana businesses maximize their success. As advocates for Indiana's thousands of manufacturers, our staff identifies areas of improvement, streamlines processes, and ultimately increases competitiveness. Purdue MEP serves hundreds of companies annually by implementing continuous improvement principles in the areas of productivity, growth, and technology.