



5/13/2026

Meeting Summary & Highlights

Speaker Highlights

Hosted by Kevin Cawood, Mike Kelly, founder and owner of [Caliente](#), a Fort Wayne-based custom flexible heater manufacturer, gave a wide-ranging profile of his company's 25-year history and growth trajectory. Kelly described leaving a larger competitor at age 30 to launch Caliente in 2001, building the business by targeting underserved niches — military thermal training targets, telecommunications cell-site battery warmers, and electric vehicle battery heaters — using a proprietary silk-screen conductive ink technology that eliminates traditional wires or etched metal. He shared that Caliente is currently acquiring a California-based company to enter the aerospace and silicone heater markets, and is seeking \$750,000 in private capital to fund the acquisition.

Announcements

Upcoming Meetings:

5/20: Social Event / Cassidy Young — 4pm – 6pm

5/27: Business meeting at Umi

6/10: Offsite at Master Spas hosted by Kevin Richard — lunch at new showroom + 30-min plant tour

Tip Session Highlights

- Dick Fox / Fox & Fox thanked Kevin Cawood for equipment at a great price, and thanked Jon Aichele / EPCO Products for business
- Gary Voirol / MSKTD & Associates noted ongoing business with Melanie Carney / Allen County Memorial Coliseum, NA Holdings, Brian Bauer / IU Health, and Eric Touchet / Touchet Performance Golf
- Steve Zacher / The Zacher Company purchased a car from Jim Kelley; Jim Kelley noted Dan Arnold and Tad Levy also recently purchased vehicles from Kelley Automotive

- Jim Kelley / Kelley Automotive attended the White House for the IU national championship ceremony
- Rick Schuiteman / Fort Wayne Zoo announced the Zoo was named a finalist for best training program at the international zoo and theme park industry conference in Cancun (one of three finalists); Lassus gas stations round-up fundraiser currently running in support of the Zoo
- Dr. Mark Daniel / FWCS recognized as Man of the Year; shared highlights of the Boys Club program
- Jon Aichele / EPCO Products thanked Dick Fox for out-of-state car help and Kevin Cawood for TVs, which will be used to create a visual factory
- Kevin Cawood / Indian Creek Veterinary distributed surplus TVs and electronics to members from a recycling opportunity; members with reserved items reminded of May 13 pickup deadline — unclaimed TVs released for general sale starting May 14

Featured Speaker (Summary / AI-Supported notes for record / recording available with request)

Introduction: Mike Kelly is the founder and owner of Caliente, a Fort Wayne-based manufacturer of custom flexible heater pads. Kelly left a larger competitor at age 30 to launch Caliente in 2001, starting in 5,000 square feet in the Hop River Building at Fourth and Harrison. Caliente recently celebrated its 25th anniversary and is a finalist for Greater Fort Wayne's Small Business of the Year award (ceremony early June).

Technology and Niche Strategy: Caliente produces custom heater pads using a proprietary silk-screening process with conductive inks containing silver and gold — rather than traditional wires or etched metal — enabling precise, application-specific designs. Kelly built the business by identifying niches that larger domestic competitors did not want to pursue and that China or Mexico had not yet commoditized, deliberately avoiding consumer-facing product categories.

Telecommunications and Military Markets: Caliente serves telecom carriers with heaters that keep cell-site battery backups warm enough to meet required backup-time standards regardless of outdoor temperature. Around 2013, Kelly pursued the military market after a Montana competitor paused civilian work for a large contract; Caliente developed thermal targets — heater profiles on cardboard that replicate the heat signatures of people, vehicles, and equipment — used for live-fire training with thermal scopes, providing a recurring revenue stream.

Electric Vehicles and Emerging Markets: Caliente is applying its battery-heating expertise to the EV market, where cold-weather performance loss is a recognized issue and thermal management is often engineered late in the design cycle. The company is also developing battery heaters for the emerging air taxi and drone markets.

Acquisition and Capital Raise: Caliente is acquiring a Los Angeles-based company to expand into the aerospace market and add silicone heaters — a higher-temperature, complementary product line — to its offerings. Kelly has made nine trips to California in the past 14 months pursuing the deal. To fund the acquisition and support liquidity during growth, the company is seeking \$750,000 in private investment; an investment prospectus is available for interested members or referrals.

U.S. Manufacturing Renaissance: Kelly noted a meaningful uptick in domestic manufacturing opportunities as companies reshore production from China due to lead times, quality concerns, and supply chain risk. Caliente's competitive advantages are quality and speed — custom prototypes turn around in 4–6 weeks — and the company actively targets Chinese battery manufacturers establishing U.S. facilities as prospective customers.

Q&A Highlights: Members asked about team size (currently 20, growing to 25–30 post-acquisition), how Kelly identified his niches (market research and networking), EV battery competition from Chinese manufacturers (Caliente's strategy is to target Chinese companies building U.S. plants, such as CATL in Detroit), the rising cost of silver in the conductive ink process, and the 4–6 week prototype turnaround for custom heater designs.