VER THE PAST FEW YEARS, JEWELERS have been upgrading their estimates from Stuller Settings in Lafayette to find Marli Gros beads among the earrings. At Christmas, it's usually tame, and the rest of the year, a kilo is packaged with each of the 2,000 orders that are processed on an average day.

This sort of language is one of the reasons that Stuller is known as the largest operation of its kind in the country, and still growing. "It's the difference between your local office supply store and an Office Depot," says Steve MacDermid. "No one else in the industry does what we do in terms of the number of customers and the number of orders." Since Matthew Stuller founded Stuller Settings in 1977 in a modest building on General Mission, the business has grown to encompass 65,000 square feet at Ray Louis XIV. It has grown from a handful of employees to some 400 today, with payroll reaching $4.6 million.

The company is housed in a fortress-like structure with an elaborate security system that keeps uninvited visitors out. Inside, workers fashion jewelry in a factory-like setting, albeit a high technology one. Most workers have their own stations, where they design, cast, polish and inspect the company's products, some of which are no larger than a baby's fingernail. The entire work process is tightly controlled and scheduled to prevent waste and mistakes. After all, the newfound product of the factory is not dough or food, but expensive gold.

The company manufactures and distributes jewelry findings, which are components such as the clasp, carrying back or the head of a ring. "We are basically a hardware store," says Steve MacDermid, director of public relations. The bulk of Stuller's customers are independent jewelers, who usually order the pieces unfinished although unstamped jewelry is available as well.

The company also produces precious stones. Stuller Settings has no means of the first company to focus on this niche in the jewelry industry. It is in a league by itself, though, where it comes to manpower, space, sales, size and inventory.

"It's always been true that ideas flow more with us," says Edward Bouton of Bouton-Jewels in Lafayette. "I don't know for a fact, but I do believe we've got 30,000 ideas on a worldwide scale, he's in the top 10 as far as dealing with everything anyway."

THE COMPANY DOES NOT RELEASE SALES FIGURES, but it is rumored to do sales at 300% of $80 million. By comparison, its largest national competitor probably comes in at $300 million. A recent study by Wholesale Jeweler has Stuller Settings has an effective client base in the range of 250,000 active accounts. The fact that Stuller Settings is located in the heart of America's jewelry industry couldn't be worse news for New York City, a market that, with some exceptions in Dallas and Miami, is hardly worth the trip. Stuller's business is concentrated in a mixture of Southern charm and Cajun friendliness, and it's an attitude that lies at the core of the company's success.

"We've done a lot to protect the fact of us being in Southern Louisiana," says MacDermid. "They love the Southern hospitality."

THE EMPLOYEES AT STULLER SETTINGS ARE A highly motivated group with a clearly developed sense of corporate for their company and their boss. The three sons are seated at the table, customarily including background checks, credit information, physical, drug screens and even handwriting analyses.

MacDermid credits the work force with much of the company's acumen. "We really want to build from the inside, and we're like a family. He's used to the company to personalize the business," says Brede. "It seems to me that his personalized marketing and his technology that he's been able to use with the marketing."

Workers fashion jewelry in a factory-like setting, albeit a high technology one.

"It seems to me that it's very important that he's been able to use with the marketing."

Among other benefits, wholesale programs that emphasize physical and psychological aspects are defined and strongly encouraged.
Sales have increased. "When times get tight, you go with the supplier you can depend on. You want to do business with somebody you know has a history of giving you what you want when you want it, and at a fair price."

MacDiarmid actually sees the national economy as a plus in terms of insulation against the pitfalls of any particular area. "It gives us a more stable base than if we were wired just into a regional economy."

STULLER continues to set its sights on new territory. He intends to pursue the international market, but realizes it will be tough, according to MacDiarmid. "You're going into an area where there are already strong players." Cultural differences in style are another factor that make the crossover difficult. However, a stylish Canadian line has been established and there are scattered accounts in the Caribbean and overseas.

Stuller Settings who has its sights set on the large-scale jewelry chain, but it is approaching this market very carefully. "We have already begun doing that, but on a very selective basis. We would rather be in the position of a lot of people owing you a little bit of money than a few people owing you a lot of money," says research and development, human resources and public relations.

MacDiarmid says the analogy of Federal Express to explain the rapid rise of Stuller Settings. "Nobody had really conceived of the idea of overnight delivery..." But it was somebody making the connection and doing it. All the elements were there, but nobody had developed the total concept.

Stuller has put all the pieces together, and while the mechanics of his success are varied and complex, the formula is not. "What is coming down to us is that person," says MacDiarmid. "It's how people work and interact with other people.

The jewelry industry is hard to break into. It's sluggish, fickle, last and very family oriented, with some businesses passing from one generation to another in an unbroken line. While this makes Stuller's views on more accounting, it also gives him something of an advantage because he can't afford to be complacent. That attitude is part of Stuller's striving for perfection. The attempt to do something better is what keeps his company on the cutting edge.

In fact, many of the employees think they have no direct contact with the jewelry at all. MacDiarmid estimates that the labor force is evenly split between manufacturing and administrative workers, with entire departments devoted to data processing, quality control, inventory control and finished goods.