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PACKAGING Innovation

BELL INC. FOCUSES ON INNOVATION AND CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT AS KEYS FOR SUCCESS IN THE FOLDING CARTON INDUSTRY. (From left: Ben Arndt, Marianne Von Seggern, Mark Graham, and Ben Graham)



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The Face of Packaging Innovation™, that's what Bell Incorporated calls itself. More importantly though, it's not just a slogan, but a key element of a business philosophy that has been at the heart of its success since Mark Graham, president and CEO, bought the company in 1976.

At that time, Bell Paper Box Com-

pany had one full-time employee, less than \$40,000 in sales, and a customer list that could be counted on one hand. Graham, however, recognized the entrepreneurial opportunity presented by the fragmented state of the packaging industry in the mid-1970s. During the next two-and-a-half decades, he used an overriding focus on innovation, meeting customer needs, and reducing costs to build the company into one of the ten largest independent folding carton manufacturers in the U.S.

Along the way, Graham changed the company's name to Bell Incorporated.

Today, the company has 200 employees and operates out of two manufacturing facilities in Sioux Falls, S.D. It supplies products to markets that include packaged foods, fast/convenience foods, consumer goods, and courier envelopes. According to Ben Arndt, VP of operations, the company has a dominant position in the courier envelope market, with a commanding market share of more than 80 percent.

**Bell Incorporated
uses its offset
and flexo printing
expertise to
grow in a highly
competitive
folding carton
market.**

customer-focused workforce that aggressively seeks continuous improvement is a top asset in this pursuit.”

Because of its focus on being an innovative, low-cost, high-quality provider, Arndt believes Bell is an especially attractive supplier for large national and multi-national clients that can partner with them for multi-year periods. And this type of customer/supplier relationship can pay big dividends to all parties.

“This commitment allows us to make significant investments in customized equipment and services to consistently drive costs out of their packaging conversion process—confident in our

The company is currently creating its plan for the next 5-year period, which Arndt says includes continued focus on packaged-food sectors, along with its efforts as a low-cost, high-volume supplier.

Facilities to do the job

One of the areas in which Bell has put significant effort is in its press capabilities. It currently operates three presses, all customized to run at higher speeds with inline rotary diecutting. With its focus on longer run business, Bell is dedicated exclusively to the web platform.

The company has two flexo presses—a 26” and a 32” Stevens Graphics System 2000. At the end of last year, it put into operation the first Drent Goebel Variable Sleeve Offset Press (VSOP) in North America. The 850-mm press is customized with eight offset printing units, two flexo units, EB drying, and rotary diecutting.

According to Arndt, among the features of the VSOP that were a good fit for its business model were the “faster makereadies and the flexibility of variable-repeat-length sleeves that allows for excellent efficiencies and high-quality printing.

“The VSOP is perfectly suited for high-volume clients who desire multiple copies or graphic SKUs on the same size carton, such as private label,” he continues. “The VSOP has also allowed us to attract customers who for a variety of reasons aren’t interested in the flexo printing process for their packaging.”

It is interesting to note that although Arndt believes it’s hard to tell the difference between Bell’s flexo and offset printing results, this doesn’t always matter. Some customers just want offset, he says, and because of this, the purchase of the VSOP was a customer-driven decision.

In addition, the VSOP “enables us to diversify our portfolio without higher costs,” says Arndt. “[It] creates increased opportunities in the food sector.”

The food sector is the main reason for



Arndt credits the company’s success on the decades-old philosophy first established by Graham, but says the philosophy is fairly simple to express in words but is more difficult to put into practice.

“We know that we can’t continue to be the low-cost provider for our customers without also being the low-cost producer, so we invest in the latest technologies and lean manufacturing practices to run with unprecedented quality, speed, and efficiency,” he states. “A

ability to make up for the investment through our relentless focus on increasing efficiencies,” says Arndt.

Bell has recently seen the culmination of a successful 5-year plan in which it experienced sales growth of more than 50 percent over the final three years. This most recent plan saw the company focus on long-run business from major regional and national packaged goods companies. It especially focused its efforts in the convenience and fast-food sectors.

the use of EB drying on the VSOP. According to Arndt, there is a bias in the food industry against UV because of the concerns for odor and tainted food. "Some consumer products companies won't consider using UV," he says.

With the high-quality flexo printing that Bell is able to produce, much of the printing jobs assigned to the various presses are determined by the need to manage press capacity. Of course, customers that require offset printing have their jobs run on the VSOP. This press is also used for jobs that require more highly detailed graphics, while the two flexo presses are used in some food and other consumer product applications.

In the prepress area, the company has digital capabilities that include computer-to-plate technology, digital processing, and digitally imaged plates. It can output CTP for both flexo and offset printing.

"Our graphic services department uses the Creo Prinergy Powerpack [Kodak] system which allows us to trap, impose, and plate internally," reports Arndt. "The Creo system also provides the flexibility to work with either locked or live files from our customers. Our turnaround time is minimized and flexibility is enhanced because we no longer have to wait for plates from outside sources."

Lean manufacturing

As mentioned, lean manufacturing principles are a driving force in the company's operating philosophy. Bell incorporates lean manufacturing in a manner that makes it as much a culture as it is a process, says Arndt, with the people on the plant floor entrusted with much of the day-to-day decision making. "People are our greatest asset," he notes, "and on a daily basis our people are looking at where they

can drive costs out of the system while maintaining—even improving—quality and consistency."

A most recent accomplishment in putting lean manufacturing into practice was the completion of its second manufacturing facility at the end of 2005. This facility houses the VSOP and is the "epitome of lean manufacturing," says Arndt, with a straight-through approach to material flow. The facility is designed to accommodate significant growth, including plans for additional VSOPs.

In addition to a successful operating philosophy that is heading into its third decade, Bell is using state-of-the-art printing presses and management systems to position itself for continued growth. There is every reason to believe that the five-year plan, currently being developed, will be every bit as successful as the one that just ended. ■



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