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Marketing Its Nine Decades' Experience:

Tilsner Carton Turns Up The Volume

by Jackie Schultz

Three years ago, an industry trade publication referred to Tilsner Carton Co., a sheet plant in St. Paul, Minnesota as "The Quiet Company." That characterization reflected owner Joel Tilsner's personality - soft-spoken and reserved. While the company was, and continues to be, a success story, Tilsner Carton was not one to toot its own horn. However, these are competitive times, and Joel Tilsner and General Manager Len Mackley recognized that in order to attract more business, they needed to get loud.

As a result, the company has reorganized its sales efforts, introduced a new logo, updated its web site, redesigned the artwork for its trucks, invested in new equipment, and most important, hired a marketing manager.

"We've made changes from top to bottom, from management, equipment and sales," Tilsner says. "The pieces are all in place."

The Plan

Tilsner Carton's distinguishing quality is its diverse mix of products, including stock and custom boxes, signage and fulfillment services, shipping supplies and corrugated and wood pallets. Its sister operation, Meridian Display & Merchandising, specializes in custom design services and point-of-purchase displays.

The company was founded in 1918 by Tilsner's grandfather, Isadore, who sold used setup boxes purchased from liquor stores. His warehouse was his

garage. Today, Tilsner Carton operates out of a 225,000-square-foot facility, employs more than 120 people and runs about 20 million square feet of



Tilsner's new visibility extends to its truck fleet, note, from left, General Manager Len Mackley, Marketing Manager Michelle Lee and President Joel Tilsner.

board a month. Last year the company did \$24 million in sales. Brown box (three colors or less) represents about 65 percent of the product mix; however, the graphics segment is growing.

Call For Consistency

Having all of these products and services under one roof, Tilsner says he needed consistency in the marketing message. He enlisted the help of the Chicago firm RSM McGladrey.

“We were looking for some direction with a strategic plan. It was determined that we had most of the pieces. We needed to do a better job of marketing,” Tilsner says. “We’re trying to upgrade our message and our image and get it out.”

RSM McGladrey conducted a customer survey, contacting companies that have purchased a little, a lot, or nothing from Tilsner Carton. The feedback was eye-opening.

“We were the best kept secret in town,” says Sales Manager Mike Mackley. “Our company has grown so fast in the last 20 years. But no matter how hard we

sign capabilities. “We have a great design team but we don’t advertise that we design,” she says.

Lee was pleasantly surprised to discover that many Fortune 500 companies in the St. Paul/Minneapolis area are Tilsner Carton customers, even if they’re just buying one gaylord box. Opportunities like that abound, and Lee is figuring out how to capitalize on them.

She works closely with Mike Mackley, whose sales team generates most of the revenue. “It’s really our sales people who are making it happen. The sales force is a huge success story,” Lee says.



Tilsner Carton's production floor

tried as a sales force to get our message out, people still didn’t know all of our capabilities.”

The message, he says, was confusing and inconsistent. “We had about four or five different logos on different things, from trucks to paperwork to cards.”

One of RSM McGladrey’s recommendations was to hire a marketing manager. About a year ago Tilsner hired Michelle Lee. Although Lee has an extensive marketing background, she knew little about the corrugated industry. The first thing she did was familiarize herself with Tilsner Carton products and services. Much like the RSM McGladrey’s findings, she discovered that the company was not communicating its full potential to customers. She would ask new customers how they discovered the company, and the response was often, “Google.”

“Even though we’ve been here for 90 years, people don’t necessarily recognize us. We needed ways to communicate better with existing and potential customers,” she says. “It is amazing the different things that Tilsner Carton does that people have no idea.”

One of the first things she tackled was the company’s web site, which she felt didn’t showcase the de-

Streamlining Sales

About three years ago, Tilsner Carton restructured its sales department, putting Mackley in charge of sales for both Tilsner and Meridian products. Previously, the two companies had separate sales managers and staffs.

Mackley says the department lacked organization. “We needed to become more efficient. A customer would call and talk to anyone. I assigned a customer service rep to a sales person. It’s not an original idea. We put together sales teams. Our customers really like it. They know if they can’t reach their sales rep, they have somebody who knows their accounts intimately.

“My approach is sales people sell and customer service handles things [in the office],” he continues.

Another change is that the brown box sales representatives are now encouraged to sell P-O-P products for Meridian. “Some of those customers who buy industrial packaging also buy P-O-P. Why don’t we try to sell to that? Before, we split that in half,” Mackley says.

Staffing includes two inside sales representatives who sell Meridian products and six full-time outside sales representatives who sell primarily industrial packaging. In addition, there are five customer service employees.

“We still have two companies, but the sales part is all managed by Mike,” says Joel Tilsner. “It’s in our best interest to have separate identities but not necessary to have different management teams.”

Service And Speed

The production crew supports the sales efforts through its quick turnaround. Ask any Tilsner Carton employee about the company’s niche, and he or she will tell you it’s service and quick turnaround.

“Customer service is our core strength. If a cus-

tomers call at 9 a.m. and need boxes by 2 p.m., he can rest easy that he'll have them by 2 p.m.," Mackley says.

"We do everything fast. It's got to be done quick," adds General Manager Len Mackley. "When the sheets come through the door, I'd like to see something done with them within 48 hours. That's ideal.

"This morning we took an order that had to be delivered today. It's not getting better that way. It's getting more intense," he adds. "I don't know why people forget they need boxes. You're making these pieces. How can you forget you don't have a box to put them in?"

New machine installations that help speed up the order cycle are a common occurrence at Tilsner Carton. "Most of our production group has worked here for 20 to 30 years. They say, 'We're always changing. I tell them, 'When the change stops, that's when you should start worrying and start looking over your shoulder. Then you know we're not doing well,'" Mackley says.

Change almost always involves the addition of new technology. In the past four years the company has purchased a three-color 66-inch by 126-inch Göpfert rotary diecutter with a Castaldini stacker, a J&L specialty folder-gluer, a Stock laminator, a two-color Bobst Martin mini 618 flexo folder-gluer with an EAM-Mosca bundle squarer and strapper, conveyors from Systec, a new Signode unitizer, and a heat treater to make heat treated pallets to meet EU requirements and other worldwide standards. Tilsner Carton claims to be the only Minnesota manufacturer of both wood pallets and corrugated containers.

The Martin flexo folder-gluer was installed this past summer. It is a Rapidset machine meaning operators can prepare a makeready on the color units that they're not using while they're running the other units.

The 25-inch machine is the latest generation. It can run up to 26,000 boxes an hour. Minimum sheet size is 15 inches by 8 7/8 inches and maximum sheet size is 74 inches by 25 inches, running a range of board thicknesses from microflute to doublewall. Additional features include independently driven feeder and print units, independently driven folder-gluer with Multi-T belts for additional accuracy, and top or bottom counter ejector.

Speed to market was one reason why Tilsner Carton purchased the new Martin. It replaced an older 38-inch Ishikawa flexo folder-gluer, which was at capacity. "It was either [buy another machine] or go to

a second shift," Mackley says. "The mini is much more efficient. We can run 5000 6 by 6 by 4 boxes in about 40 minutes. It used to take about three or four hours with four people involved."

"We're not really selling to a new market," he continues. "We're just trying to expand existing accounts. We're looking at different types of businesses. Michelle is working on different things to promote to that." Lee is coordinating a direct mail campaign and



Tilsner's two-color Martin mini 618 flexo folder-gluer

has identified all the SIC codes that would buy something small off the Martin press.

While Lee's goal is to make sure the company stays focused on the customer, another new employee, Paul Branchaud, is charged with quality control. He is the company's quality specialist. He has experience with ISO and AIB certification requirements and can document processes for critical functions and implement systems to monitor those processes. His goal for Tilsner Carton? "Never have to say we're sorry."

Securing The Future

Next year Tilsner Carton will celebrate its 90th anniversary. Starting from very humble beginnings, the company has experienced steady growth over the years. In a sense, its more recent marketing strategy is laying the foundation for the next 90 years.

"We didn't have a good marketing campaign because we had too many people doing it. The greatest thing is we have somebody focused now. That's her job," Mike Mackley says.

"They've had all the parts. It's not that they didn't do things. They did them," Lee says. "They're realizing that marketing really does bring in results and information."

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