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SECRETS OF CENTENNIAL FAMILY BUSINESS

SFC Graphics: There's Always a Better Way

By Donald Levitt

Peninsular Engraving was founded in Toledo, Ohio in 1902. Fred Seidel and Clarence Farris bought the company in 1933 and hired Paul J. Clark as superintendent. Paul Clark and his son Tom became owners of Seidel-Farris-Clark in 1955. Tom Clark's son Paul R. Clark is now president of SFC Graphics.

Secrets of Success

Secret #1: Lead with innovation

SFC Graphics has a 104 year history of innovation. In 1927 they produced the photo-engraving plates for the first full color double page ad in a national magazine. They went on to many other "firsts" over the years including: flush mounted photo-engravings, direct screen separations, reflective scanning, digital photo studios, and digital print ad files transmitted via the internet.

"My father inspired me regarding innovation," says Tom Clark. "He wrote a column entitled 'There's Got to be a Better Way.' When you bring up an idea it leads to more studies and information and a better way. There's not a day that goes by without a better idea. I wake up that way, and my son Paul is the same way." Tom Clark goes on to note some of the benefits of innovation. "We've always been able to attract the best people because they knew that we were innovative – that we were the movers and the shakers. We've also always had innovative products that other people could not copy."

Secret #2: Be entrepreneurial

"When I was twelve-years-old I went to work with my father. I just wanted to be part of the business," says Tom Clark. "Even though I was the owner's son I wasn't allowed to touch anything because of union rules, so I started my own business selling negatives for lithography. When I was fourteen I started advertising in *Graphic Arts Monthly*, and at seventeen I moved into my own space and started to call on printers door-to-door. I then started the lithographic division of our business."

Secret #3: Love the business

"I love this business," says Tom Clark. "It gets into your blood. Everyday there is a new challenge. Everything is new. It's not humdrum. With photography, layout, stripping, film, coating plates, etching, mounting – there was plenty of problem solving. I loved the hard work and the glory. The explosion in color photography brought the world to life. I

get goose bumps thinking about introducing the first really digital photos to *National Geographic* in 1995.”

Secret #4: Reinvent the business in every generation

SFC Graphics has had to reinvent the business in every generation. “My father ran an engraving business,” says Tom Clark. “I nurtured the lithographic business. By the early 1970’s the lithographic business represented two-thirds of our work. Then seven years ago our whole industry went away. Someone with a Mac computer could be competitive with what we were doing.”

Paul R. Clark – Tom’s son and the current president of SFC Graphics – led the next reinvention of the business. “Everything we knew for 95 years – our service model, our place in the market, our relationships – all went away. Like what my father did in moving the business from letter press to lithography, I did for desktop computing. I created my own department. I handled production flow. It was a hell of a change for the company – from a union craft shop to a twenty-first century – no walls – get the job done business. Why are we still in business? Because we think about this all day long – and argue about it like a good family business – and figure out the best answer.”

Donald Levitt, president of Levitt Consulting, helps family businesses to succeed as both a business and a family. More information about this month’s topic, and other family business issues, can be found at LevittConsulting.com.