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MUIR OMNI GRAPHICS: A GOLDEN ANNIVERSARY

by BECKY BROWN

The second-generation company celebrates five decades of perseverance and innovation.

Any business leader will tell you the ability to anticipate and respond to change is an essential factor in a company's longevity. Andrew Muir, whose family-owned silk screening company is celebrating its 50th anniversary in 2013, is no exception.

"I have seen too many companies fail when presented with challenges," the president of Peoria-based Muir Omni Graphics says, recalling dramatic changes in the industry and shaky economic times that have tested his company. "I'm proud to say that instead of failing, we flourished. It's a testament to our continued dedication to both our clients and our employees."

Leveraging Opportunity

Muir, who joined the business in 1982, learned the importance of anticipating what's next from his father. Don Muir founded Muir, Moleck and Pelini in 1963, and just three years later, heard opportunity

knocking. The owner of Foto Screen, a local printing firm, was retiring and selling his business. Sensing a trend among his clients—a move away from hand-lettered signs to more professionally produced decals for trucks, machinery and other vehicles—Don Muir took action and acquired the business.

The expanded company's first customers were an eclectic mix, including Caterpillar Tractor Co., Montgomery Ward and Standard Oil Company. Growth came quickly, and by 1971, Muir Omni Graphics was printing more than a million decals and emblems each year—making it the largest producer of its kind between Chicago and St. Louis.

Today, 45 full-time employees provide turnkey decal production and management solutions for some of the world's leading manufacturers, utility companies and service organizations. While Caterpillar remains an important customer, the client list has expanded to include household names like American Family Insurance, AT&T, the Chicago Transit Authority and Verizon, along with local companies like Excel Manufacturing and Intellihot.

A Key Role in Brand Identity

While it's fairly easy to define Muir Omni Graphics' business—the company sums it up as "manufacturing industrial graphics for the off-highway, construction, farm equipment and transportation markets"—creating those graphics has evolved over time into quite a complex process.

Gone are the traditional shops that followed a simple "quote-order-produce-ship" model. In their place are highly technical, process-driven operations focused on production quality, environmental safety and craftsmanship. "Decals, labels and other markings were once considered an afterthought by many companies," Muir says. "Now they're seen as an important extension of an organiza-

"DECALS, LABELS AND OTHER MARKINGS WERE ONCE CONSIDERED AN AFTERTHOUGHT BY MANY COMPANIES," MUIR SAYS. "NOW THEY'RE SEEN AS AN IMPORTANT EXTENSION OF AN ORGANIZATION'S BRAND AND CORPORATE IDENTITY."



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Persevering Through Tough Times

Evolutions in the industrial graphics industry—think just-in-time manufacturing, the introduction of thermoplastic polymers and the rise of digital printing, to name a few—have required Muir Omni Graphics to remain vigilant about staying ahead of emerging technologies, new techniques and changing customer expectations. The company has also weathered two major recessions in its history, emerging from each stronger and better prepared for the future.

“Our company has not only persevered, but also managed to thrive through times when mere survival was no small feat,” Muir remarks. “We’ve been able to turn downslides in the marketplace into opportunities to regroup and realign our goals, so we’re ready for the economic recovery that follows.”

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During the early 1980s, for example, Muir Omni Graphics continued to invest in research and development despite a significant slowdown in business and high unemployment and inflation rates. Recognizing that the telecommunications market was turning to fiber-optics, Don Muir poured resources into innovative signage solutions to meet these needs. He also focused on diversifying the company’s client base and updating its internal production structure to keep up with demand as the economy rebounded.

Andrew Muir remembers those days well, and he applied the lessons learned during the most recent downturn. In the late 2000s, even as the economy plummeted, the company embarked on a strategic plan that included investing in equipment and marketing planning to diversify its capabilities and client base, setting aggressive goals for increased sales, and planning for continuous growth and improvement.

Realizing that client resources for decal manufacturing and program management were scarce at the time, Muir Omni Graphics positioned itself as the industry expert. The company offered roundtables, webinars, case studies and other resources to help its clients improve efficiencies—a tactic that saw sales improve along with economic conditions.

Transitioning for the Future

Muir credits the company’s resilience in large part to his employees, their willingness to embrace change and new ideas, and the culture they’ve created. “We strive for employee enrichment and empower employees to make business decisions,” he says. “Our culture has allowed us to weather the economy’s ups and downs without mass long-term layoffs or downsizing.”

To retain that culture and honor employees for their commitment and accomplishments, Muir Omni Graphics recently began transitioning business ownership through an employee stock ownership plan (ESOP). Since many employees have been with the company for more than a decade and are considered family, Muir believes the ESOP marks a shift into a symbolic third generation of “family ownership.”

“Not only does this show our employees how much we value their loyalty, commitment and vast knowledge base, it should also demonstrate our dedication to our customers,” he says. “They’ll know they have company owners working to get the job done right—not just employees.” **iBi**

tion’s brand and corporate identity. Customers today place more value on industrial graphics than ever before, and they want to work closely with us on research, development, design and performance.”

Customers turn to Muir Omni Graphics for OEM markings and decals, fleet and corporate vehicle markings, corporate identity markings, control panels and fascias, and warning labels and signage, along with a wide array of specialty graphics. Chances are, most of us see the company’s output on a daily basis, whether it’s a business logo on the side of a truck or a safety message on a utility pole. (In the 1970s, the company even prepared the red, blue and gold color scheme and brand identity guidelines for the City of Peoria’s iconic American Indian head logo.)

To create these products, Muir Omni Graphics provides end-to-end solutions—offering design and prototyping expertise, inventory management, and engineering and installation recommendations in addition to manufacturing. An onsite laboratory can replicate weather conditions on different graphics to help customers choose the best materials, inks and mounting methods for longevity and performance. The production process inside the company’s facilities on Main Street in Peoria is also increasingly high-tech. Muir Omni Graphics employs Six Sigma and lean manufacturing methodologies and holds ISO 9001 and ISO 14001 certifications, with a strong focus on recycling and environmental responsibility.

“With our global mix of products and services, we have a unique ability to fulfill our customers’ total needs,” Muir explains. “We’ve been able to integrate customer support, quality assurance, engineering, sophistication, energy, experience and technology to form a highly specialized service organization.”