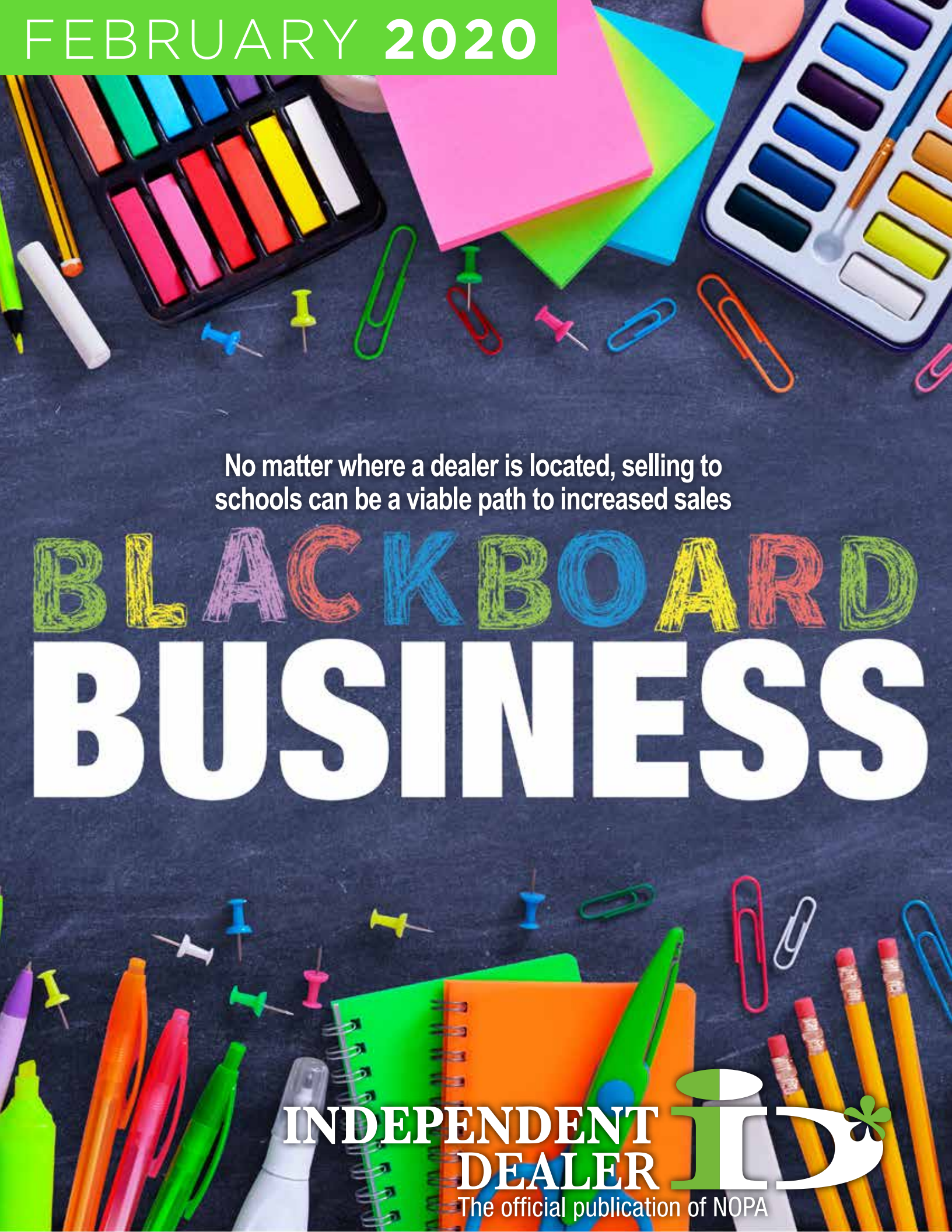
FEBRUARY 2020



No matter where a dealer is located, selling to schools can be a viable path to increased sales

BLACKBOARD BUSINESS

INDEPENDENT DEALER
The official publication of NOPA

Rowan McIntyre
rowan@idealercentral.com

EDITORIAL

I know I keep going on about the need for the IDC to keep pulling together and work collectively to combat the ongoing threats from online competitors and the Big Boxes, but it's not something for which I'm going to apologize.

This month I shall simply direct your attention to the NOPA news piece on page 28 regarding the advocacy fly-in event that is taking place toward the end of next month.

Recent attendance at this event has been very good, but that is no reason to get complacent! This is an invaluable opportunity to get some facetime with the people who help set and implement the country's legislative agenda. Small businesses face an ongoing and increasingly uphill battle to get their voices heard over the crashing waves created by millions, if not billions, of lobbying dollars being poured into the (as yet) undrained swamp by the Amazons of this world.

True, it looks as if the current administration is starting to take notice of the counterfeits flooding into the market through poorly regulated online marketplaces (see news story p16) but there are still conversations to be had regarding GSA schedules, the National Defense Authorization Act pilot program, AbilityOne and many other issues. So, please follow the links on page 29 and attend the event if you can.

To finish I'd quickly like to mention another NOPA initiative with an impending deadline and that is the 2020 scholarship program. This year has seen an increase in the funds available from $25,000 to $40,000, meaning more of our families can benefit! Visit the NOPA website to download a copy of the application form.

I hope you enjoy this month's issue.

WINNER'S CIRCLE

In Texas, Perry Office Plus turns 100

2019—the 100th year in business for Perry Office Plus—turned out to be its best ever. The dealership celebrated the historic landmark on January 10, 2020, with a special Founders Day anniversary event at the Santa Fe Depot in Downtown Temple, Texas. More than 200 customers, community partners, friends, family and staff were in attendance, as local and state dignitaries made presentations and the Chamber of Commerce held a ceremonial ribbon cutting.

What eventually would become Perry Office Plus started when A.D. Baggett and R.E. Miller opened American Printing in Temple. The two partners separated in the late 30s and created American Printing and Miller Printing. By the early 1960s, Miller Printing was up for sale, and in 1962, J.W. Perry and his wife Ruth relocated to Temple and purchased the company.

»

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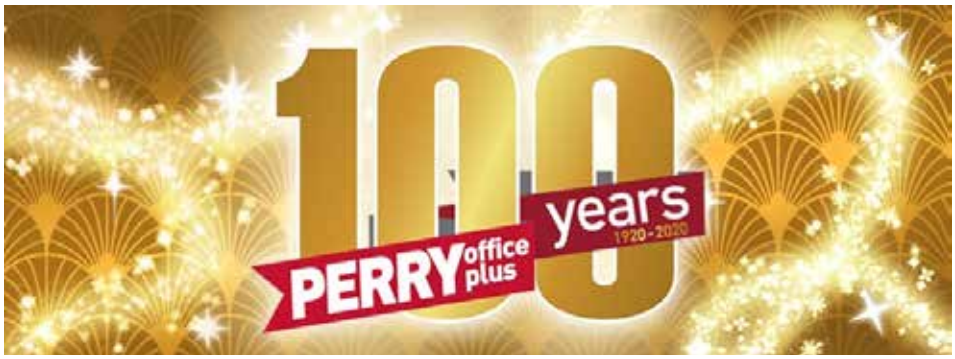
When A.D. approached retirement in 1966, the Perrys purchased his company and closed Miller Printing. They operated the business as American Printing & Office Products. In 1976, the company opened a second store in nearby Belton, which is still in operation today.

In 1983, the business was divided into two: American Printing and Perry Office Products. The printing business was sold in 1988. Harry and Debbie Macey approached the Perrys in the early 1990s about purchasing their company. The sale was finalized in 1994, and J.W. Perry went on to serve three terms as Mayor of Temple.

The Maceys sought to modernize the company throughout the remainder of the decade and updated the name to Perry Office Plus. At



the end of the decade, Curry Office Supply in Waco and Myron's Office World in Killeen were acquired. By 2005, just ten years into the Macey's tenure, the company had quadrupled in size.

After 85 years with a retail presence in downtown Temple, that storefront was closed. In 2006, the Waco retail location transitioned to a furniture showroom and, a few years later, the Killeen retail store also closed. The acquisition of CFS, Inc., a local furniture dealer in Temple, in 2018 helped the furniture business soar. In 2019, a heavy emphasis was placed on janitorial supplies and promotional products as new avenues of business due to the continuing decline of traditional office products.

At the Founders Day celebration a video was recorded featuring three of the dealership's owners. In addition to Harry and Debbie, Ruth Perry was in attendance and will be included in the historical video which will be posted on social media. Additionally, video vignettes will be created that focus on different aspects of the company and which could be used by sales staff.

Plans call for additional events to be held in outlying communities also served by Perry Office Plus. "We are thinking of some come-and-go events, maybe some lunchtime events and small ways to say thank you," explained Bonnie Johnson, marketing manager. "So many of our customers have embraced us for a long time, we really wanted to use this as an opportunity thank them."

The Office Shop named business of the year in Aitkin, Minnesota

At the most recent dinner meeting of the Aitkin, Minnesota Chamber of Commerce, the company to be named business of the year was kept a secret from at least two of the attendees. "The presentation started off kind of generic and then all of a sudden we realized they were talking about The Office Shop," said Jodie Johnson, who owns the dealership along with her husband Scott.

"What a surprise to hear our name being announced as Business of the Year at the Aitkin Annual Chamber of Commerce dinner," said Jodie. "Scott and I are grateful for this recognition and could not be prouder of our Office Shop Team."

Later that same week, Scott and Jodie hosted a Business After Hours event for the Brainerd Chamber of Commerce. The event recognized the opening of a Lorell Diamond furniture showroom in their Brainerd store. "We always wanted a place for people to come and touch, feel and actually see what they want to purchase," Jodie added.

»

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 CONTINUED FROM PAGE 4

New York dealer FM Office Express rebrands

New York state dealer FM Office Express, which also owns Stevens Office Interiors, has consolidated its businesses under a single brand, Intivity. The new name came into effect at the beginning of the year.

The company previously operated four main go-to-market brands in the New York state market: FM Office Express, FM Office Products, Merkel Donohue and Stevens Office Interiors. Fabricio Morales, president and CEO, said the various trading names had made it difficult for customers to relate to the company and its identity and as a result a new corporate name was needed.

Fabricio worked with a marketing firm to develop the new identity and focused on the furniture offering as a differentiator between the dealership and its competitors. The word Intivity combines elements of what the reseller does and how it does it. The "In" prefix is derived from interiors, innovation and inspiration, while "tivity" relates to creativity, productivity, simplicity, connectivity and unity.

Intivity operates out of premises in Rochester, Syracuse, Albany and New York City. It acquired Stevens Office Interiors in 2018. "The new name supports our corporate purpose," added Fabricio.

intivity at work

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In Oklahoma, Merrifield donates furniture to child services organization

Making a donation of furniture to Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA), which works hand-in-hand with the courts to support troubled children, was the most recent good deed performed by Merrifield Office Plus in Enid, Oklahoma. "I cannot tell you how many times we have gotten involved with someone needing furniture," said Joe Merrifield, co-owner.

The dealership did a drawing of the site and then went to work updating the CASA office. "We retooled their front area in the county building in Stillwater [Oklahoma]," said Joe. The furniture was delivered and assembled by Merrifield employees.

»

 CONTINUED FROM PAGE 6

Arkansas Office Products sets high standards with new newsletter

Arkansas Office Products, Jacksonville, Arkansas, has introduced a quarterly customer newsletter that rivals major publications. According to Steve Pawloski, president, his graphics guy asked if the dealership had ever done a newsletter. "I told him yes, but it got to be too much work as I was the only one writing articles," he said.

The result is a new newsletter from Arkansas Office Products called "Amplify." The newsletter features content that Steve believes will help customers become more informed buyers. "For instance," he said, "should you be sitting all day as opposed to a sit-stand approach."

The first issue was put out last December and was quickly followed by another edition in January. The early issue featured a profile of Steve Pawloski. The newsletter went out to customers via email, was available on Facebook and has since been posted on the dealership's website.

Kentucky dealer Kerr Workplace Solutions meets for a New Year strategy session

Early in January, the management team from Kerr Workplace Solutions, Elizabethtown, Kentucky, met for a 2020 strategy session. The full-day meeting was held off-site at Greater Louisville Inc. "We met, held a strategy session and created a vision statement," said Ed McCoy, vice president of sales and marketing.

The meeting, in part, was to make sure that all managers were fully inclusive when it came to the recent acquisition of fellow Kentucky reseller Office Environment Company. "We completed the acquisition in August and rebranded our name and logo," said Ed.

As Kerr moves forward, all signs point to a strong market in 2020. "Following the acquisition we need to penetrate existing accounts deeper and go after new ones with new products and services," said Ed. »

 CONTINUED FROM PAGE 7

New York dealer Hummel's Office Plus supports local fire-safety campaign

Following a local tragedy where three boys were killed in a house fire, the town of Herkimer, New York, has responded in a number of heartfelt ways. Most recently, Brett Saunders, a third-grader who had been friends with one of those boys, donated his birthday money to the Herkimer Fire Department to buy smoke alarms.

In a small town, news of the donation traveled quickly and caught the eye of Justin Hummel, CEO of Hummel's Office Plus based in Herkimer. "I thought that Brett's story was really neat and we wanted to see if we could help other families by placing smoke alarms," said Justin.

Early in January, Justin visited the Herkimer Fire Department and presented nine dozen smoke alarms to the Fire Safety Program. The goal is to get a smoke alarm into the home of every child in Herkimer Elementary School. Brett and several firefighters were on hand to accept the donation.

Custom photography adds interest to Minnesota dealer's catalog cover

For the past ten years, Innovative Office Solutions, Burnsville, Minnesota, has selected a theme and then photographed its own cover to use on the Everything for the Workplace catalog it gets from Essendant. "Our theme this year is about the Olympics; we thought it would be fun to piggyback off the forthcoming summer Olympics," said marketing director Bridget Smith.

The theme focuses on the Innovative Olympics, the purpose of which is to empower success. It was launched at the company's kick-off meeting in early January. The dealerships is asking customers and employees to submit inspiring stories in support of the idea. The Innovative Olympic artwork also appears on ream wraps for house brand copy paper sold by the dealership.

In addition to the catalog and ream wraps, the Innovative Olympics photography is also featured on social media. The theme varies from year to year. Past ideas have included a mystery motif, based on the Clue board game, which generated a lot of responses.

"The customer engagement for us is really a fresh way to bring our brand to life," said Bridget. "Our customers get into it—but our internal team does as well, which is the really fun part."

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SECRETS of success

Carrollton Office Supply, Carrollton, Kentucky

Products carried: office supplies, office furniture, breakroom supplies, janitorial and sanitation products, school supplies—over 80,000 products available
Year founded: 1984
Number of employees: 6
url: www.carrolltonos.com, www.732heresyoursign.com
% of total sales generated online: 75%

Located midway between Cincinnati and Louisville, Kentucky, Carrollton Office Supply places a high priority on modern customer communications methods, using email and Facebook regularly. At the same time, the dealership evokes memories of a simpler time in our industry, with a retail operation that generates around 30 percent of sales.

Most office supplies are delivered daily to businesses within an approximate 50-mile radius of Carrollton. It's about a 45-minute drive either way to metro area shopping malls and the only local competition for office supply sales is Walmart. "There's not really anything else between here and Cincinnati or here and Louisville," says owner Charlotte Wallace. People can drive, she says, but many chose to make purchases online.

Since she purchased the operation about five years ago, Wallace has been faced with the challenge of owning and running a business. "We're in a small town of about 10,000 people," she says. "We have office supplies, a bible bookstore and a retail store front." In Charlotte's time in charge of the dealership, both walk-in traffic and walk-in sales have quadrupled.

Helping to generate more local traffic is the effort Charlotte puts into adding retail product lines. The store sells Vera Bradley, Simply Southern T-shirts and apparel, Girly Girl clothing and Candleberry Candles made in Kentucky. "We sell Kentucky Proud items," says Wallace of the statewide intitiative to promote regional products. "The state of Kentucky promotes these items, in an effort to get people to shop locally."

Since the dealership started in business more than 30 years ago, a bible bookstore has been part of the offering, nestled in one of the smaller retail aisles and offering a selection of bibles, books, music and related gifts. Sales tend to be seasonal with a big spike in December when bibles are given as gifts.

Downtown Carrollton has witnessed the transformation brought about when Walmart moves into an area. There aren't many stores left downtown; those that remain have banded together to promote the benefits of local shopping. "We have this older, rural setting with empty buildings and a bunch of us owners would love to see more people shopping local," adds Wallace.

To provide a boost for downtown business, Carrollton Office Supply has produced Facebook posts under the heading of Carrollton Connections. "We show a short video to publicize what is in specific stores," says Wallace. "We hope that will intrigue people enough to get them to come downtown and shop."

Finding the next item to drive retail sales at Carrollton is close to a full-time activity, but somehow time also is made available to work on the growing sign business. Up until a few years ago there had been a sign shop in town. When Wallace started to hear questions about where to get signs printed, she knew what to do.

Carrollton Office Supply introduced sign-making capabilities a little over a year ago. The dealership already offered printing services so moving into sign work wasn't a big stretch. Offerings include banners, yard signs, posters and window decals; design services are also available. "It involves a lot of customization," says Wallace. "Customers can view options on our website and Facebook page, but then they need to call us or come in."

Even with what remains a strong retail presence, Wallace is fully aware that future sales of office supplies and related products are going to be primarily online. She relates how her dealership is the only retail operation that her wholesale rep has. "That's an eye opener," she says. Most office supply sales today take place online as it cuts out a lot of costs. "Online is going to be the norm because in most offices people can't go out and shop, so they have to order online."

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Calm before the storm as silence precedes hostile takeover battle between HP and Xerox

The boardroom battle between HP Inc and Xerox continued this month with the next salvo now due to be fired on February 24.

On February 10, Xerox announced its intention to launch a tender offer for HP Inc at $24 a share on or around March 2. The hotly anticipated hostile takeover bid will see Xerox take a deal directly to HP's shareholders, following frustration at HP's apparent lack of willingness to engage in talks.

Xerox had previously made a proposal to HP's board valued at $22 per share in a combination of cash and Xerox shares. The structure of the new bid is the same, but Xerox has increased its cash price to $18.40 (from $17) and will now provide 0.149 Xerox shares for each HP share (up from 0.137). This represents a headline price for HP of $24 per share.

In a press release, Xerox said it had met with many of HP's largest stockholders, stating: "These stockholders consistently state that they want the enhanced returns, improved growth prospects and best-in-class human capital that will result from a combination of Xerox and HP. The tender offer announced will enable these stockholders to accept Xerox's compelling offer despite HP's consistent refusal to pursue the opportunity."

In response HP has announced it won't respond to Xerox's latest proposal until the publication of its first quarter earnings on February 24, stating that it was now in a "quiet period" until that date and limited as to the information it could share to the market.

On that Q1 earnings call, HP said it would "share additional information about its plan to drive sustainable long-term value for its shareholders, including through the execution of the company's multi-year strategic and financial plan and the deployment of its strong balance sheet."

"We believe it is essential that our shareholders have full information on our earnings and the value inherent in our business before responding to Xerox," said HP CEO Enrique Lores in an internal memo in which he also encouraged all staff to listen to the conference call.

The latest moves follow the announcement towards the end of January that Xerox planned to nominate a full slate of directors for election at HP's 2020 annual shareholder meeting later this year. The move was dismissed by HP as "self-serving" and appears to have been superseded by the revised takeover bid.

Domtar CEO suggests paper market is becoming more settled

Domtar CEO John Williams has said supply and demand dynamics in the North American cut paper sector have shown signs of stabilization over the past few months.

Speaking to Domtar investors at the beginning of February, Williams suggested that the market was in a "more settled place" after the "inventory bubble" that had built up in the U.S. following Georgia-Pacific's sudden exit from the office paper category at the beginning of 2019.

Williams added that much of that extra product had now found a home although it had taken a long time. He noted that supply and demand were more balanced as major U.S customers moved business back to domestic producers after scrambling to get paper from importers following the Georgia-Pacific decision. However, he also admitted that the underlying downward trend in paper demand has not eased and recognized "challenging market conditions".

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Office Partners launches large dealer program

Dealer group Office Partners has announced the development of a direct-buy program for larger dealers.

The initiative, named OP Direct, apparently follows numerous enquiries from larger independent resellers over the past few months. As of January 1, the first member on the new program is Hawaii-based HSC Office Products (formerly Hawaii Stationery).

"During our 22-year history, we have supported resellers as large as $200 million in revenue as well as small to medium-sized independent dealers," said Office Partners president Matthew Hebert.

"OP Direct dealers are part of the Office Partners family and they will be treated the same as all our other members," he said. "We put the program together and then basically let the dealers get on with their own thing—they like our hands-off approach."

Hebert confirmed that services for OP Direct members are the same as those for the group's other dealers. The differences relate to separate purchasing programs that reflect the needs of resellers with bigger direct purchasing power. "We had to change around some of our programs just like any other group for large dealers would do to accommodate those kinds of dealers," he added.

While Hebert said other large dealers were in talks about joining OP Direct, he isn't setting targets or making an aggressive sales push within the dealer community.

"With the combination [of Independent Suppliers Group and TriMega], we are pretty much the only other dealer group out there," he noted. "If the new entity doesn't suit some, then we are another option and I'm just a phone call away."

Last year was a strong one for Office Partners in terms of dealer membership. Hebert said numbers grew by about 25 to currently stand at 110 members. However, he was quick to play down any suggestion that this was a result of dealers switching groups.

"Most of these new members were not previously aligned to a group," he affirmed. "They were just looking for a no-frills option and liked the fact that we treat all our members like family," he said.

Although there has been talk of an Industry Week in the U.S. later this year, Hebert confirmed that, in 2020 at least, Office Partners would be holding its own event in Tampa, Florida from October18-20.

"We don't do all the 'extra' stuff so we can keep expenses down for the manufacturers and dealers," he stated. "We do what we have to do, and then get back to work." »

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U.S. shifts responsibility for counterfeits to online giants

Following the U.S.-China phase one trade deal that specified steps to deal with intellectual property theft, the Trump administration has made moves to put pressure on e-commerce firms to deal with counterfeits.

A 54-page report issued by the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) was released last month detailing the extent of counterfeit listings and products available online. *Combating Trafficking in Counterfeit and Pirated Goods* stated: "The problem has intensified to staggering levels, as shown by a recent OECD report which details a 154% increase in counterfeits traded internationally—from $200 billion in 2005 to $509 billion in 2016."

The report used Amazon's own words as evidence of the scale of the problem, revealing that the online giant has prevented one million suspected bad actors from publishing a single product through its platform and blocked over three million suspected counterfeit listings.

The government will put the onus back on companies such as Amazon, JD.com, Alibaba, eBay and Walmart to deal more effectively with the problem and make them liable for fake products sold via third-party sellers on their platforms.

Under the auspices of a modernized Customs and Border Protection regulatory framework, this liability now stretches to include domestic warehouses and fulfilment centers which are to be treated as the "ultimate consignee for any good that has not been sold to a specific consumer at the time of its importation".

DHS has recommended several private sector e-commerce best practices which include country of origin disclosures, marketplace seller IDs, effective notice and takedown procedures and significantly enhanced vetting of third-party sellers.

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Supplies network expands Midwest and Southwest distribution centers

Imaging wholesaler Supplies Network is to expand its Southwest and Midwest distribution centers during the first half of 2020, according to parent company Distribution Management.

The capacity and infrastructure improvements to Supplies Network's operations in Dallas and St. Louis follow a major expansion of the company's Northeast facility in Carlisle, Pennsylvania last year and mark the completion of the six facility upgrade plans launched in 2015.

"I am extremely proud of our organization for successfully executing our aggressive expansion plans," said Sean Fleming, CEO at Distribution Management. "Relocating and expanding distribution centers requires a tremendous amount of planning and collaboration among all of our teams. These facility upgrades are mission critical in allowing us to capitalize on significant growth within both our Supplies Network and DM Fulfillment sales divisions and support increased demand for the near term and future growth expectations."

"It's an exciting time for our company," added Rick Goe, vice president of supply chain at Distribution Management. "We have always embraced technology and these new distribution centers are loaded with next-level, leading technologies that will enhance our dedicated teams' ability to deliver a world-class customer experience with every order."

Both new facilities are expected be operational in the first half of 2020, with Dallas launching first followed closely by St. Louis. »

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[1]Independent ISO testing: Average of G2 write out (all point sizes) compared to the average of the top branded gel ink pens tested (all point sizes). Data on file.
[2]G2, Precise & FriXion are the #1 Selling Pen, Rolling Ball & Erasable Pen Brands/ The NPD Group/Retail & Commercial/US Dollar Sales/Data on file.

 CONTINUED FROM PAGE 16

Victor Technology acquires Officemate

Victor Technology has acquired the assets of New Jersey-based Officemate International Corporation. Officemate is a leading provider of paper clips, binder clips, clipboards, letter trays, and other office organizational solutions.

It was suggested that the combination would advance Victor's strategy of growing through innovation while leveraging its core capabilities, relationships and infrastructure to enhance scale and relevancy in the business supplies channel.

"We are excited to join forces with the Officemate team. Officemate has an incredible history of product innovation and customer satisfaction" noted Jordan Feiger, CEO of Victor Technology. "The two companies have many common customers. The Officemate product offering is a great complement to Victor's line-up of calculators, standing desk products, desk accessories and E-Z read rulers."

In recent years, Victor has enjoyed substantial growth with the launch of its High Rise collection of standing desk converters. The award-winning electric line-up was recently expanded to include a three-monitor version.

With the sale, long-time owners Peter and Sue Chen will retire. Officemate, a new wholly-owned subsidiary of Victor Technology, will continue operating out of its existing location in Edison, New Jersey.

AOPD welcomes SC Johnson Professional

The AOPD national and regional accounts dealer network has announced that SC Johnson Professional has been approved by its board of directors as a new supplier member and will join the group of preferred suppliers that support AOPD's national contracts program.

SC Johnson Professional is part of one of the world's leading manufacturers of household cleaning products and home storage solutions, air care, pest control and shoe care, as well as professional products. The company has a long history in the business market, in which it started operating in the 1930s.

SC Johnson Professional provides skin care, cleaning and hygiene solutions for industrial, institutional and healthcare users. This incorporates the Deb range of specialist occupational skin care products, along with well-known SC Johnson brands and innovative professional cleaning and hygiene products.

AOPD executive director Mark Leazer remarked that "We are pleased to welcome SC Johnson as the newest supplier member to the AOPD family of companies. SC Johnson, itself a family company, is now involved with supporting our organization of independent office products dealers, most of which are family-owned businesses. AOPD is very excited to be working with another organization known by its core values and its well-known brands, many of which are household names. We see great synergy in this new relationship as we work together to mutually grow our businesses."

AOPD
BUSINESS SUPPLIES NATIONWIDE

New president at Kimberly-Clark Professional

Kimberly-Clark Corp. (KCC) has announced that Russ Torres has been named president of Kimberly-Clark Professional (KCP), following Aaron Powell's move to head up Kimberly-Clark Asia-Pacific's consumer business at the beginning of January.

Torres will take over at KCP on March 9. He was previously at Newell Brands, which he joined as chief transformation officer in 2016 as the company prepared to merge with consumer products group Jarden.

Most recently, he was group president, leading five divisions that spanned 11 brands in more than 40 countries with annual revenue of nearly $6 billion. He has also held a number of key senior leadership positions at Bain and Mondelez International/Kraft Foods.

"Russ is a respected leader with a proven track record. I am confident that his extensive experience, coupled with his great passion to win, will drive top- and bottom-line growth for our Kimberly-Clark Professional business," said Mike Hsu, KCC chairman and CEO. »

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With tremendous pride, together TABBIES and BARCO LABELS divisions under the umbrella of XERTREX INTERNATIONAL INC., are committed to a hands-on attitude, growth and maintaining the highest standards of quality and service for our customers while providing them with innovative solutions to their business requirements.

We have accomplished a lot together and look forward to what is next...Thank you!

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Pilot wins consumer award

Pilot Pen's FriXion Fineliner erasable marker pen has claimed the top prize in the office supplies category at Product of the Year USA, the country's largest consumer-voted award for product innovation.

The award was announced in early February during a special ceremony that took place in New York City.

"Pilot Pen is honored to receive this distinction for our FriXion Fineliner, especially as it comes directly from consumers' experiences with our product," said Ariann Langsam, VP of marketing at Pilot Corporation of America. "The FriXion line has truly changed the way Americans think about writing and the erasable pen category. We look forward to helping more people write and create fearlessly."

Product of the Year winners are determined by a polling process that canvasses the opinions of 40,000 U.S. consumers. Pilot will now have the right to use the Product of the Year logo in marketing communications for the next two years.

DiverseID president Derra honored

Martina Derra, president of DiverseID, the Kansas City, Missouri-based business supplies and promotional products, has been honored by *Enterprising Women* magazine in the 2020 Enterprising Women of the Year Awards.

The awards are considered one of the most prestigious recognition programs for women business owners. To win, nominees must demonstrate that they have fast-growth businesses, mentor or actively support other women and girls involved in entrepreneurship, and stand out as leaders in their communities. Many of the honorees also serve as leaders of the key organizations that support the growth of women's entrepreneurship.

Derra has been involved in the office products industry in both business development and leadership positions for more than 25 years, joining DiverseID in 2011 and becoming president in 2015. In addition to her role at the firm, she serves on the Women's Business Enterprise National Council regional committee and is a board member of Office Products Women in Leadership and the FBI Citizens Academy Alumni Association in Kansas City.

Derra is also a member of Central Exchange, Conference of Minority Transportation Officials, National Association of Women in Construction, Northland Chamber of Commerce (Kansas City) and Women Construction Owners & Executives.

"I am privileged to be a 2020 Enterprising Women honoree," said Derra. "I look forward to networking with this great group of women and continuing to move my business forward!"

Post-it Brand releases innovative Post-it Flex Write Surface

Post-it Brand from 3M has released its latest product, Post-it Flex Write Surface, a removable whiteboard surface that provides the flexibility to write with both permanent and dry erase markers and wipe clean using only water.

3M suggests that the innovation not only addresses common complaints of ghosting and staining, but also environmental concerns. A recent survey commissioned by the firm suggested that a high proportion of operations professionals claim workers at their company expressed an interest in using fewer harsh chemicals.

The company also believes the product will increase efficiency, with the ability to unroll, peel and attach the surface directly before use removing the need for timely installations.

"The Post-it Brand is committed to providing intuitive tools for creative thinkers so they can focus on bringing their ideas to life," said Remi Kent, chief marketing officer at 3M Consumer Business Group. "Post-it Flex Write Surface is not only a solution to common whiteboard issues like staining and ghosting, it is also easy to install and can be used right away so teams can continue collaborating and ideating the next big thing."

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Vendor Innovative Office Products acquires SiS Ergo

Innovative Office Products (IOP), parent company of HAT Contract and manufacturer of ergonomic monitor, tablet, sit-stand mounting products and height-adjustable desk solutions for office, healthcare and other specialty workspaces, has announced the acquisition of height-adjustable table pioneer SiS Ergo.

SiS Ergo, which introduced the first height-adjustable desk in 1970, today manufactures ergonomic electric and non-electric height-adjustable tables and accessory products for a broad range of workplace ergonomic needs. The acquisition will complement IOP's existing line of HAT-branded ergonomic office products, said an IOP statement.

"With the addition of SiS Ergo and its Danish design roots, we have a truly unique and inspiring product solution for the contract marketplace," said IOP CEO Dave Fox. "What's more, SiS Ergo's ability to offer customized product solutions, short lead times and first-rate customer service aligns perfectly to our existing business approach. We are excited to have SiS Ergo as part of our Innovative Office Products family."

Under the terms of the transaction, the SiS Ergo brand name will remain, as will its manufacturing operations in Denmark. In the U.S., SiS Ergo will maintain its headquarters in Londonderry, New Hampshire, and continue to serve customers through its current sales force.

AIS announces promotions, expands sales team, welcomes new NYC showroom manager

Office furniture vendor AIS has announced the promotion of two members of staff to key positions in the company.

Amy Transue, who was most recently director of marketing and strategic resources, has been promoted to vice president of strategic resources, a role that will see her take on additional senior-level sales responsibilities as well as lead new sales initiatives.

Meanwhile, Steve Lyons was recently promoted to AIS's senior territory manager for Florida. Lyons has been with AIS since 2016. With this promotion, he will manage the Florida market as well as mentor new sales team members.

In addition to the promotions, AIS has also taken on four new staff members. Wendy Gricius has joined as a member of the sales leadership team. Based in Indianapolis, the new vice president of Midwest sales will be responsible for continuing to grow the business and strengthen relationships with dealers in Ohio, Indiana, Kentucky and Michigan. In addition, she will oversee the expansion and merchandising of existing and new group purchasing agreements across North America.

Raquel Salvato has joined AIS with nearly 20 years of design and business development experience. In her new role as territory manager, she will work to strengthen and expand AIS dealer relationships in South Florida. Most recently, Salvato was at Corporate Design Choice where she was a design consultant.

Another new hire is Gretchen de Gouveia as territory manager for Southern California. Working out of Newport Beach, de Gouveia will continue to grow AIS dealer relationships in the area. With over 15 years of experience in the furniture and office products market, de Gouveia most recently worked for Office Depot, where she was a vertical market manager. Earlier experiences include working for Humanscale and SPACECO, Inc.

Also, Tyler Finley has joined AIS as manager of the company's New York City showroom. Finley comes to AIS from Allsteel, where he was showroom manager. At Allsteel, Finley maintained showroom products, oversaw new product installations, worked with the sales team on client visits and mockups and planned and executed showroom events.

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Clover Imaging announces dates for Depot International 2020 Roadshow

Clover Imaging Group has announced the upcoming training dates and locations for Depot International's 2020 Roadshow.

Depot International, Clover Imaging's sister company, will present a series of training courses targeted towards providing printer repair technicians with the knowledge they need for certification and providing high-quality service to customers.

These two-day training sessions provide attendees with hands-on, personalized instruction delivered by Depot International's certified trainers.

Chris Sinibaldi, SVP and general manager of parts, Depot International, noted, "Depot International is focused on providing the kind of interactive learning that drives real knowledge and expertise. Our instructors are highly experienced, both in teaching and in the subject matter, so attendees acquire the skills they need rapidly, with little frustration."

Depot International's 2020 Roadshow locations will include the following locations and dates:

Ottawa, IL
March 31-April 1
April 2-3

Ottawa, IL
August 11-12
August 13-14

Farmingdale, NJ
May 5-6
May 7-8

Van Nuys, CA
October 20-21
October 22-23

Topics addressed during each training include laser printer theory (both color and mono methods); advanced troubleshooting procedures and resources; removal/replacement, break-fix scenarios and common failures, and a session for open discussion and DI Certification testing.

Scenarios will emphasize today's most popular MPS printers to deliver the most utility to customers and keep technicians current on cutting-edge technology. Classes are limited to 12 technicians per session to ensure attendees get personalized instruction and attention.

Companies looking to send technicians to one of this year's eight Roadshow events should submit their registration early to ensure a spot. Registration can be completed online.

CLOVER IMAGING GROUP

Waddell launches new modular space division collection

Display furniture maker Waddell has introduced Define, a design solution intended for community spaces to provide an alternative to architectural built-ins, serving as millwork but on a furniture budget and purchase order.

With the shift in focus from individual workspaces to common collaboration areas, Waddell perceived a need for more space division, branding, mobility, privacy and noise reduction options.

"The Define solution grew out of mining the broad history, market position and operational capabilities of Waddell and the GMi family of companies," noted Paul James, of James Design Company, who was contracted to develop the concept. "It combines the latest visual communication tool expertise with traditional display case functionality to produce a new way to functionalize open plan environments. The result is a flexible partitioning system that fosters collaboration, creates visual privacy, supports sound attenuation and egress, all while displaying organizational assets and visual brand narratives."

"The beauty of Define is how its function can morph throughout the day depending on the space it's in and the user's needs," said Scott Bowers, director of product for Waddell. "We were driven by the idea of connecting employees to their work and coworkers through a variety of design elements that promote personalization and shifting work modes."

Comprised of whiteboard surfaces, storage and space division, Define offers design options with a slim profile, angled base and simple drawer pulls. »

Canon
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- DUAL NOZZLE CHECK MECHANISM
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- JAM DEFYING DESIGN
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Visit https://www.usa.canon.com/internet/portal/us/home/explore/product-showcases/printer-technology/wg7200-series for complete product information.

ECI launches Allseating integration for TeamDesign

Software solution firm ECI, has announced a new Private Supply Network (PSN) integration with Allseating Corp. for its TeamDesign cloud-based software.

Through the integration, contract furniture dealers will have direct access to data from Allseating and be able to automate time-intensive purchase order processes, boosting efficiency and data accuracy.

"We are very excited about our new partnership with ECI and TeamDesign, as it supports Allseating's mission to invest in electronic ordering across numerous platforms to make it easier for dealers to do business with us," said Paul Vendittelli, Allseating CFO. "Now, dealers can submit electronic purchase orders directly from TeamDesign into our order entry system, which vastly improves our ability to provide superior service."

"The ECI PSN directly solves the challenge of spending an unnecessary amount of time generating and validating purchase orders," said Brian Bowerfind, ECI Distribution Division President. "We continue to seek opportunities to expand that network by adding organizations like Allseating. As a result, our customers have direct access to critical purchasing data, can replace manual order submission with automation and are able to strengthen their relationship with key manufacturers."

ECI has direct integrations with 14 premier contract furniture manufacturers via its PSN to support its customers' business development and sales. To learn more, visit TeamDesign today.

OPI launches industry recruitment site

INDEPENDENT DEALER sister publication *OPI* has announced the launch of OPI Jobs, a dedicated area on its website that will enable hiring employers and job-seeking candidates to connect easily and affordably.

The new service ties in with OPI's tagline and mission of "connecting the business products world", and is being supported by an extensive awareness campaign that will reach tens of thousands of industry participants across OPI's database of contacts and social media channels.

To mark the start of OPI Jobs, employers can advertize any relevant vacancies they may have free of charge. This special launch promotion applies to any job offers that are posted to the site between now and the end of February. All companies have to do is register as an employer on jobs.opi.net before posting their first free job advertizements.

For those seeking their next opportunity in the business products industry, registration on OPI Jobs is free. Personal details will be stored securely and only be visible to dedicated job board personnel, and not be made available to editorial or commercial staff.

Thanks to a successful pre-launch, there are already several exciting new opportunities advertized on the site from some of the world's leading manufacturers and dealers.

For more details, please email jobs@opi.net or call +44 207 841 2950 (10am-6pm UK time, Mon-Fri).

ECA by Dekko launches new charging solution

Power and data supply specialist ECA by Dekko has announced the launch of Sto-Way, a power and charging solution for lockers.

Sto-Way has the ability to route electric cables either inside or outside the storage space and allows for in-field maintenance that doesn't require any disassembly of the locker, the company said.

Compatible with ECA's daisy chain system, Sto-Way is capable of powering one or two circuits from a single power infeed, which allows for runs twice as long as a single-circuit system. This means multiple units can link together, locker-to-locker, from a single infeed allowing designers to increase locker-run lengths while reducing the supporting infrastructure.

Unsightly cables remain concealed and specifiers can choose from five different power and USB configurations to deliver the best options for the locker space. Options include 2 power (120 VAC), 2 power with USB A or USB AC or USB C; or 2 power with GFCI.

"Sto-Way was developed specifically for lockers. The product reshapes conventional locker usage, transforming each space from just a storage compartment to a personal charging station for your phone or computer and a place to plug in personal-care items such as a hair dryer or electric shaver," Dekko marketing director Meghan Meier said.

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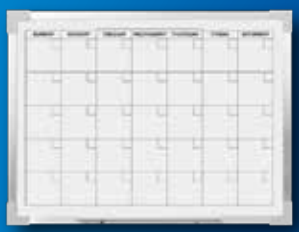
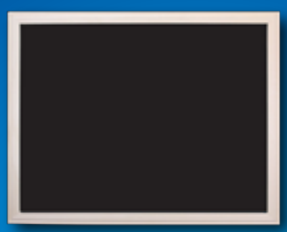
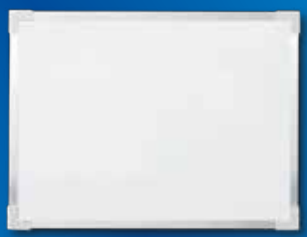
flipside

Flipside Products, Inc.

Office & Business Essentials







www.flipsideproducts.com **800.926.0704**

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Katun North America introduces color toners and a drum unit rebuild kit

Minneapolis-based compatibles manufacturer Katun Corporation has introduced a number of products for use in Canon and Ricoh applications.

The products include the Katun Performance color toner set for use in Ricoh SP C 430/440-series, Katun Performance color toners and a drum unit rebuild kit for Canon iR Advance C5535 / C5540 / C5550 / C5560-series machines, and more than 100 Katun and original brand toner cartridges, now available via the Katun online catalog.

Katun products may be ordered by phone, fax or email, or via the Katun online catalog. Customers can access the catalog, or find Katun customer service contact information, at www.katun.com.

Deflecto announces new corporate website

Workspace accessory manufacturer Deflecto has launched a new website. Designed to offer a clean, easy-to-navigate format that incorporates improved functionality, mobile responsiveness and enhanced content, the site allows customers to see the firm's full product portfolio, while showing where to purchase Deflecto products and how to contact the company.

New features include landing pages with lifestyle imagery, videos demonstrating products and their uses, as well as an Inspiration page featuring creative storage solutions intended to help inspire, create and organize what's important. Other elements include details about the company's sustainability efforts, client service pages, product filters, FAQs, and career opportunities.

"We wanted to create a site that showcases our focus on delivering great products and give customers, users and consumers ideas and inspiration. Watch out for many new and exciting product innovations coming in 2020," said Bob Flynn, CEO of Deflecto.

Technology Targeting Cancer

For more than 100 years, City of Hope has pioneered cancer and diabetes research and treatment around the world. Today, City of Hope researchers like Ammar Chaudhry, M.D., are continuing to challenge conventional practices and applying targeted therapies and techniques such as "theranostics" – a noninvasive technology used to assess not just a few tumors, but every cancer site throughout the body, which could shorten treatment duration and diminish side effects.

For nearly four decades, the National Business Products Industry has helped raise more than $200 million to ignite lifesaving research at City of Hope. Join us for the 2020 REINVENT HOPE campaign as we honor Stephanie Dismore of HP. To learn more on how you can get involved, visit **CityofHope.org/nbpi**.

SAVE THE DATE

TOPS CURLING FOR THE CURE
March 4 to 5, 2020
St. Paul Curling Club
St. Paul, Minnesota

AOPD ANNUAL MEETING
March 8 to 11, 2020
Dallas, Texas

NETWORK TRADE SHOW
March 22 to 25, 2020
Las Vegas, Nevada

S.P. RICHARDS CO. HERITAGE OF HOPE GOLF OUTING & VENDOR SUMMIT
March 24 and 25, 2020
Omni Amelia Island Plantation Resort
Amelia Island, Florida

REINVENT HOPE | hp

2020 REINVENT HOPE campaign

Honoring Stephanie Dismore
Senior Vice President and Managing Director
HP North America

*For more information on City of Hope's National Business Products Industry, visit **CityofHope.org/nbpi** or contact Matt Dodd at **mdodd@coh.org**.*

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NOPA News

There's a full schedule for NOPA in February

By: Mike Tucker, president and CEO of NOPA

The Holidays are over and spring is just around the corner. Hello February—I have a feeling you'll be a good month!

NOPA is preparing for its annual Advocacy Fly-In event at the end of March. This event has doubled in attendance over the last two years and we're expecting record attendance once again this year.

Realizing there is strength in numbers, we are excited to announce that this year's event will be held in partnership with ISSA—The Worldwide Cleaning Industry Association.

Both associations have scheduled their Fly-Ins for the week of March 23 and will be presenting at each other's sessions. Additional discussions are in process regarding ways the two groups can work together for the benefit of our members.

The association has also kicked off the 2020 scholarship program and is accepting applications through March 2. Employees and immediate family members of all National Office Products Alliance (NOPA) and Office Furniture Dealers Alliance (OFDA) member companies are eligible to apply for the annual scholarships.

Started more than 50 years ago with a $5,000 donation from Jennie Zachs, founder of the C-Thru Ruler Company, the IOPFDA Scholarship Fund has given more than $2.5 million in scholarships to deserving families of office products and office furniture dealers.

This year our goal is to have the sponsoring organization or local dealer present to hand out the award to the students at their High School award night—not only so the student receives the recognition they deserve, but to also highlight the industry/dealer in their community.

Most excitingly perhaps, for 2020, the NOPA board has approved an additional $20,000 in awards, increasing this year's total to $45,000. Visit the NOPA website to download a copy of the application.

Finally, we will be hosting two technology webinars in February. The first will be on February 19. The topic is International Property Rights (IPR) and the risky liability of selling gray market and black market counterfeits. Our presenter will be Allen Westerfield, president of the Imaging Supplies Council (ISC).

We will also be doing a second session on "Cyber Security – Is Your Business Protected?" (date to be determined). This session will explore ways you can protect your business from:

- Unpatched server and software vulnerabilities
- Account takeover
- Malware and ransomware
- Viruses and more. . .

For more information on these or any other NOPA programs, please contact Mike Tucker at mike@iopfda.org

Small Business Advocacy

Independent Office Products & Furniture Dealers Alliance

www.nopanet.org www.ofdanet.org

2020 Small Business Advocacy Fly-in

March 23-25, 2020 | Capitol Skyline Hotel | Washington, DC

Join the Independent Office Products & Furniture Dealers Association (IOPFDA) as we converge on Washington, D.C. to lobby on behalf of the industry's needs. You'll be placed directly across the table from your legislators and they'll be listening to your concerns as a leading business operator in their district.

If you're a small business owner and operator, then you're exactly who lawmakers need to hear from on issues related to healthcare, taxes, government procurement and much more! Stand up and get involved! The more participants we have for the Small Business Advocacy Fly-In the better our chances are of being heard.

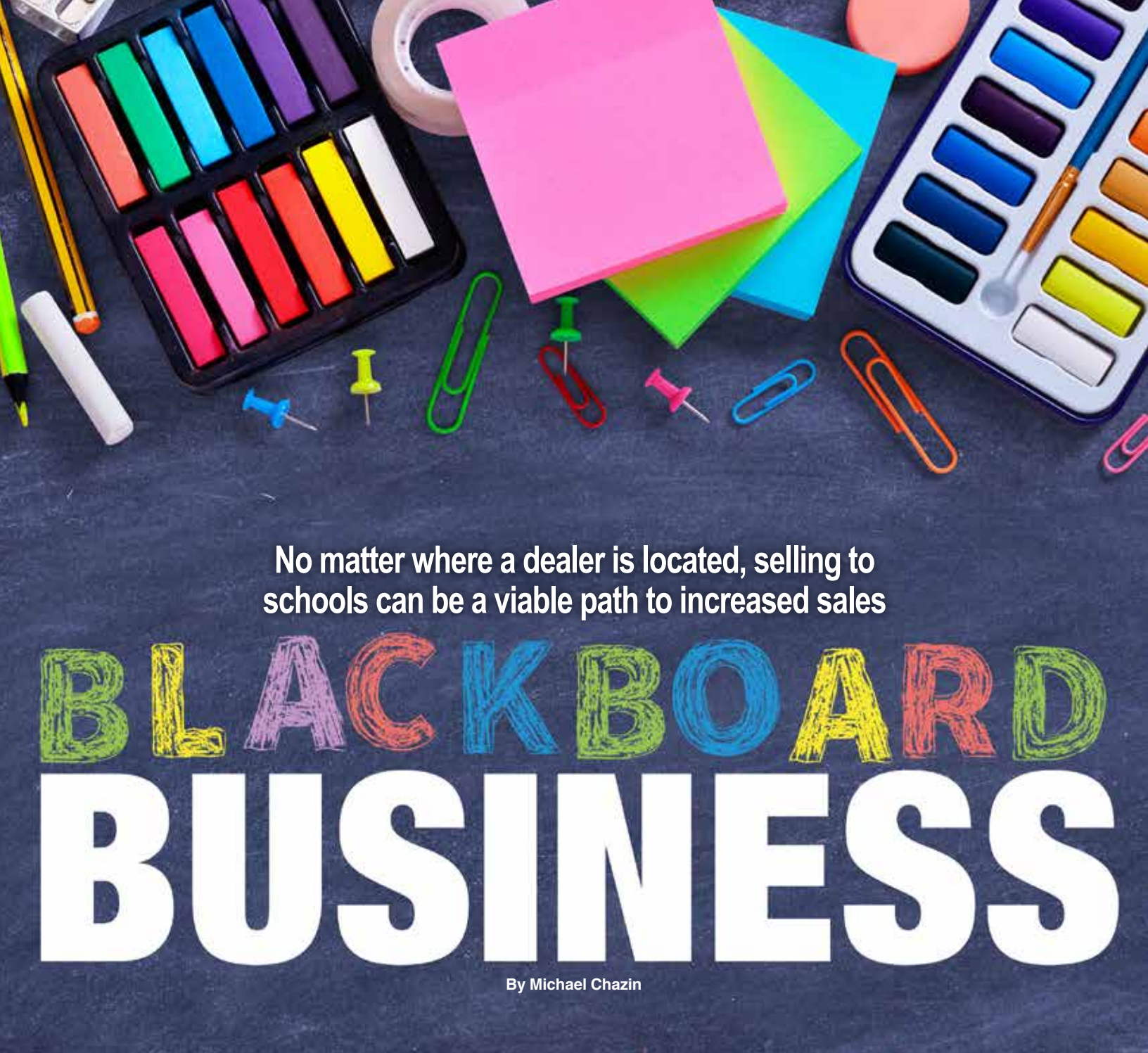
Topics covered will include:

- GSA Schedules and Consolidation
- Amazon/ NDAA Pilot
- Counterfeits
- Tax Cuts
- Amazon/ Anti-Trust
- AbilityOne
- Cyber Security
- and more!

The Independent Office Products and Furniture Dealer Association welcomes and appreciates the support of our vendors. Don't miss the opportunity to build brand awareness among more than 800 industry professionals! Consider becoming a sponsor of the 2020 Small Business Advocacy Fly-in.

The deadline to register and reserve your sponsorship for the 2020 Small Business Advocacy Fly-in is March 10, 2020. Reserve your spot now!

REGISTER NOW! **FIND OUT MORE**



No matter where a dealer is located, selling to schools can be a viable path to increased sales

BLACKBOARD BUSINESS

By Michael Chazin

 CONTINUED FROM PAGE 30

As independent dealers move into the new decade, education sales offer an excellent growth opportunity. Classrooms have remained unchanged for most of the past century, but new takes on classroom organization open a world of possibilities. What some refer to as the Classroom in Motion offers a radically different look from desks lined up in rows. "It creates a learning environment that is reconfigurable, that's mobile and that inspires creativity," says Jamin Trowbridge, vice president, furniture and design, at Palace Business Solutions, Santa Cruz, California. "Almost every classroom has the opportunity to be reset in this way."

No matter where a dealer might be located, from major metro areas to rural markets, selling to schools can be a viable approach to garner more business. "Our city is about 100,000 with a school district of about 13,000 students," says Dick Wilson, vice president, Wilson Office Supply, Wichita Falls, Texas. He adds that the dealership also sells to another ten smaller independent school districts within a 50-mile radius. "We don't do anything particularly special," he says. "A couple of them are on TIPS pricing that we get through ISG, but the majority comes from good-old relationship selling."

Two outside salespeople call on every one of those districts. "We try and have good relationships with the superintendent of each district and with the principal and secretary in every school," says Wilson. "That promotes quite a bit of loyalty; when needs pop up, we're the first ones on their radar." Four or five of the districts provide steady business, while the remainder of the smaller school districts are hit or miss.

The average school district has something like 15 different schools as well as a district office, a maintenance facility and possibly an alternative special education facility. "All of these people have different needs," says Trowbridge. "You have to be agile to adapt and provide next-day supplies or furniture for ever changing environments because different sites cater to a different type of person."

Form lasting relationships

The most important position for a dealer to take when it comes to education sales is to maintain relationships and get to know specific public school teachers. "Typically someone's support person will do the ordering, but if you get information to teachers, they'll see what we offer and that opens up possibilities," says Mac Neilon, owner of Penn Office Products, West Chester, Pennsylvania. "We try to dig down below the administration to who's behind them."

Education sales differ from everyday commercial sales in a number of important ways, yet they still share some characteristics. "Teachers have a different mindset than corporate customers," says Wendy Pike, president, Twist Office Partners, Wood Dale, Illinois. Just like commercial accounts education customers focus on the bottom line, but that's probably where the comparison ends.

"Teachers are far more creative," says Pike. "You can show them unique products and how they will work with their classroom." Teachers are always interested in new products and opportunities that could help them teach better or facilitate learning. Additionally, she says that people in education positions tend to stay there longer than employees in the corporate world. "You don't see new buyers coming in as often," she says.

Twist has education customers in all of its markets—Illinois, Indiana, Minnesota and Wisconsin. "You foster those relationships as they seem to be longer lasting that some of our corporate customers," says Pike. Relationships continue to be important in all sectors, but she feels that some of those connections are being lost in the business world.

Wilson agrees that longer lasting relationships are harder to maintain in the commercial world. "It seems like schools remain relatively constant with their people," he says. "Schools are pretty steady with the people we know, whereas other business tend to be a little more turnover oriented." »

Find the decider

The decision-making process is distinctly different in the education world. More layers of personnel have to be dealt with to reach the decision maker, suggests Mark Porter, president, Porter's Office Products, Rexburg, Idaho. "So it takes a little longer to make sure we get to the right person and all the different approvals get signed off," he says.

Porter's is placing a greater emphasis on education sales this year, citing reduced competition due to issues faced by its main competitor. "When I talk with other dealers they can't believe the high prices School Specialty charges on non-bid items," he says. The fact that Porter's largest competitor for school sales isn't competitive on daily transactional business creates an opportunity. "It's really going to be a focus for us this year," he adds. Just like any commercial customer, schools want to maximize their budgets and minimize their spend. "They're definitely price conscious but they also want service," Porter contends.

The school business at Palace started at the beginning of this century with just one district. Up until then, districts maintained their own warehouses, but Gary Trowbridge, CEO, saw that was about to change. Palace won the bid from the largest school district in its market and quickly added school supplies to the contract.

The just-in-time ordering capability that Palace offered was used repeatedly over the years as one school district after another was added to the customer mix. "With anywhere from 10 to 50 schools per district wanting next-day delivery; the nationals can't really offer that level of service," says Gary Trowbridge. Today, the school market comprises roughly 100 districts and 1,000 schools and represents more than 50 percent of the business at Palace.

When you sell to schools, he says, for the most part you get one shot and that comes July 1. "Some dealers might find that discouraging because you usually start calling these schools in January," he says. You work on the relationship and put in a bid and then it gets awarded in April or May. "The good news is now you know exactly what's coming to you typically for the next three to five years."

Another difference from the everyday commercial market is that there tends to be less competition selling to schools. "You have multiple people online from Amazon, Staples and Office Depot to another dozen online sellers of office products," says Gary Trowbridge. Because the school market is more specialized there are really only two competitors—Staples and Depot. "Really, it comes down to the fact I have fewer competitors when I sell to schools with a just-in-time program," he says.

Schools also tend to purchase more C, D and E items, adds Wilson. Recently a microwave oven was purchased by a school. "Who in the world buys a microwave from an office products company?" he asks. Schools often will order the odd items that other customers might go to the dollar store to purchase. "They are obligated to go through the purchase order process and it is just easier for them to order that stuff from me."

Earn community recognition

FSIoffice, Charlotte, holds state contracts with North and South Carolina. The dealership also holds an NCPA contract, which some school districts choose to use. The contracts on their own don't produce any sales and FSI works within the different school communities to gain recognition. "We've participated in drives for schools that needed supplies," says Kim Leazer, CEO. "We've hosted events with the schools and Junior Achievement." Students toured the FSI facility and heard employees talk about different jobs and the skills that are needed."

Such activities help build name recognition in the education community. "We're genuinely concerned about education and about the teachers," says Leazer. "We know that it's a tough job and we want teachers to know that we support them." These efforts contribute to increased sales but there is much

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more to the motivation. "Our future as a company depends on students doing well and moving forward so the work pool that we pull from is equipped," says Leazer.

The standout program at FSI is the dealership's Teacher of the Week effort that runs in conjunction with the Carolina Panthers (see sidebar on page 30). The program has run during the NFL football season for the past ten years. "Our investment in the program has been significant over the that period," said Leazer. Over that time she has seen the percentage of education sales increase in both states. "At this point we probably have maybe 65 percent of the total market in the two states," she maintains.

Leazer considers another difference from the majority of commercial accounts is the need for secure deliveries. Security is important on K-12 campuses as well as with higher education customers. "Having a company's own badged and background-screened drivers is preferred to delivery by courier where they don't get the same people," says Leazer.

Specialist drives sales

At Office Essentials, St. Louis, Missouri, the K-12 market represents roughly ten percent of total sales. School sales have been growing since a K-12 specialist came on board in 2017. "The last couple of years growth has been driven by our education furniture offering and program," says Anne Farrow, product category manager for the education market. Farrow works as a consultant with the schools, learns about new teaching method and transforms that into flexible, collaborative classrooms.

Farrow joined Office Essentials after a stint selling for School Specialty. When she joined the dealership an analysis showed that it was selling office products to schools and furniture to the administrations. "The reason

I was hired was to sell past the front office," she says. Since coming on board, multiple building projects have been completed with new education furniture vendors.

She suggests that most furniture sales take place outside the bid process. "You need to get to know each school, know the buildings and then become a consultant to help them get to know the furniture products you offer that can transform their school," she says. Many school fronts are being remodeled to incorporate more secure entrances. When that happens, the front office is frequently redesigned and new furniture is required.

Increased emphasis on education furniture has led Office Essentials to offer a greater selection of it in an effort to become more competitive on transactional sales. "We have to expand our offering to compete with online retailers," say Farrow. "The biggest things people are looking for in classroom furniture today is flexibility and storage." She points to furniture makers that have expanded their education offerings such as Safco and HON.

A lot of school districts give schools and their teachers latitude to buy, and they usually end up on the internet. "When somebody wants 25 student chairs and eight flip-and-nest tables, they can point and click and find those on our website," says Farrow. "That frees us up to do larger projects when there is a school remodel or a new building is going up."

Market for art supplies

With the competition in the education sector, Farrow says it's difficult to imagine that independents could win more than 50 percent of any school's business. "Most independents aren't strong in art supplies which is a really big spend in school districts, especially K-6," she says. There is a good amount spent on construction paper, crayons, glue and paints (both tempera and water colors) along with more specialized art products for high schools. "We don't have great sources for a lot of that."

A variety of specialty products used by K-6 students offer opportunities for increased education sales. "We have »

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gotten into elementary school-specific products in the past six or seven years," says Neilon. The elementary grades use a variety of art products. "S.P. Richards stocks these items and gets them to me really quick, so that's a new market."

"When you're selling to K through sixth grade you need more than office products," says Gary Trowbridge. "You need a strong offering of school and art supplies." To service this market, Palace purchases direct about half of what is sold to schools. To be effective on the sales side it's a requirement that salespeople become familiar with these products. "You have to know the grades of construction paper, brushes, crayons and tempera paints. You have to become a bit of an expert in the category," he says.

Selling to higher ed

Opportunities for education sales also exist in higher education and can often be found within a dealer's local market. That's the case with Penn Office Products, which is based in the same town as West Chester University, part of the state higher education system. "The university is a big part of our town," says Neilon.

Selling to the University presents a different approach than selling to schools. Every department does its own purchasing. "West Chester University has about 150 departments and we dig in and get to know each department's contact person," says Neilon. The big boxes don't have the time or personnel to do that. "Obviously departments can go online and order from anyone, but the drawback is online sources don't have the know-how and expertise to offer the same level of service," he adds.

Since the end of last summer FSIoffice has onboarded five colleges. "We have always done well with colleges and universities, but our success in that market has picked up," says Leazer. The colleges had overspent and were instructed to check with the state contracted vendor. "They contacted us and asked if they could become customers. The biggest difference selling to colleges and universities has to do with distribution," says Leazer. "Higher education operates more like a large corporation," she adds. Lots of end users place their own orders and everything is delivered to them at their desks.

Porter's does a good deal of business with its state university. "Steelcase has a contract with our state and that has really helped us get into that world of higher education," says Porter. The extensive design and furniture consultation capabilities that the dealership offers have proven to be the needed ingredient to propel strong sales. "We've done classrooms, large common areas and cafeterias," says Porter. "The expertise to show them different options to meet their needs has been successful for us."

Contracts sometime facilitate sales but not always. "The contract isn't binding so if they need something in an emergency they call me," says Neilon. He suggests the reason schools make purchases from Office Depot is primarily based on price. "We got a lot of orders from the school district based on our ability to provide service, particularly with furniture," he says. "Our knowledge and expertise in furniture can't be found in a call center."

To find success with school sales, Neilon suggests that education customers be made aware that while some big box items might be cheaper they shouldn't expect every price to be the lowest. "We emphasize a local connection," he says. "Being local, we get to know people and develop relationships. It resonates to a point, particularly with furniture, because they know we can provide service."

Competition for education sales at Twist has found new life now that School Specialty has problems. "Our big competitor in the school market is now Office Depot with the perception that they're the lowest cost," says Pike. She says the response is to show that Twist is local and supports the schools. "We customize our programs and work with the schools to provide what they need."

Leazer believes that Staples and Office Depot hold on to some of their school business because certain customers like to shop in stores. She suggests that's starting to change as fewer workers today want to

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leave work and do that. "Typically an independent dealer is strong in their local community and has relationships with the school systems," says Leazer. That local positioning often trumps any big box offers.

How to grow school sales

Opportunities for growth in the education market generally means selling more than office supplies and school supplies. At Palace, the next big opportunity is to sell janitorial supplies. Gary Trowbridge says that janitorial supplies can be offered for just-in-time delivery. "Schools are a big market for anything imprinted but that is probably down the road for us," he adds. Essendant might be rolling out a program for that sometime this year, but right now the focus is to get janitorial supplies into every school.

At FSIoffice janitorial sales to schools has been a focus for the past two years and the dealership has seen sales increase in that time by as much as 50 percent. "If we could penetrate just the education accounts we currently have with facility products our sales would probably double," says Leazer.

To further grow education sales, Farrow of Office Essentials suggests that dealers look for other pockets of funding that aren't directed by purchasing. "There's a lot of federal grant money spent on early education," she says. Also take a look a summer school programs. There is both federal money and district money that is spent on summer school. "If you can find that summer school director you can get a pretty nice order for a one-time spend," she adds.

Many schools are enlarging their media centers and Office Essentials finds that flexible tables and soft seating are part of the mix. "That's another area where there could be flexible spending because a lot of parent teacher organization raise money for the media specialists—or librarians as they used to be called," says Farrow. "You have to dive deep into the districts to be successful."

"To find success in education sales start working the relationship and go in with the expectation that the sales cycle is probably going to take 12 to 18 months," says Porter. Then, he says, instead of going after bids, focus on the daily transactional business to build relationships. "You can make decent margins and still blow the competition out of the water in terms of what schools currently pay," he says.

Teachers + Football = Success

The Teacher of the Week promotion in conjunction with the Carolina Panthers NFL team provides FSIoffice abundant recognition from teachers in North and South Carolina. Teachers are nominated for the honor and each week a winning teacher gets selected until the grand prize winner is announced at a Carolina Panther's home game towards the end of the season.

"We just completed our tenth year," says Kim Leazer, CEO, FSIoffice, Charlotte, North Carolina. Sponsorship of the Panthers and donations of supplies results in extensive recognition for the dealership in the education community. "We utilize that sponsorship to support teachers," she adds. In 2019, 610 schools were represented in the program and 1,200 teachers were nominated.

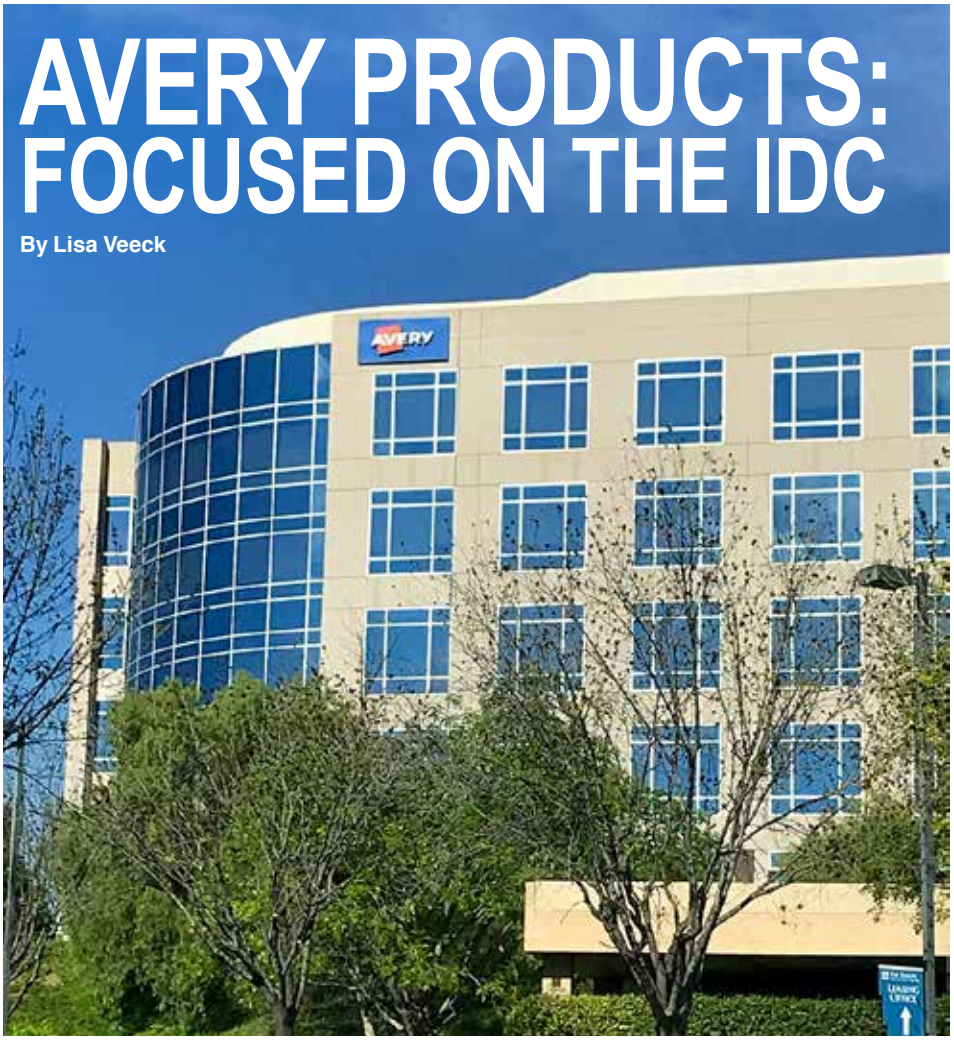
Now that a new year has begun, efforts our already underway for the 2020 effort. "We have a list of all the schools that had teachers nominated and then we can target those schools that are not customers," explains Leazer. Not too many years ago a small town in South Carolina wasn't getting much attention until it was visited by Teacher of the Week.

A teacher in the local school was nominated and became a weekly winner. The sales director went down there and notified the principal. The principal called the mayor and the local newspaper. A front-page photo in the local paper led to coverage by newspapers statewide.

"It's great for my business and sales, but we want teachers to know that we support them," says Leazer. "Teachers struggle to have what they need to do their classroom job without all of it coming out of their pockets."

AVERY PRODUCTS: FOCUSED ON THE IDC

By Lisa Veeck



In 2013, CCL Industries, Inc., a leader in specialty label and packaging, purchased the office and consumer products unit of Avery Dennison, creating Avery Products Corp., a smaller, more specialized company.

According to Avery Products national accounts director George Kennedy, the sharper focus brought significant benefits: "There are advantages, such as more label expertise, quicker decision-making and executing, and having a more direct line to customers."

Kennedy believes these advantages are not unlike those the IDC enjoys in today's office products marketplace.

"If you look at the independent dealers that are successful today, they have a high level of skill and of focused competency," he says "They have an innate awareness of their products, their customers and their buying and delivery patterns. A lot of local companies as well as some large national ones think it is important to support independent small businesses, and I don't see this going away. People still want that personal service touch. The IDC has been there since the beginning and most have strong relationships with their brand manufacturers. These manufacturers, like Avery, are very interested in maintaining these IDC relationships and are always looking for new ways we can help them grow their businesses."

Walking the walk

Avery offers what Kennedy calls a "comprehensive suite of programs" designed to help independent dealers grow their business. "We offer dependable, premium, manufactured products that, when put in the end users' hands, create an excellent experience," he says.

"Couple that with our world-class supply chain fulfillment, which is dialed in pretty specifically to independent dealer needs and requirements. As far as in-house independent dealer support, the Avery Sales Portal offers an ideal online resource for our dealers to access images, editorial content, web banners and all manner of sales-driving tools at a moment's notice 24 hours a day."

Yet the company's most effective dealer support mechanism could be Avery's consumer outreach.

"Avery invests quite a bit of resources to create consumer demand for its products," he says. "This includes social media, print brochures, magazine and digital advertising and more. We do all we can to promote our products and what can be bought through the IDC. These pull-through efforts are ongoing, thorough and far reaching; the dealer may not actually see those efforts but will benefit from the end-user awareness."

In addition to its famous labels, the products that can be bought from Avery include cards, tags, name badges, dividers/ tabs, binders/ accessories, markers/highlighters and adhesives.

While these products are familiar, today's generation of buyers—and how they purchase—are less so. This is another area where Kennedy thinks suppliers can help.

"There's no doubt that Amazon and online purchasing has shifted some market share; so, too, has the consumer," Kennedy says. "The buyer used to be the corporate administrator, now the customers are all different and ever-changing like the industry itself. Manufacturers—like Avery—are very interested in helping the IDC stay current, to help them recognize who the customers are so they can stay in the game." »

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Challenging times

Having just returned from the company's national sales meeting where the topic was front and center, Kennedy was prepared to lay out what he sees as the major challenges facing today's independent dealers.

"One is the decline in the consumption of office products overall." he says. "There are fewer independent dealers due to mergers, acquisitions and others going out of business. And there is the aggressiveness of acquisitions, such as those made by Office Depot's 'federation' strategy and Staple's HiTouch Business Services' model.

Two is a lack of succession—and a lack of succession desire; the office products industry isn't the flashiest of industries, so not a lot of younger people want to go into it.

Three is the need to invest in technology, to stay current.

Four is the share-shift to online buying.

Five is keeping up with today's customers. Customers, like business itself, are constantly evolving; how does the IDC identify and keep up with these needs?

And finally, six, with companies being acquired and merging left and right, there is the need to keep up with the 'Who's Who and What's What.' It is a challenge to keep up with the constantly shifting landscape."

Stay focused—and invest

While Kennedy recognizes meeting these challenges isn't easy, the 23-year Avery veteran has definite ideas on how it can successfully be done.

"I am sure it is true of many industries, but you tend to see it a lot in ours and that is a lack of focus," Kennedy says. "I think it's one of the biggest mistakes independent dealers can make. When traditional office products sales sputter a little, everyone wants to latch on to the next big thing when maybe instead it would be better to look at finding a better path to the ever-changing customer or offering more education.

Don't get me wrong; expansion into other areas is not a bad thing, but I think it needs to be tempered. Mostly, though, I think independent dealers need to decide what they want to be and what they want to accomplish. If they want to be the local office supply expert, do it. If they want to be the best jan-san/breakroom supplier, do that. But they need to focus on what they want to be and then execute based on that.

"Another mistake I see for the IDC is an unwillingness to invest. Independent dealers need to keep current, and by that I mean technology, equipment and investing in their people, their internal and external salespeople."

Worst case, best case IDC future

What, if anything, does Kennedy think could bring the demise of the IDC? Again, he is straightforward: "If the IDC were to fail, it would be because its dealers have not worked to understand the changing customer, do not have the infrastructure to serve their customers, do not have a clear focus on their own identities and are not keeping up with technology and trends."

Yet Kennedy's prediction for the future of the channel is far more optimistic. "Independent dealers must stay confident—after all, if you've lasted all these years you must be doing something right," he says. "They need to know their manufacturer partners and understand their programs, policies and procedures clearly. Then, if independent dealers focus on what they want to be and execute on that, they will be successful."

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CREATING BLOG CONTENT:
HOW TO FIND STRONG TOPICS TO WRITE ABOUT

By Kevin Rehberger

For online sellers, maintaining a company blog is one of the most effective ways to attract new customers. Blog posts not only generate interest for your business, they also help develop trust between you and potential customers. However, you can't blog about any topic related to your industry and hope to get results.

The key to running a successful blog is to write about topics that will attract people who will pay for your products and services. If you're struggling to find new topics to write about, here are a few ways you can develop ideas:

Think about problems you can solve

When you're developing content ideas, it's important to remember that people are searching online to find answers. They have problems that need to be solved and they look for people who can help them out. Many of your blog posts should focus on problems that people can solve by paying for your products and services.

To give an example, say you focus on selling adjustable sit-stand workstations. These workstations provide relief for people who are straining their muscles at the office. To entice people to buy them, you could write about the health benefits of standing up while working.

You have the answers that people want, all you have to do is supply them.

Google can provide inspiration

Google's autosuggest algorithm is one of the best tools you can use for topic research. If you enter keywords you already use in your blog posts, Google will suggest several topics associated with them. The results you get are topics people are searching for online »

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and some of them can provide great ideas for blog posts.

There's another trick you might be unaware of and it's very effective for topic research. On Google, type in an underscore (_) and put in a space, then enter your keyword. Google will provide you with new phrases and suggestions with words that come before the keyword. This is an excellent method for finding new blog post ideas that other companies might not be familiar with yet.

Find products that deserve a spotlight

Product spotlights are among the most common blog posts published by online sellers. While a product page gives a general overview of a specific item, a product spotlight can be used to provide an in-depth look at its uses and benefits. If you want to do a spotlight for your blog, there are a few things to consider when selecting a product to focus on.

Do you have a new product releasing in the near future? Writing a spotlight on it is the perfect way to get people excited for it. Is there an item you want to push that isn't getting a lot of attention on your website? A product spotlight can help rejuvenate interest in it.

You have plenty of options when writing product spotlights, so spend some time deciding which products to focus on.

Get inspiration from user comments

Another good way to find blog topics is to see what your customers would be interested in reading about. Browse through your past blog posts and social media channels, and take a look through the comments that people leave for you.

Lots of people have questions for you and any common queries can provide you with excellent content ideas. If there's a topic you want to write about, don't hesitate to respond to a few of the questions associated with it. This will help you collect more information to use for the blog post you want to write.

To give an example, say you sell pens online and a few people ask you which pen would work best for their current job. Since this is a common query, there's a good chance that other people would benefit from knowing this information. This could inspire you to write a buyer's guide on which pens are suitable for certain jobs.

See what other businesses are doing

If you're struggling to come up with a unique angle for your blog, it doesn't hurt to see what your competitors are up to. Visit some competing websites and see which of their blog posts are gaining the most traction. You shouldn't copy their ideas outright, but doing some research can help you find topics that appeal to your niche.

You might even benefit from reading blog posts from other industries. Even if the blog posts you read don't relate to your industry, they can provide a fresh perspective on content creation. Who knows, you could be inspired to write about ideas that no one else in your industry has thought to write about before.

Inspiration doesn't always come naturally, so use these tricks to make sure your blog is populated with interesting and engaging content.

Kevin Rehberger is a content strategist for Fortune Web Marketing. To learn more, visit: https://www.fortunewebmarketing.com.

REVIEW, REFLECT & REFRESH: YOUR 2020 VISION

By Krista Moore

It's that time of year to review and reflect on your business successes and challenges so you can create a clear 2020 vision for your company. However, this can feel daunting and it often gets pushed to the back burner, never finalized or formally communicated.

If you're questioning how prepared you are for 2020, or think you might have missed some details, then read on. I would like to share an easy and effective way to Review and Reflect on 2019; then make the right adjustments to refresh your 2020 sales plan and vision for success.

REVIEW your customer and company trends—and your employees' performances.

The old adage "knowledge is power" is so true when it comes to creating a clear vision and a winning sales plan. The devil may be in the detail, but the analysis of data trends can provide you with a clear picture of what's happening in your business by customer, segments, commodities and salespeople. Many companies look at year-end results, rather than going back and reviewing past performance and trends.

Below are some examples of customer and company areas to review:

Individual customer trends year over year.

- What do the results indicate?
- What are your conversion, penetration and retention rates?
- Compare revenue, margins and GP% year over year, by sales rep and customer.

As a company, what percentage of your business is in what product category?

- What would you like it to be?
- What do you need to do differently to reach that percentage?
- What are the product category trends by company, sales rep and customer?

Review accounts by their size and market segments.

- How many accounts are large, medium or small?
- What is the individual segment contribution to your overall business?
- What should it be?
- What can you do differently in 2020 to penetrate the most profitable market segment?

Review performance of your people.

- Were performance goals met? If not, why?
- What were their conversion, penetration and retention rates?
- Did they obtain quota and meet their territory goals and objectives?
- What needs to improve to get better results?
- What training and development do they need?

REFLECT on your successes from the past year, as well as lessons learned. What's happening in your market and industry? What is changing, and how can you adapt?

To spend quality time reflecting, I suggest an annual brainstorming SWOT analysis, with a cross-functional team that represents all facets of your business. Determine as a group what your company's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats are for the New Year. It is important to be clear and communicate the differences in these four areas before you facilitate the conversation. You may even have them come prepared to the meeting, to save time and eliminate confusion.

Strengths: Those things that have superseded competitive pressures; your differentiators; what has sustained your business over time.

Weaknesses: These are the areas in your company that can be detrimental and may affect whether you ultimately succeed or not. They usually take a lot of attention or resources to overcome.

Opportunities: Ideas that are on the horizon that need some attention or resources, but could make the difference between winning or losing.

Threats: These are serious concerns over which you have no control.

The end game of the SWOT analysis is to create your company's 2020 vision playing from your strengths while putting strategies together to quickly address the business opportunities. »

Krista Moore CONTINUED FROM PAGE 40

The next step is to Reflect on the competition, your customers' changing needs and what worked and what didn't work in the business sales strategy and approach. Where did you fall short?

There is no doubt that small independent businesses need to be more aggressive, think more strategically and go after their competitors' weaknesses. At the same time you need to ensure you are meeting your customer's ever-changing needs.

Reflect by asking the following questions about your competition:

- How is their business growing?
- What tactics are they using?
- What markets are they winning?
- What messaging are they sending?

Put the customer first to better understand their changing needs.

- What's changing in their world?
- How can you better satisfy their needs?
- How can you continue to add value?
- How can you differentiate and remain relevant?

Now look inward at your company's previous year's sales approach and strategy. Ask yourself:

- Did we have a clear plan and approach?
- Did we execute the plan well?
- What worked? What didn't work?
- What should we do differently moving forward to get better results?

It may feel daunting, but most hard work does. The best thing you can do for yourself and your business is to take the necessary time to REVIEW and REFLECT. Clean the windshield and REFRESH your 2020 vision.

Krista Moore is president of K.Coaching, Inc., founder of IDGrowth Solutions and creator of the IDGrowth Sales Vault, a learning management system utilized by hundreds of independent dealers to enhance their sales strategies, training and leadership development. For more information, visit the IDGrowth website at www.idgrowth.com.

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