DECEMBER/JANUARY **2022**

LOOKING AHEAD TO 2022

INDEPENDENT DEALER
The official publication of IOPFDA

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EDITORIAL

As another year draws to a close, we continue to slowly chart a course out of the pandemic. Despite the emergence of new variants, things do seem to be improving and we can only hope that the "return to the office" continues.

Whether we'll ever see a full return to pre-pandemic levels is one of the issues considered in our cover story on page 24, which looks at trends for the forthcoming year and includes some advice on how to succeed going forward from some leading members of the IDC—once again showing the willingness of dealers to help each other succeed in the larger battles it faces.

Speaking of help, there's also our regular annual update from the two main industry wholesalers on the marketing plans for the forthcoming year, designed to help dealers make the most out of their product portfolios.

There's also good news from Paul Miller, legislative counsel and chief lobbyist of your trade body, IOPFDA, about a couple of big wins for the industry as Congress begins to wind up for the end of the year.

Meanwhile, at *INDEPENDENT DEALER* we are making a few changes for 2022. We have tweaked the editorial calendar to introduce alternate combined issues, in order to ensure maximum use of resources and better coverage of key events.

As always, please get in touch with any news about your dealership that you think would interest our readers. We are always keen to hear about ways you contribute in your local communities, new marketing ideas and any other wins you may have.

All that remains is to wish you all a happy holiday season and the brightest possible New Year.

WINNER'S CIRCLE

Virginia dealer celebrates 50 years in business

When Patricia (Pat) Miller traveled to Washington DC from her hometown of Kingsport, Tennessee in 1969, a career in the office supplies industry didn't really feature in her plans. Her ambition was to study cosmetology; but in order to support herself through school, she took a part-time job working for Rosslyn Office Supply in Arlington, Virginia.

By the time she finished school, she realized that her future lay in sales and went full time with the dealership. Within a year she was manager of Rosslyn's newly opened second branch in Springfield, Virginia. When she learned that the owner planned to close the branch after just six months, she took out a $8,000 secured loan—co-signed by a local bank officer who had seen how she treated customers and believed in her business acumen—and purchased the store in February 1971.

That bank officer's instincts proved correct. By the end of the »

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AVERY

Winner's Circle CONTINUED FROM PAGE 2

1970s, thanks to a well-crafted business plan, Miller's Office Products owned four retail stores. However, the 1980s brought a different business environment and new challenges. The arrival of the retail superstores such as Staples and Office Depot meant a rethink in strategy was required.

Like other IDC survivors of that time, Pat refocused her efforts on building a dedicated B2B sales force, with all retail operations shut down by the end of the decade. Another key development in the 1980s was the appointment of Wayne Stillwagon, who had joined the firm in 1976, as general manager in 1980. He bought into the business in 1994; and while Pat is still a major driving force in the company, it is Wayne who currently makes most of the key day-to-day decisions.

The company continued from strength to strength during the 1990s, expanding its reach outside DC to service the Charlottesville, Virginia market as well as the I-81 corridor. "We operate in a very crowded market," explains Craig Church, Miller's vice president of sales. "But our strategy was to move into areas that were less crowded rather than trying to fight it out in denser markets."

With the dawn of the new millennium came the need to adapt once more and Miller's embraced the e-commerce market. It also recognized the need to diversify early and made a significant move into breakroom products in 2004.

In 2006, Wayne oversaw the building of a new 65,000 square foot distribution center in Lorton, Virginia. The facility replaced a network of smaller warehouse spaces and housed the company's corporate headquarters when it opened in 2007. Miller's also purchased a certified Knoll dealership which helped move its furniture sales to another level.

Diversification continued over the next decade or so; as did a targeted acquisition program that continued the strategy of moving into underserved markets. By 2015, it was decided a rebrand was needed to better reflect a product mix that now included categories such as maintenance, jan/san, industrial, healthcare, school and promotional products, in addition to the dealership's traditional office supplies, office furniture and breakroom offerings.And so Miller's Supplies at Work was born.

In February 2020, Miller's was doing well and looking forward to its 50th year, weighing up various thoughts about different ways to celebrate. The following month COVID-19 hit and in April the decision was taken to switch wholesalers; so party planning understandably took a back seat.

"We have done a few things to mark the occasion," explains Craig. "We changed our logo and ran a

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Winner's Circle CONTINUED FROM PAGE 4

lot of different promotions based on the number 50:50 percent off certain products; buy 50 of these for a discount—that sort of thing. But we stopped short of having an in-person event. Our attention was turned toward looking after our customers and staff during the pandemic, and figuring out how we approach being around for the next 50 years!"

Like many in the IDC, Miller's refocused its efforts early in the pandemic to getting hold of PPE product to help its customers, while its office supplies and breakroom division took a hit.

"The challenge is now to take those PPE customers and turn them into regular jan/san customers," explains Craig. "We had several years of sustained growth going into COVID and have made several acquisitions over the last four or five years. So we really ran into COVID, which helped us survive all those challenges that immediately hit. Now we are trying to run out of COVID. Sales did drop; but we are now coming out and in November we were only down maybe 13 percent on pre-COVID figures; so that is certainly tolerable. It was a punch to the face, but it didn't knock us out!"

Craig is a firm believer that the core reason for the dealership's success over the last 50 years is the philosophy that Pat installed at Miller's right at the very start. "She is very much a person who believes that you should treat others in the way you would want to be treated. As a result, we not only have a lot of long-term customers—with whom we have grown over the years—but also a lot of long-term employees that have been with us through all the various challenges that we have faced and helped support us through them. Change is tough on everyone and it's been a real team effort."

Pat Miller

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California dealer donates to local hospital

San Francisco Bay Area-based Blaisdell's Business Products was delighted to be able to restart its regular donations to UCSF Benioff Children's Hospital in Oakland at the end of November with a check for $10,000.

"This donation is near and dear to our heart," said Michael Witt, Blaisdell's chief operating officer. "My wife, Margee, and I have two children who have been patients there. Our daughter Emily, who now works for our company, was very sick when she was four years old with a case of E. coli and spent about five weeks there. Years later, our son Alex was hit by a car at a crosswalk and spent three weeks there. Both kids are now in their 30s and fully recovered, but were very well treated by the hospital—and we are so grateful. It has always meant a lot to Margee and me.

"We have been able to get Blaisdell's to a point where we can give back a little more. This is one we do every year. Unfortunately, we couldn't do it last year because of COVID-19, but business has returned enough for us to be able to make this $10,000 donation. It brings the total over the years to $50,000 for this particular charity."

The check was presented to Anthony Candito, director of corporate partnerships at UCSF Benioff, by Blaisdell's general manager John Banholzer, who joined the dealership earlier in the year, having previously worked as regional sales manager for northern California and northern Nevada at Office Depot. "He's just a solid guy," said Michael. "He has really helped take our team to another level." »

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BICGSAM11BE	BIC® PrevaGuard™ Round Stic® Ball Pen	1.0mm	Blue	DZ
BICGSAM60BK	BIC® PrevaGuard™ Round Stic® Ball Pen	1.0mm	Black	60 CT
Retractable Ballpoint Pens				
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BICCSA11BE	BIC® PrevaGuard™ Clic Stic® Retractable Ball Pen	1.0mm	Blue	DZ
BICCSAP60ECBK	BIC® PrevaGuard™ Clic Stic® Retractable Ball Pen	1.0mm	Black	60 CT
BICCSAP60ECBE	BIC® PrevaGuard™ Clic Stic® Retractable Ball Pen	1.0mm	Blue	60 CT
Retractable Stylus/Ballpoint Pens				
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Gel Pens				
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BICRGGAP4BE	BIC® PrevaGuard™ Gel-ocity® Gel Pen	0.7mm	Blue	4 CT
BICRGGA11BK	BIC® PrevaGuard™ Gel-ocity® Gel Pen	0.7mm	Black	DZ
BICRGGA11BE	BIC® PrevaGuard™ Gel-ocity® Gel Pen	0.7mm	Blue	DZ
Mechanical Pencils				
BICMPCMAP4	BIC® PrevaGuard™ Media Clic™ Mechanical Pencil	0.7mm		4 CT
BICMPCMA11	BIC® PrevaGuard™ Media Clic™ Mechanical Pencil	0.7mm		DZ

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California dealership donates 8,600 meals through Second Harvest

Santa Cruz, California-based Palace Business Solutions was delighted to be able to hand over a check worth 8,600 meals to Second Harvest Food Bank at the beginning of December.

While checks are usually made out for dollars and cents rather than meals, the move highlights Second Harvest's amazing ability to create a meal for $0.25, due to its extensive networks of food producers, suppliers and dedicated volunteers,

The dollar-value of the donation—$2,150—is a result of Palace's Take a Bite Out of Hunger campaign, which has been running for a number of years now.

"This is something we do every year," explained Brittany Overbeck, customer care manager at Palace. "Every October we partner with Hammermill and focus on its Great White recycled paper line. For every carton of paper sold, we donate 10 meals to Second Harvest. We also offer a similar incentive with toner. It basically comes down to what our customers are going to purchase the most—so yes, it's a way to push sales; but it is also a way to promote Second Harvest and get the word out about the wonderful work that they do."

Left to right (Palace employees unless stated): Denise Hunter; Mark Rispaud; Mary Kate Belliveau (International Paper); Todd Trowbridge; Gary Trowbridge; Richelle Noroyan (Second Harvest Food Bank); Michael Marquez; Lori Scott

The promotion runs for the full month of October and then it becomes a logistical issue as to when the check can be presented. "It's not always easy to get everyone together," Brittany pointed out. "This year we were excited because Mary Kate Belliveau from International Paper, who helped with the campaign, was able to be there which was great.

"Second Harvest has been amazing for our community, especially as we went through COVID-19. Before the pandemic it was giving out about 650,000 pounds of food a month, but during the pandemic that number nearly doubled to 1.3 million in Santa Cruz County alone. It was fantastic to see how they stepped up. We are really proud to be able to help them." »

 CONTINUED FROM PAGE 8

Texas dealer presents three checks to local causes

Central Texas dealer Perry Office Plus has donated a total of $3,600 from its annual Giving Fund to help three deserving local nonprofits.

The Perry Office Plus Giving Fund is one of the many ways in which the dealership contributes to the community. "Whenever a new employee joins the Perry team, they have the opportunity to opt into the fund," explains customer support manager Lynnsay Macey. "We call it Denim Donations, where we automatically donate a few dollars via a payroll deduction and in exchange, employees get to wear jeans to work on Fridays."

At the end of the year, an email is sent out to all participants in the fund asking them to nominate and vote for three nonprofits which will receive a share of the collected funds.

This year, the team decided the money should be split between local homeless center Feed My Sheep Temple; Foster Love Bell County, which helps children caught in the welfare system; and the Children's Advocacy Center of Central Texas. All the organizations are based in Bell County, where Perry Office Plus is headquartered, and each received a check for $1,200.

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SECRETS of success

Eaton Office Supply Welcoming the fourth generation

These days, hearing of an independent office products dealer preparing to usher in its second generation of leadership is impressive. Hearing of one ushering in its fourth generation is nothing short of amazing. But that is precisely what Eaton Office Supply, Amherst, New York, will be doing on January 1, 2022.

Getting started

Richard Eaton learned about obtaining supplies—primarily books—for other students in college. After graduating in accounting, he started a bookstore at Wesleyan University in Connecticut. In 1915, he joined a print shop looking for expertise and financial backing. A year later, Arthur Eaton joined the printing company and the two brothers bought out the other partners, establishing first Eaton Brothers, then Eaton Office Supply.

Changing of the guard

Today, 106 years later, Richard's grandson, Bruce C. Eaton, is president—until the new year, when his stepdaughter Andrea Bradly assumes the role, which Bruce says she has worked hard to earn. "Andrea started with Eaton in 2008 in the marketing department," he says. "In 2011, she became marketing manager and in 2018 she joined the board of directors."

Even so, the transition won't be instantaneous. "We started succession planning back in 2018 and we are still not done," he explains. "We'll continue to work on it for the next couple of years. I've been in the business for 44 years. It's my job to show Andrea the things I've learned and she will figure it out from there."

Tips for success

Bruce has figured out a few things in his long career that have kept Eaton Office Supply successful. One of them is the need to keep up with technology.

"Investing in technology is very important," he says. "With everyone working at home, we put in a Wi-Fi-connected route tracking system. Our truck drivers have tablets, so customers receive emails that their deliveries are on the way and once they are delivered. Our drivers take pictures of the delivered packages and email them to the customer. And thanks to GPS, we know where the trucks are and what deliveries have been made. If a truck has made 30 out of 50 deliveries, we know there are still 20 to make and can keep our customers informed.

"On the front end, a good website is critical to survival in today's world. A good web store with A+ content is important. So too is easy accessibility and easy navigation. Finally, it needs to have an easy way to purchase. We just created an open website. Before, customers had to log in with their user names and passwords; now they can log in if they want, but visitors also can order and use a credit card."

Number of employees: 60
Key management: Bruce C. Eaton, president; Andrea Bradley, marketing manager; Bill Bunny, IT director; Kristine McMahon, controller; Paul Nasca, sales manager; Casey Hester, operations manager; Laura Dillon, customer service manager
Percentage of business online: 60%
Year founded: 1916
Main wholesaler: S.P. Richards

Bruce believes diversification is another key to independent dealer longevity.

"Office products are changing and alone are not enough, so diversification is very important," he says. "We are always looking for additional products and services to offer customers. We offer breakroom, janitorial, print and other categories; so we are already pretty diverse. But we are looking into doing more with safety and shipping supplies. Maintenance, repair and operations is another area. A few of our peers have started down that path with some success, so it is intriguing."

Bruce offers some further advice for dealers looking toward the future: "I'd encourage dealers to think about acquisitions if they have the cash. I also think that to drive profit, it is important to be able to look at the profit and loss, balance sheets and cash flow, and understand them. Staying close to your suppliers is also essential. We are a stocking company, so we buy direct from manufacturers, but we also buy from wholesalers. Listen to your suppliers and try to connect their brands to the marketplace.

"I've spent 40 years working with buying groups, as chairman, on the board of directors and as a member," he concludes. "Buying groups help independent dealers stay competitive."

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NBPI again raises millions for City of Hope

City of Hope's National Business Products Industry (NBPI) has announced it has raised a total of $14.5 million this year for cancer research.

NBPI's annual fundraising effort was led this year by senior vice president and general manager of Sylvamo, Greg Gibson. The year-long Sustain Hope campaign culminated in October with a virtual gala and "watch part" honoring Gibson, who is also the 2021 NBPI Spirit of Life Award recipient.

Executives from the US business supplies industry gathered at the historic Navy Pier in Chicago, Illinois, for the celebration of Gibson and the industry's philanthropic achievement.

"I can't thank the industry enough for what you've done, what your teams have accomplished; for your generosity and kindness," Gibson said. "City of Hope researchers, scientists, physicians and staff work around the clock providing solutions for those who need them today, while fueling the hope of finding the cures of tomorrow. The commitment of the NBPI over the years demonstrates our industry's compassion, unity and unwavering commitment to supporting City of Hope and its mission of finding cures for diseases that affect so many we know and love."

NBPI at City of Hope is made up of philanthropic and volunteer leaders across sectors including office products, technology, food service, retailers and more. Since 1983, NBPI has raised more than $230 million to support research and patient care for life-threatening diseases, such as cancer and diabetes.

City of Hope will host the 2022 NBPI Spirit of Life Gala in Chicago on October 13, 2022. It will honor Peter Scala, chief merchandising officer of Staples Inc, who, as the 2022 Spirit of Life honoree, will spearhead the coming year's annual fundraising efforts.

AIS makes strategic move to realign sales territories

Massachusetts-based office furniture manufacturer AIS England has announced the realignment of its sales team, which will now be comprised of two geographic regions: the Eastern and Western United States.

The reformed sales team will be led by two senior vice presidents of sales: Ben Maxwell in the east and Doug Bowen in the west.

"In the months since I assumed leadership, I continue to be impressed by our outstanding teams," said Nick Haritos, who was named president of AIS in June. "This sales realignment will further enhance our responsiveness to our dealer partners and position us for strong continued growth, even in the face of market uncertainty."

Maxwell, who joined AIS in 2000, has long been an integral part of the company's executive team. Bowen is new to AIS but a veteran of the industry: before joining AIS, he was the South sales director for Global Furniture Group and prior to that director of sales, Southeast region for Haworth.

"We believe this new structure will not only streamline the sales process for our dealers, but also create more opportunities," stated Haritos. "Ben and Doug will work in tandem to leverage our already robust presence in the industry, ensuring that we better meet the needs of our dealers and help them succeed. Together, they will develop new strategies and invest in new markets that have the greatest opportunities for us."

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Clover Imaging unveils new sustainability-focused packaging

Clover Imaging Group has redesigned its ink and toner cartridge packaging to reflect the company's strong commitment to environmental sustainability.

"As more and more businesses and consumers seek out environmentally friendly products like remanufactured printer cartridges, we wanted our packaging to showcase that integral component of our value proposition," said Eric Martin, president of Clover Imaging Group. "When you choose a remanufactured printer cartridge over a single-use plastic cartridge, you are making a conscious decision to keep waste out of landfills and conserve natural resources while maintaining OEM-comparable quality."

Clover Imaging has spent the past year designing the new look. "We worked with a number of focus groups to explore what is most important to our partners and their customers," added Keli Posch, director of marketing for Clover Imaging Group. "We concluded that the continuing health of our environment is critical not only to the sustainability of our planet, but also to the economies we serve. That understanding very much guided our design efforts."

The new packaging design also features a seal celebrating Clover Imaging's 25 years in business. In that time, Clover claims to have diverted more than 350 million pounds of waste from landfill and planted over 700,000 trees in at-risk forests around the world.

Clover Imaging's new packaging will begin shipping at the end of December 2021. »

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Kimberly-Clark names KCP president

Kimberly-Clark has named an experienced fast-moving consumer goods executive to head its B2B professional division, KCP.

Ehab Abou-Oaf has been appointed to the role vacated in April by Russ Torres, who was promoted to run Kimberly-Clark's North American consumer business. Abou-Oaf has been with the company for just over two years, most recently as vice president for the Middle East and Africa. He will now be responsible for the group's $3 billion B2B arm and will report directly to CEO Mike Hsu.

Prior to Kimberly-Clark, Abou-Oaf spent 19 years in senior management roles with Mars, including president of Mars Wrigley Confectionery for Asia, Australia, the Middle East & Africa. Before that, he spent 10 years with Procter & Gamble in packaging, product development and marketing roles. During his extensive career, Abou-Oaf has worked in Singapore, Saudi Arabia, Belgium, Japan, Egypt and China.

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Whitney Brothers' Nature View Serenity Pod wins Best of Year award

Early learning furniture brand Whitney Brothers has received a 2021 Best of Year Honoree award from *Interior Design* magazine for its biophilia-inspired Nature View Serenity Pod for preschool and kindergarten classrooms.

Editorial panelists from *Interior Design* cited the curved design and stunning imagery as an inventive interpretation of a study carrel that brings the calm of nature indoors and creates an inviting personalized space for children.

Multiple pods can form an S-shape, semi-circle, horseshoe or myriad other configurations to create an esthetically pleasing and flexible learning space without compromising visibility for adult supervision. The Nature View Serenity Pod also serves as a functional partition for social distancing—a necessity amid the realities of COVID-19.

Now in its 16th year, Best of Year is the preeminent design awards program honoring the most significant projects and products of the year. The awards were announced in a December 8 live broadcast hosted by Cindy Allen, editor-in-chief of *Interior Design*.

"We're honored to receive this award and excited how the judges' decision reinforces the importance of biophilia design to our littlest learners," said Mike Jablonski, president of Whitney Brothers. "This award signals an understanding that biophilia design can increase a child's engagement with their learning environment and set the trajectory of their future learning outcomes. That's a powerful force for creating equity."

Imperial Dade makes it 44

Food service packaging and janitorial supplies distributor Imperial Dade has added American Paper & Twine (APT) to its growing list of acquisitions.

Headquartered in Nashville, Tennessee, APT is a leading distributor of janitorial, packaging, food service, safety and office products run by Bob Doochin and Karen Doochin Vingelen. With 95 years of experience, it has built a strong reputation for its knowledgeable sales force, wide breath of products and high touch customer service.

The addition of APT will significantly strengthen Imperial Dade's existing presence in the Southeast and help reach customers coast to coast.

"The legacy we have built here at American Paper & Twine over the past 95 years will provide a great foundation for growth for Imperial Dade in our region," said Karen Doochin Vingelen, president and COO of APT. "With the added resources by combining with Imperial Dade, we will be able to continue to provide exceptional customer service while accelerating the growth we have experienced in recent years."

The transaction represents the 44th acquisition for Imperial Dade under the leadership of Robert and Jason Tillis, CEO and president of Imperial Dade, respectively. Financial terms of the private transaction were not disclosed.

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All Congress wants for Christmas is to adjourn

By Paul A. Miller, IOPFDA legislative counsel

They say the only two certainties in our lives are death and taxes. That may be the case for some of us; but when it comes to the 535 members serving in Congress, there are two additional certainties in life. First, crisis drives them to cross the partisan aisle to pass legislation quickly. Second, Christmas and the end-of-year holiday will get them to break any legislative logjam if it means getting out of town early. That's politics, as they say!

Last month the House and Senate came together to pass a five-year transportation reauthorization bill. This is significant, because Washington typically punts on issues like this until the next year by simply passing an extension of the previous law. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, all we heard from Washington was that there wasn't money to pass a long-term transportation reauthorization bill. Then the talk suggested that if a bill could be passed, it would need to be in the range of $500 billion over five years. Fast forward to 2021 and the "pandemic effect," as I call it. Yes, there were some who complained about the cost of the recently passed transportation reauthorization bill, which came with a $1.2 trillion price tag; but the majority in Congress voted for this legislation. In so-called "good times," we cannot muster up the courage to spend on needed infrastructure; but during a pandemic, we are willing to break the bank to do so. We call this the "Washington way."

We are now 15 days away from Christmas and we want to see Washington get things done; pay close attention. We move at warp speed when the possibility of having to stay in Washington during Christmas is at stake. For over a year, Congress sat on a transportation reauthorization bill. For 12 months, Congress sat on a budget resolution and was unable to pass its 12 annual appropriations bills. For 12 months, Congress sat on its annual debt ceiling obligations. For 12 months, Congress battled over another $1.5 trillion economic stimulus plan (Build Back Better).

In non-pandemic times, passing all these bills would be a monumental task, with lots of partisan fighting and made-for-TV moments, and both sides accusing each other of failing the American people. This year, the partisan fighting and made-for-TV moments have still occurred; but Congress has passed all these bills, with the Build Back Better plan passing the House along party lines—but not even close to getting it over the goal line in the Senate.

How can Washington move so quickly today? Well, I call it having "the amnesia effect." Congress will cut deals and move critical legislation over the goal line if it means everyone gets to go home and spend time with family. But when they return in January, they are quick to blame the other side for voting to pass a massive wasteful annual spending bill that will cause our grandchildren to pay it all back. You've heard the rhetoric before.

As Congress races to the end of the session, here are a couple big wins for IOPFDA and the industry.

Vaccine mandate update

The General Services Administration (GSA) recently issued a notice informing contractors that the United States District Court for the Southern District of Georgia issued a preliminary injunction on December 7, 2021 that halts the enforcement of Federal Acquisition Regulation (FAR) Clause 52.223-99, Ensuring Adequate COVID-19 Safety Protocols for Federal Contractors, in GSA contracts and contract-like instruments, implementing the Safer Federal Workforce Taskforce guidance for contractors and subcontractors nationwide.

What does this mean?

GSA and federal agencies using GSA contracts will take no action to enforce FAR Clause 52.223-99 in any GSA contract or contract-like instrument. The Safer Federal Workforce Taskforce is maintaining a website with current information related to this subject.

What does it mean to "not enforce" the clause?

If a GSA contract already includes FAR Clause 52.223-99, federal agencies should not require the contractor to fulfill the requirements outlined in the Safer Federal Workforce Taskforce guidance:

- continued eligibility of GSA contractors for new contracts, new

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orders, options and extensions, even if they have not agreed to follow FAR Clause 52.223-99;
- vaccination of covered contractor employees;
- requirements related to masking and physical distancing while in covered contractor workplaces; and
- designation by covered contractors of a person or persons to coordinate COVID-19 workplace safety efforts at covered contractor workplaces.

GSA noted that the court order applies only to the enforcement of the contract clause. Federal agency workplace safety protocols for federal buildings and federally controlled facilities still apply for the purposes of accessing those facilities (e.g., masking and social distancing). Contractor employees working onsite in those facilities must still follow those federal agency workplace safety protocols.

FY'23 National Defense Reauthorization Act

GSA Online Marketplace Update

Section 853 requires GSA to begin testing all three e-commerce models. Starting no later than 180 days after passage of the Act, the GSA is required to begin testing all three portal models (other than any such model selected from the initial proof of concept phase).

GSA is required to submit to Congress a report that:
- Assesses and compares each e-commerce portal with regard to the price and quality of products supplied on each platform. This includes:
  - supplier reliability and service;
  - safeguards for security of government and third-party data;
  - protections against counterfeits;
  - supply chain risks, particularly with respect to complex commercial products; and
  - overall adherence to federal procurement rules and policies;
- List the types of commercial products that could be procured using the models tested;
- Provide an estimate of the amount that could be spent on each portal;
- Analyze the costs and benefits of convenience to the federal government of procuring commercial products from each of the three e-commerce portal models; and
- Provide updates on the models tested and a timeline for the completion of testing.

This is a big win for IOPFDA and the industry, as we have been pushing for this common-sense solution from the date of creation of the online marketplace.

Federal Prison Industries

The House bill contained a provision (Section 817) that would amend Section 3905 of Title 10, United States Code to enhance competition and market research requirements for products offered for sale by Federal Prison Industries (FPI).

The Senate amendment contained no similar provision. The final agreement does not include this provision.

In light of improvements in the ability of federal agencies to better mine acquisition data, increases in the simplified acquisition threshold and the advent of e-commerce portals, Congress has directed the comptroller general of the United States to assess:
- how the department identifies opportunities to acquire products from FPI;
- the contracting approaches and the vehicles used to do so;
- what oversight is conducted to ensure compliance with applicable laws and regulations; and
- any other issues the comptroller general deems relevant to help inform congressional oversight and future legislation.

It has further directed the comptroller general to brief the Committees on Armed Services of the Senate and the House of Representatives on preliminary observations by December 1, 2022, and provide a complete report at a mutually agreed upon date.

Outlook

These aren't the only three policy areas facing IOPFDA; but they are at the top of the list, due to their economic impact in keeping the industry viable for a public that depends on it for critical supply needs. Next year is an election year and will be very contentious in Congress, as Democrats try to figure out how to get over this COVID-19 hump, President Biden tries to boost his sagging poll numbers and Republicans prepare for what they see as a possible red wave election in the House. So 2022 will provide us with more partisan politics, election year drama and continued massive spending efforts. This means IOPFDA must be aggressive in its asks and be on guard for any efforts to implement rules and regulations that would either give big tech a continued advantage or introduce additional barriers that might hinder our recovery.

So, while Congress is pushing for adjournment, IOPFDA is already preparing for January 3, 2022 and the reconvening of Congress. We have a lot to accomplish next year in a very short timeframe; which is why, even before the current Congress adjourns, we are already focusing our attention on 2022. Nothing is ever easy in Washington and continued COVID-19 restrictions, along with a very divided Congress, will make our jobs harder and make you even more critical to our grassroots efforts.

Happy holidays to everyone and I look forward to working with you again in the New Year!

For any questions, please contact Paul Miller, IOPFDA director of government affairs at (703) 383-1330 or via email at pmiller@mwcapitol.com.

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IOPFDA/ISSA merger: one year later

By Mike Tucker

I was interviewed in the January/February 2021 edition of *INDEPENDENT DEALER* about the recent merger of IOPFDA and ISSA and the benefits and opportunities our members could look forward to. This article is a follow-up to that discussion and details how our partnership has evolved since.

As mentioned in the interview a year ago, access to healthcare benefits was one of the major factors our dealers were interested in. As of this month, about 10 percent of our members have enrolled in the plan, with estimated annual savings approaching $1 million. These are significant numbers, but not quite where we hoped to be at this point. Even with a strong program offering significant savings, dealers are still reluctant to make changes that aren't necessary or take on any tasks that add to their current workload. As the business climate continues to improve in 2022, we expect participation in the program to grow. You can learn more about these benefits at www.mdp.issa.com.

We are also working on affordable cyber risk coverage. Over the past year, IOPFDA has hosted two webinars for dealers on the importance of cybersecurity. To operate smoothly, all businesses rely on their computer systems functioning properly. If systems go down due to a glitch, error or attack, businesses risk losing significant income and customers. Ransomware is evolving and becoming more advanced, with infections up 40 percent within the past year. In addition to educating and warning members about these dangers, IOPFDA is working with multiple insurance brokers to provide affordable cyber risk coverage. We anticipate launching this new benefit in the first quarter of 2022.

It was my intention to retool and launch a series of jansan training programs customized for office products dealers. In the early stages, it became apparent that a lot of this training was already being offered by wholesalers, manufacturers and others, so additional training from ISSA would require a unique approach. That said, we have two ISSA programs that office products dealers can really benefit from.

The value of clean

This toolkit helps dealers explain and justify cleaning budgets in an easy-to-follow way with hard numbers that their customers need. IOPFDA member dealers can access tools like the Value of Clean Report, infographics, calculators, videos and more to make the business case that cleaning is a critical investment in better occupant health, a more confident society and a better bottom line for facilities. Dealers can get started at www.issa.com/value.

GBAC STAR accreditation for dealers and distributors

IOPFDA is teaming up with the Global Biorisk Advisory Council (GBAC), a division of ISSA, and its GBAC STAR accreditation program—the cleaning industry's only accredited facilities program for outbreak protection, response and recovery. More than 4,000 facilities—including hotels, airports, sports arenas, convention centers and more—in 85 countries worldwide trust GBAC STAR accreditation to open and operate safely. GBAC STAR will be available soon for office products dealers.

To ensure the program meets the office products industry's needs, GBAC will provide a simplified risk assessment and risk mitigation strategy designed for office products dealers and their customers. Businesses will learn how to establish, implement and maintain documented cleaning and disinfection standards for their offices, warehouses and delivery vehicles. The program will also include provisions for minimizing and controlling risks associated with an infectious disease outbreak to protect customers, employees and the community. Additionally, GBAC recognizes the importance of standards and procedures for drivers and deliveries. This program will provide the guidance to minimize risk and maximize the safety of deliveries, drivers and customers, including:

- enhanced disinfection of vehicles and delivery equipment and high touch areas encountered during deliveries;
- photo/no touch proof of deliveries;
- masking and social distancing as required by customers; and
- daily confirmation/documentation of no fever or other suspicious symptoms.

This unique program is nearly complete and we anticipate it will be launched by the end of the first quarter.

As I said in the January interview, IOPFDA's goals and association programs are designed to enhance, not compete with, a buying group or wholesaler's offerings. We're always trying to find ways to help dealers save money, improve processes and adapt to change. I think we've done well in working through this first year, and I'm excited for an even better 2022.

For more information on GBAC STAR or other IOPFDA/ISSA programs, contact Mike Tucker at info@iopfda.org or (410) 493-9491.

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IOPFDA
A Division of ISSA

by Lisa Veeck

LOOKING AHEAD TO 2022

Most independent dealers are more than happy to see 2021 draw to a close in the hope of a bright, shiny new year. Yet with continued pandemic uncertainty, an economy that may be on the brink of going rogue and the vague underlying feeling that the world is a bit off-kilter, most dealers are wondering what 2022 will bring. While no one claims to have the proverbial crystal ball, many dealers are willing to make educated guesses about what 2022 might look like, including trends, concerns and opportunities.

Locally speaking

"Buy local will continue to be important and we will continue to emphasize it, especially for schools and other local businesses," says Yancey Jones, COO of The Supply Room, Ashland, Virginia. "It's about keeping dollars local and supporting our communities."

Bruce C. Eaton, president of Eaton Office Supply, Amherst, New York, agrees: "Buy local is absolutely a trend I see continuing in 2022. We just had Small Business Saturday, which is an example of how the trend is moving into the local and national spotlight. We have 'buy local' on all our marketing materials. I think it is important. It's what differentiates independent dealers."

But Kasie Morley—president of Jacobs Gardner Supply Co. and Penny Wise Office Products, both headquartered in Bowie, Maryland—doesn't think stressing "buy local" is enough. "Buy local took a back seat during the pandemic to convenience, which is still top of mind with customers," she says. "Dealers need to stress speed, delivery, product selection and ordering convenience."

Cleaning up with clean

Another trend that may—or may not—continue from this year to the next is the surge in PPE and other janitorial supply sales most dealers experienced in 2020-21. While the wave was moving in that direction pre-pandemic, COVID-19 triggered a tsunami of sales in these categories.

"Janitorial sales was a big boost for us last year," recalls Jeremy Bourret, CEO/owner of Suburban Inc.—We Help People Work, Middleton, Connecticut. "We sell more and more in janitorial, while traditional office supplies are shrinking. And we keep the business. Office products has become so competitive; but once we get janitorial product accounts, they stay with us. It has grown so much that the comfort level for our sales force is now the same as selling coffee. It is an opportunity they might have shied away from in the past, but sales reps are now more willing to take on new things."

According to Jordon Kudler, president of Legacy Office Solutions, Brooklyn, New York, the category exposes some of the advantages of doing business with independent dealers. "I hope our janitorial product sales continue," he says. "It shows the ability of independent dealers to be nimble and respond quickly. Besides broadening our product offerings, it showed our willingness to work harder and go the extra mile."

Morley contends that "absolutely" janitorial products will remain a hot category in 2022: "People are thinking of cleaning and air purification—things

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we never thought of before that open doors for office product dealers and create new opportunities."

Homeward bound

"Lucky for us, we have two companies," Morley continues. "Through Penny Wise, we've always served small home offices, so we were prepared for what was needed, including residential deliveries. I don't think it will return to pre-pandemic days; it will be a hybrid of workers in the office, maybe three days, and working remotely the other two. We feel well prepared for this scenario."

Kudler agrees emphatically: "Yes, yes, yes, the hybrid office model will definitely continue in 2022. I think they will work in the office two or three or alternate days. I don't know if it will be permanent. People still need to collaborate, which is difficult, and filling some customer requests can be challenging. One concern with the hybrid model is how it will impact how people buy. In the early days of COVID-19, businesses were scurrying and didn't have time to think about prices. They gave employees the latitude to buy where they could get produce and submit receipts for reimbursements. But this is cumbersome for offices going forward. I think businesses will begin having a requisition process to fill requests from their normal supplier to the office to avoid additional expense."

Jones agrees that the hybrid workplace model is here to stay for many businesses. "How independent dealers adapt to the hybrid model will be very important," he says. "Home delivery is a huge challenge and order size has to be profitable. There also are geographical differences regarding going back to the office; and there are verticals—such as healthcare, education and manufacturing—where working from home is not an option. But with the additional services we provide, remote working gives us a chance to do well. Plus, very few offices are saying they are never coming back; and when they do, we will be ready."

Mary Catherine Sigmon, president of Kennedy Office Supply, Lincolnton, North Carolina, also thinks geography plays a role: "In the more metropolitan areas, the hybrid model of a couple days in the office and a couple days remote is likely to stay. Some of our largest accounts in these areas are still not back. In more remote areas, workers are all back in the office. Our outside sales team in remote areas had much higher numbers, while our outside sales forces located in cities struggled to make sales and reach their goals."

Inside or out?

This brings up another interesting trend: will the focus on inside sales reps that started in 2020 and gained momentum through 2021 continue next

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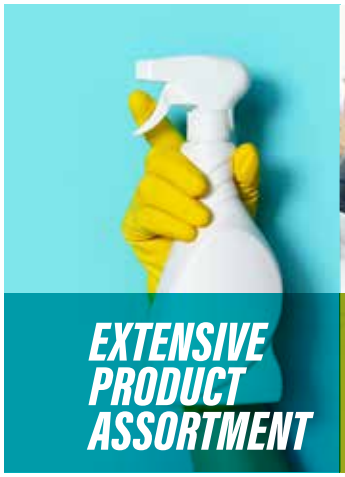

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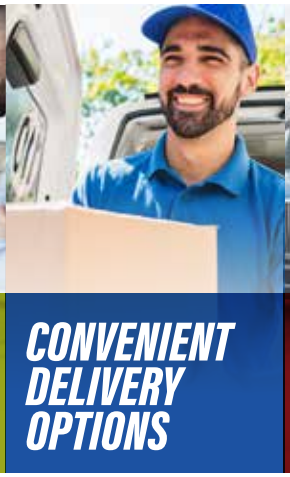

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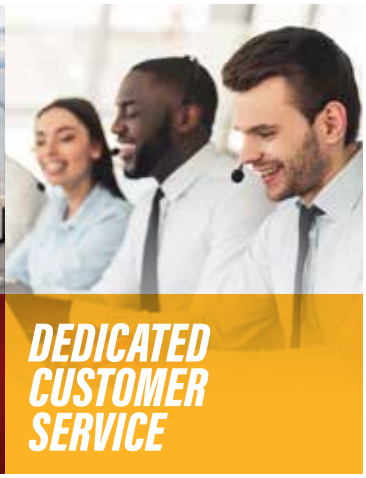

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year and into the future?

"It's been an interesting evolution," Jones acknowledges. "Outside sales reps didn't have a choice but to become inside reps, since they couldn't see customers. But the days when outside reps can just manage accounts are gone, since inside sales reps can do this more effectively. Outside reps will become more like category specialists in charge of expanding into other categories and increasing market share with existing and new clients. Other outside reps will be hunters, bringing in new business, which will continue to be the hardest part. I also think it depends on the size and type of account. A school or state account needs a strong inside sales force to handle the number of e-commerce users. Even if you have the most effective outside reps, they won't be able to service these customers as well as an inside group. I think it will be a hybrid, but I think inside sales will be bigger for a lot of dealers."

Morley believes change is imminent. "Our company always had inside sales reps, but a lot of our outside reps are transitioning to inside since the days of knocking on doors are over for now," she says. "What I've found is inside sales outperform outside, due to the volume of customers."

But Eaton suggests it's too soon to write off outside reps: "We had a sales meeting this morning, and it included both inside and outside reps because I believe both models are needed. They offer different levels of service. Inside can contact more people by phone and smaller accounts may only need inside assistance. But complex customers need both. You can buy office furniture online, but it is not the same as sitting in a chair; so I see a life for outside sales. Many big regional and national entities have eliminated their outside sales forces, and I think that is a big mistake. I think it is headed that way, where people will have no time to see outside reps and will go one line to get their questions answered. There's no question about that, but we are not there yet."

Bourret is betting the exact opposite. "Many of the larger companies scaled back during the pandemic and didn't bring the human capital back," he says. "There was a lot of talk at the recent ISG meeting about investing in inside sales versus outside sales. We found there is now a lack of outside sales at our competition. Customers are having a tough time finding the outside help they need, so we've kept our focus on outside sales and continue to invest in our outside salespeople to fill the gaps."

According to Rosemary Czopek, president of Gorilla Stationers LLC, Cypress, California, "Outside sales has never been our model." But she does predict changes in how sales will be handled due to the pandemic: "With COVID-19 and customers being less likely to go out, they are now much more likely to demand immediate service. They also want to get in touch the way they want to—whether by text, email or through the website."

Undermining the king

Czopek attributes some of these changes to Amazon, which she believes poses a two-pronged threat to small businesses. "Amazon is controlling the environment and making it hard for smaller dealers to compete," she explains. "Whether dealers are selling against Amazon or selling on it, the company is taking a huge piece of the pie, putting pressure on dealers' margins, pricing and profitability. It's a huge threat and one that is here to stay."

Sigmon too envisages that Amazon will still very much be in the picture in 2022, but believes emphasizing what differentiates independent dealers is the best way to compete. "There's no getting around that Amazon is a threat," she says. "It's the king and controls so much; it's difficult to compete head to head. But we have humans who offer customer care and delivery; humans who can answer questions and solve problems. Everyone buys from Amazon some, but most don't trust it. Independent dealers can capitalize on their relationships and trust."

Bourret agrees on the value of human capital: "We take a consultative approach. People still have questions and need answers. We also can handle larger orders and larger deliveries of multiple product lines. We provide a point of contact, and we can bend »

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CREATING ORIGINALS

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more and quicker than Amazon. We are focusing on what we can do better and will continue to do that in 2022."

One thing Bourret believes Suburban does better than many online retailers is communicate with customers. "My wife's birthday is today," he says, providing a personal example. "I ordered three things online well over a week ago, and not just from Amazon. One of the three arrived; and there's no number to call for the others, just an email and tracking number. Our customers need answers to run their businesses. There's a need for the IDC, and I think many of us are leveraging this differentiation. Some customers don't appreciate these things, but the customers we work with appreciate and need it."

On the topic of diversification, Jones summarizes the overall sentiment: "Diversification will be key. Even pre-pandemic, if you were growing market share in traditional office products, you were taking shares from other dealers."

So, where will the growth areas be? "Janitorial, PPE and safety are big ones," he says. "I see packaging and shipping supplies continuing to grow. Facility maintenance, repairs and operations is another; a lot of dealers have scratched this surface and the ability to expand here is pretty vast."

Causes for concern

Dealers seem to be unanimous on their two main business concerns. Czopek gets straight to the point: "Inflation is at the top of my list for 2022, with the supply chain right under it."

Bourret seconds this sentiment: "The supply chain is not improving and inflation doesn't seem to have an end in sight. Right now, customers seem to be understanding, but I am not sure how much longer they will continue to be. Prices can't go up forever. At some point, there needs to be a balance. I do credit the suppliers that have been able to get products to us. But right now, whoever has what we need, we have to pay what we need to get it."

And Kudler concurs: "Product availability and supply chain constraint are major concerns. So too is inflation. Historically, it has been my experience that when companies feel they need to save money, they cut office products first; which is ironic, since it is the smallest expense. It happens every time there is a recession. I don't think janitorial budgets will be scrutinized quite as much, but companies will be looking to maximize their spending by price comparing and shopping around there, too."

According to Morley, these concerns may exist beyond 2022. "At the recent ISG show, many predicted supply chain issues will continue next year and maybe through 2023," she says. "My company is a stockless dealer, so we have to rely on our wholesalers. They tell us cargo ships are full, but there's no room to dock or unload product. There are labor shortages at the docks and not enough trucks or drivers. Labor will continue to be a problem."

But inflation and supply chain shortages are not the only challenges dealers see on the immediate horizon.

"I think a major concern is our ability to continue to adapt," suggests Jones. "We put a lot of investment in e-commerce, but it still needs a lot of work to adapt to the hybrid work model. Another is continued consolidation. We've always looked at acquisitions strategically; I think the Staples and Office Depots of the world will be looking at dealers that don't want to continue or don't have a succession plan. Many independent office product dealers sold janitorial products and were able to take advantage of federal funding and support to make it through 2021. Now they are looking at challenges in 2022; and if they haven't diversified from office products, they are looking to exit sooner than expected."

Another challenge Jones sees continuing in 2022 is worker shortages. "The labor market is not getting easier any time soon," he predicts.

And Czopek believes uncertainty is exacerbating these concerns. "The environment has changed more in the last 12 months than in our 22 years with supply chain and wholesaler product availability issues," she says. "These are unprecedented times."

Lisa Veeck is the owner of Clean Communications, a full-service content-generating firm specializing in the office products, cleaning and maintenance, and healthcare fields. She can be reached at lisa@cleancommunications.biz or 773-484-7412.

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Words of wisdom

Despite genuine concerns for 2022, these independent dealers are far from ready to throw in the towel. Instead, they offer advice for dealers like themselves seeking prosperity in the coming year.

Bourret: "While larger companies are downsizing and automating, we are doing the opposite. People need people. When the competition is pulling back on people, there is an opportunity for outside sales reps."

Czopek: "Educate your customers on what your costs are; do your best to procure goods; and make yourself available to customers however they want to get in touch."

Eaton: "Independent dealers should set customer expectations, then meet these expectations to the best of their ability. Also, understand your customer habits. We invested a lot in data analytics for our website and are studying what our customers view versus buy; where they come to the site; where they exit and so on. We are learning a lot from our investment."

Jones: "It may be a challenge, but acquiring talented workers to take next steps is critical—new workers who may look at the world differently. This will continue to be essential for dealers to adapt to changing business models in 2022."

Kudler: "Independent dealers should continue to align themselves with buying groups and focus on selling brands and buying direct, so manufacturers see them as relevant partners. They should also continue managing operational expenses and stay close to the customer."

Morley: "Be nimble and embrace change. Find your niche. Look for where your wins are and how you can replicate them. Adapt to changes in the workplace landscape. Be open to new products and opportunities. Be creative with social media and video campaigns and new ways to reach customers."

Sigmon: "Stay flexible and work together with wholesalers and manufacturers. Be resourceful. Strategize and capitalize on every opportunity to keep you moving forward. Stay on track; but be open to new relationships and new opportunities. Positive thinking is powerful. Use it to your advantage. Plus, it's more fun that way!"

ESSENDANT™ MARKETING 2022

Essendant is committed to advancing dealers forward and supporting them for long-term success with marketing that is innovative, impactful and adaptable. In this spirit, our focus has become increasingly digital. This is in direct response to the buying behaviors and expectations of B2B buyers. We've all seen the data that has shown the dramatic rise in e-commerce sales over the last year and a half. B2B buyers have high expectations for the businesses they work with and the websites they buy from. Forrester found that 50 percent of B2B buyers are unlikely to purchase from the same site again if they have a bad experience. On the flipside, Forrester's research also found that 56 percent of buyers are willing to pay more for a better experience. Addressing the buying experience can offset risk and increase the value dealers bring to their customers.

Along with the rise in e-commerce, we are also operating in a very different world today, with many businesses still remote or hybrid. This has led to a decrease in face-to-face meetings. In order to connect with customers, dealers have had to employ new tools to operate virtually. The role of their websites to serve as digital salespersons has increased considerably. To account for these realities, Essendant has made bold moves and big investments. Our 2022 offering and new marketing solutions reflect this. Read on to learn more about our enhancements in user experience (UX), search and product content; and our new offerings: Essendant Marketing Studio and Essendant Consulting Services.

User experience

With UX playing an outsized role in retaining customers and driving enhanced value with them, it's essential to make it a priority. The application of UX is both art and science. It's the act of detailing every step in a customer interaction and the process of designing solutions that make each step more seamless and fluid. Within e-commerce, two areas that play an important role in UX are product content and search. We are making investments here that we share below. To complement this activity, we have also been conducting reviews of several major third-party provider systems (3PVs) in our industry. Our UX strategist logged into these sites and played the role of a B2B buyer. Through this analysis, they identified several opportunity areas and outlined a roadmap for the 3PVs to address them. This information has been shared with the 3PVs and provides an objective look at where to invest to improve UX.

Smart Search

Within the buyer's journey, their first activity is discovery. This is when they are searching for an item—whether a specific item that they have the SKU number for or a product category that they are open minded about exploring. Either way, the primary tool buyers use to find items is search. Essendant's Smart Search is designed to facilitate this discovery process and we're making new investments to advance it further through the use of artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning:

- "Never Null" enhancement: Working with technology partner LucidWorks and its Never Null solution, we will be implementing AI to study the natural language of the buyer to better understand the intent behind their search. With this data, Smart Search can increase the relevance of the search results delivered and reduce the potential for a null search.
- Personalized Type-Ahead: The Type-Ahead feature within Smart

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Search will be enhanced with machine learning to help end users find products in a more personalized and relevant way. In addition to search terms related to users' inputs, it will provide best sellers, recently searched information and more to help buyers find what they're looking for and discover new products.

- Now live on J&M: Jan-san technology partner J&M has officially released Smart Search as part of its website offering for Essendant resellers. This opens up more opportunities to take advantage of this integral service.

Product content

For a website to be effective as a digital salesperson, product content must be accurate, complete, timely and compelling. When done well, product content will educate buyers and increase conversion rates. We're making investments and enhancements in product content to achieve this, including the following:

- Investing in a new Product Information Management (PIM) system. The PIM is the hub for all activity around product content. This key investment will help ensure our product content is up to date, accurate, complete and compelling; and will help provide an optimal buying experience. We have identified our new PIM technology partner and work is currently underway to integrate the new PIM into our processes.
- Holding our content to higher standards and evaluating content quality through our Content Health Scorecard: This scorecard evaluates the quality of content for each item and gives an overall score at the supplier level and for each item. At the item level, it looks at elements such as item titles, descriptions, product attributes, images, reviews and more. All of these elements are the ingredients to a successful content experience. Holding content to the highest standards helps ensure a better user experience and leads to more sales.
- Restructuring our content teams for greater efficiencies and hiring more content experts.
- Investing in improved content for our owned brands (Boardwalk, Universal, Alera, Windsoft, Innovera). In 2021 we updated images and selling copy for 500+ items; in 2022 we are targeting 900+ SKUs, including new images, infographics, updated copy and selling points to provide a better customer experience on resellers' websites and increase conversion rates.

Essendant Consulting Services

In our focus to provide solutions that are adaptable, we look to meet dealers where they are in their digital marketing journey. Essendant Consulting Services is a tailored solution that does that. This curated team of digital strategists will provide customized one-to-one instruction to enable dealers to take the next steps for improving marketing effectiveness and digital presence. Their expert guidance will help enhance website user experience, customize search engine, elevate email marketing and translate data into action. In addition to one-to-one consultations, our specialists will be offering educational tips, webinars and videos.

Their expertise will not only help enhance the on-site experience, but also support how buyers discover dealers in the first place. To support this, our services include consulting on search engine optimization (SEO) and search engine marketing (SEM). Our SEO/SEM expert has been working with dealers already, helping them identify ways to drive more business to their websites. SEO is an important tool to consider employing. Our research shows SEO is a highly effective method of acquiring new business, as organic (unpaid) search drives 51 percent of all visitors to B2B websites.

Essendant Marketing Studio

Keeping on the theme of adaptability, it's critical that the marketing we develop can be modified by dealers to reflect their unique story, value proposition and differentiated offering. Catalogs are unable to do this, but new technologies can support this goal. Essendant Marketing Studio is our new self-service technology tool that lets dealers create professional and customized marketing campaigns with minimal marketing or creative resources required. This omni-channel solution supports print and digital templates, enabling dealers to brand their marketing, update copy, images, featured products, prices and more to fit their specific business needs.

Essendant Marketing Studio was successfully piloted in 2021 with the Reseller Capabilities flyer and Dated Goods campaign. New campaign templates will be loaded in early 2022, with more coming throughout the year. Beyond the digital assets available, many of the templates available within Essendant Marketing Studio can be printed or emailed as digital files. These pieces will be a great resource for dealer sales teams to find materials to engage with customers, and will supplement our catalog offering for 2022, Essentials for the Workplace.

Investing for now and the future

Marketing success today requires making bold moves and big investments. The 2022 Essendant Marketing Program embodies this mission and is the result of extensive research, data analysis and dealer feedback. Just like business today, we are adapting and providing dealers with the necessary tools to do the same. We will continue to keep our pulse on the market to adjust and expand our capabilities to help drive the success of dealers. Interested dealers can learn more about these capabilities by contacting their Essendant account manager.

SPR™ MARKETING 2022

Throughout 2021, SPR Marketing has transformed its approach to helping customers win in their local markets. As we all know, our business landscape has changed forever and it is incumbent on SPR to reshape our view of the market. What has worked in the past will not work in today's "away from home" environment. SPR is excited about the future office and the commercial cleaning space.

Working in close partnership with its supplier partners, SPR has spent the last year creating and refining a host of new and innovative approaches to help local dealer/distributor sales representatives win in their marketplace. The SPR Marketing team started 2021 by launching a unique marketing calendar focused exclusively on end-user buying habits. SPR's shift in thinking was that when SPR creates marketing to help resellers win with their customers, we all win.

In addition to the marketing calendar, SPR introduced Digital Toolkits, aligned to its calendar. These toolkits take SPR Marketing campaigns to the next level, going beyond the traditional flyer to a fully integrated marketing program. These newly developed campaigns are tailored for each monthly theme, highlighting the depth and breadth of SPR's robust assortment. SPR is more than just an office products wholesale organization; it gives resellers the ability to grow current end users and gain new customers, which is at the core of its marketing strategy.

Bridging the gap between the digital and print landscapes is where many of our customers find themselves struggling. While many of our customers still rely heavily on print marketing and others are fully digital, creating and executing a solid blend of both helps everyone grow. With that in mind, our toolkits help both types of customers win. Each monthly toolkit has a fully customizable print flyer, web banners, social media scripts, email scripts and alignment to our proprietary email program, CAOne™.

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SPR Marketing CONTINUED FROM PAGE 34

CAOne™ is a program exclusive to SPR resellers that allows them to leverage their website analytics to provide personalized and targeted messages to speak directly to customers' needs and boost sales. The program encourages a high level of interaction and engagement through consistent, relevant and meaningful campaigns. It starts with the reseller's website and the robust analytics that capture end users' browsing and purchasing history. This data helps build relevant, personalized emails that deliver information about the products customers are already interested in purchasing. The emails align with the digital flyers, web banners and social media to integrate a reseller's print and digital marketing strategy.

Print is still an integral part of a comprehensive marketing strategy. With more than 27,000 SKUs, the Full Line Catalog is a comprehensive reference tool that positions the reseller as the go-to resource for everything used in today's business environment. When utilized along with our SearchPro™ digital content, resellers have a solid multimedia foundation to expand their business.

While printed catalogs are a valuable tool for resellers to provide their customers, SPR also offers digital versions for customers that want ready access on their mobile devices or PCs. Our Evolve™ Digital Publications allow customers to enjoy the shopping experience associated with traditional print publications and include additional features like links to manufacturer special offers, videos and rebate forms. Resellers can integrate their Evolve Digital Publication with their website, allowing customers to place orders directly into the shopping cart.

Overall, SPR Marketing works by using its supplier partners' best products and solutions to propel customers to succeed in their business.

As the world transitions faster than ever from "bricks to clicks," SPR and SPR Marketing must continue to evolve; and as we head into 2022, it will be no different. Our ongoing focus is to elevate our marketing in the ever-changing digital landscape. Gleaning insights from our supplier partners and how they have shifted their approach in a B2C environment will help inform how SPR approaches its B2B business.

DIGITAL MARKETING TRENDS IN 2022

Liz Fernandez

It's been a wild ride this past two years; but you've made it! The pandemic caused dramatic changes in consumer behavior around the globe and our industry was no exception. As the world was disrupted, customers looked to the brands they do business with for answers. Their trust in your brand and the digital content you create will continue to be important to your success in 2022. Here are the marketing trends we expect this coming year:

1. Exceptional content wins

Content is—and always has been—king. However, content is no longer just about words. As Google continues to update its algorithms, the bar has been raised for brands that want their content to be discoverable in searches. Video and audio content continues to emerge, with video a key area for the B2B sector to unlock in 2022.

Video is visually appealing and convenient for your customers to consume. Think about your marketing and how you can integrate video. Informational videos, product demos, customer reviews and behind-the-scenes videos of your business are great places to start. As you create content, ensure you are creating it with your dream client in mind, not just your current clients. And as always, focus on building trust in every piece of content that your team creates.

2. Account-based marketing

Account-based marketing (ABM)—a collaboration between sales and marketing—will become increasingly important in 2022. Your customers want seamless transactions: they want a connection between the marketing content they receive and the experience they have with your sales team. This connection can lead to upselling and retention—both of which are critical for your company. Ensure the marketing team is meeting with the sales team and aligning on goals, tactics and even what constitutes success (metrics). The customer interaction journey should be seamless. As you create ABM campaigns, make sure you analyze what works (and what doesn't) to establish best practices for your team.

In addition to a sales and marketing collaboration, ensure you send the right messages to the right customers. According to SmarterHQ, 72 percent of consumers say they now only engage with marketing messages that are personalized and tailored to their interests. This is where segmentation comes into play. "Just purchased" marketing can target specific customers that purchased one thing and might be interested in another. Lifecycle segmentation can also be automated for first-time buyers, inactive customers and so on. You can deliver different messages to your corporate clients than to your government and educational clients. Ensure you have the tools to get this account-level detail and utilize platforms that help you automate this process as much as possible.

3. Real-time monitoring

As we learned in 2020 and 2021, marketing strategies are not just "set it and forget it." Your 2022 content »

strategy should not be set in stone in January. While a general outline is great, your strategy should include analyzing data in real time and then having the data inform content throughout the year.

In particular, the following should be monitored:

- Customers: Did they just acquire someone? Are they moving offices? What is their current focus? These activities should be monitored by the sales team and the marketing team (remember ABM above).
- Local news: While this can include pandemic news, it also includes local trends such as events and weather. Is an ice storm coming? Get in front of it with ice melt! Is a heatwave coming? Make sure your customers working outside have the hydration products they need! Is a large event coming up? How can you be part of it (from selling supplies to getting your name out)?
- Competitors: Have they added new products/services recently? Make sure you know! Did they let go of many employees in a specific niche? Get marketing out there to get those customers!

A quick daily/weekly check-in combined with custom alerts (www.google.com/alerts) on these activities can set your team up for great real-time marketing success.

4. Value in SERPs

Search engine ranking pages (SERPs) have great value. Convincing Google that your company's content should be ranked for a relevant query is not easy. As you search engine optimize your content, remember that the traditional blue link results are not the only opportunity to appear at the top of the search rankings. Image results, videos, FAQs, reviews, featured snippets, "People Also Ask", and "Top Stories" are all opportunities to be seen.

Analyze the SERPs where you want your company to show up and then optimize your content for the search result types that will get you there. You don't need to create all-new content; ensure you are reviewing and refreshing your older content as well and optimizing it for new ranking opportunities (can you add a new video to an old page?).

As you think through SERPs, ask yourself what the intent behind a search is for your ideal customer. Work through your customer's path to purchase to find stopping points, content gaps and opportunities that can inform your content.

5. Hybrid is here to stay

Over the past two years, virtual events have boomed. As we move forward, this virtual experience—from office meetings to large events—is here to stay. This hybrid model is great for those with disabilities, as well as those with busy schedules that don't have the time to drive to an in-person meeting or event.

As you plan your marketing, keep the hybrid mindset top of mind. From sales flyers and how your sales team is utilizing them to customer appreciation events, ensure you are creating content that can be dual purpose to create inclusivity for all customers.

As we move into 2022, challenge yourself and your team to think about the way your digital marketing is being received by consumers. Could that article be more compelling as a video? What do customers want and are you giving it to them? Remember to look at the data to help inform; but also don't forget to ask your customers and listen to what they say. The data will tell you what already works; but listening and learning can help you realize untapped opportunities!

Liz Fernandez is a content strategist at Fortune Web Marketing.To learn more, visit www.fortunewebmarketing.com.

How to grow your business—ONE BITE AT A TIME

By Ed Katz

If you're not growing your business, it's only a matter of time before you'll be OUT of business. That's because the costs of doing business are always rising. Even if your company has a steady flow of revenue now, it makes sense to look for ways to grow. What I'm about to share is based on my experiences in the moving industry; but the lessons I learned (mostly the hard way!) are universal.

In my industry, one of the most common ways to increase revenue is for a residential (household goods) mover to expand into office moves. What typically happens is that the residential moving company president, owner or general manager hires a big office and industrial (O&I) producer from a competitor to bring along big clients. But unfortunately, there is little similarity between residential and O&I moving operationally, which can lead to some major problems. For example:

- unless the residential moving crew is proficient in moving office furniture using the bucket brigade, the moves probably won't finish on time for the price quoted. When the final invoice is higher than the bid or estimate, the mover often doesn't collect what it bills and therefore loses money;
- when moves don't finish within eight hours, fatigued movers are more likely to sustain injuries, increasing workers' compensation claims; and
- inexperience can result in damage to furniture, computers, copiers and real property such as doors, elevators and walls.

Therefore, the best way to diversify into office moving is to build it from the ground up—slowly, deliberately and one step at a time. The same advice applies to other industries, too. Diversifying into related product lines and services is often the best way to grow revenue. However, shortcutting the process by hiring a salesperson who can bring customers with them can lead to service failures like those in the moving industry if you don't have the support to back new customers' demands and requirements.

Three ways to learn the business

In my 40-plus years of running businesses, I've learned there are three ways for companies to diversify and grow revenue besides hiring a big producer from another company:

- The school of hard knocks: This is obviously the worst way—and of course, it's the one I chose when I first started out. I didn't know what I didn't know; and as a residential mover, I made every mistake possible when I jumped into the office moving business. For example, when I first started, I used my residential formula for estimating »

office moves and added 10 percent to the time and cost for each elevator and long carry. When this formula proved worthless, I copied other movers' method of bidding per truckload—which turned out even worse, because we were bidding the competition and not the jobs. Moves still didn't finish on time for the price quoted. As a result, we had trouble collecting what we billed. Needless to say, I DO NOT recommend learning by doing or by trial and error at your customers' (and your own) expense.

- Work for someone else: A better way to learn the nuances of related product and service line businesses is by working for another company that offers them and has a stellar reputation. If you're lucky enough to get an internship at such a place, you should plan on working in all its departments—marketing, sales, customer service and operations—for as long as you can until you master the business.
- Enroll in formal training: An easier and more practical route to diversify is to enroll in formal training so that you learn the best practice methods for sales, customer service and all aspects of operations. Hire a business consultant that specializes in the business line or search the Internet for training.

In 2012, I invested in residential real estate rental properties. To learn the business, I took several real estate seminars that taught me everything from the best type of house to buy (three bedrooms/two bathrooms) to the best technique for screening prospective tenants (the TransUnion SmartMove online tool). I was amazed how easy it was to learn enough about the industry to become a successful investor.

Building your book of business: go small!

Once you're trained, I urge you not to chase big jobs or customers that appear to have high revenue dollars. Instead, build your brand, get experience and make good profits by doing smaller jobs. This business model will often enable you to charge a premium price when you render a premium service. Even if you charge a lot more than the competition, you'll get the jobs if you consistently render a great service. Since most of your competitors go after the largest jobs, there is tremendous price competition that can often lead to little or no profit at the end of the job.

Smaller jobs can help with your cash flow, too. They say cash is king. Large jobs can tie up your capital and draw down your line of credit, raising your cost of sales with the extra interest you pay on bank loans. With small jobs, it's easier to get a large down-payment and/or make them cash on delivery. Avoid negative cash flow: unless you can convert its accounts receivable into cash quickly, you can go out of business even with a positive net worth.

To learn more about the International Office Moving Institute (IOMI®) and its online office moving training, please visit www.officemoves.com/training or contact Ed Katz on 404.358.2172 or at edkatz@officemoves.com.

By Tom Buxton

THE HOPE OF CHRISTMAS PRESENT AND FUTURE

At least once a year, *INDEPENDENT DEALER* has been kind enough to allow me to stray from the topics that impact the office solutions business to themes that are meant to address issues the entire world faces. This column is one of those; so please read something else in this month's issue if you don't want to hear about my opinions about the promise that Christmas brings to all people.

Last year around this time, I shared that we would especially cherish Christmas 2020 because it would probably be our last with our daughter, Caley. Sadly, we were correct. Caley died on May 31, 2021 after a long fight against metastatic breast cancer.

We miss her and in some ways the holidays will be less joyful without her; but there is another side of her sort of death that, in my family's opinion, is not discussed frequently enough. We are sad that Caley died, but we are thrilled that she is in Heaven with her Savior. Even with the excellent care that was provided to her and the drugs that were made available to ease her pain, the last few years were extremely difficult for her.

Pain was her constant companion and things that she used to enjoy, like going for fast walks (no one in our family could even come close to keeping up with her), started to slip away. She had a hard time sleeping and a hard time staying awake. Her doctors tried multiple procedures that they hoped would extend her life; but after a while, the constant infusions, operations, scans, med changes and the requisite waiting for each new treatment to begin or finish added to her discomfort.

Caley watched herself slowly deteriorate physically; but as that occurred, her emotional and spiritual strength increased. For Christmas last year, our church requested that she make a video sharing her perspective. I am her father, so there is no doubt that I am biased, but the response it received was astounding. We shared it with a few friends and a number of Christian churches across the entire country asked permission to show it to their congregations. In a good way, it went (pardon the term) "viral." It is only seven minutes in length, so if you would like to see it, the link is below. Hopefully it will provide you with a different perspective on life and death, and enable you to take a step back from the craziness of these past years and the pressures that have come to surround the Christmas season. Click here to view

Whether you decide to view the video or not, I think you would agree that the holiday season—and specifically Christmas—is a great time to reconsider our priorities. What are you living for, and have you considered what you want to change before you die? Because we all die; and during the past two years in particular, we have seen an abundance of death. Sorry for these less-than-cheery thoughts, especially if you have been busy considering what presents you want to give or get more than your future. If you have read this far, I hope you don't mind if I leave you with one last thing to review as we close out 2021. It is a quote from a song written by a Christian artist named Randy Stonehill in the 1970s that I shared a few years ago. I hope it is impactful as you celebrate Christmas this year. It is called "Christmas Song for All Year 'Round."

I wonder if this Christmas they'll begin to understand
That the Jesus that they celebrate is much more than a man.
'Cause the way the world is, I don't see how people can deny
That the only way to save us was for Jesus Christ to die.
And I know that if Saint Nicholas was here, he would agree
That Jesus gave the greatest gift of all to you and me.
They led Him to the slaughter on a hill called Calvary.
And mankind was forgiven when they nailed him to the tree.

Merry Christmas to you all.

In addition to serving as national sales manager for AOPD, Tom Buxton, founder and CEO of the InterBizGroup consulting organization, works with independent office products dealers to help increase sales and profitability. Tom is also the author of a book on effective business development, Dating the Gatekeeper. *For more information, visit www.interbizgroup.com.*

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