Now I don’t consider myself to be a particularly old man, at least not as far as this industry is concerned (although a recent slipped disc and bout of bursitis might be trying to tell me otherwise), but in the last few years my view of technology has changed markedly.

I’m sure I’m not alone in that just a few short years ago, I thought I was down with the science and up with the latest developments—from scoffingly explaining to my parents how to set the timer on the VHS to wiring up my son’s Nintendo gaming system. I had two or three really good decades.

But it seems that while my ability to process new (and exciting) advancements has slowed somewhat, technology’s forward momentum has shown no such sign of decline.

I have therefore now joined ranks of the overawed, thinking “Ooh, how on Earth do they do that?” or even “Why would anyone want to do that?” rather than just taking it all in my stride and embracing the change as I once did. Needless to say and as much it pains me to admit it—it is I and others like me who are losing out.

So, however long you have been using your current technology platform, take a look at our cover feature on page 29 and check out the alternatives that are available. As you’ll discover from the dealers who took the time to help us compile the article, there may well be money to be saved and extra profits to be made if you do.

And while you’re at it, why not think about attending OPI’s forthcoming online summit on AI (see page 16)? Now that is something that really scares me, but perhaps I’ve just seen The Terminator too many times!
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In 1934, Harrison J. Hummel Sr. started a typewriter sales and repair business. Six years later, he expanded his offering to include office products and a retail shop. When he died, his son, Harrison J. Hummel Jr. and wife Betty would take over the leadership of the business for more than 20 years. They were succeeded in the 1970s by Harrison J. “Chip” Hummel III, who moved the company to its current headquarters in Mohawk, New York, in the late 1980s, and who was joined by his wife Judy in the early 1990s. In 2011, Chip’s son Justin was named CEO, Harrison J. Hummel IV was named COO and Chip’s daughter Solace was named CAO.

Today—90 years and four generations later—Hummel’s Office Plus enjoys $25 million in annual sales, has 80 employees and is the largest independent office supply dealer in upstate New York.

According to Justin, several factors account for the company’s longevity: “A family business well into its fourth generation is a vast exception to the rule and a few reasons come to mind, in no specific order. We always make sure the customer comes first. During good times, we make sure we prepare for not-so-good times. In 90 years, we’ve experienced both. Many companies do well in good times, but what’s important is how you manage during challenging times—you have to weather the storms to enjoy the good times. We also have an incredible employee base that has stayed with
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us and believed in us. The last four or five years have been the most challenging, with COVID-19 and the supply chain issues. They’ve had a ripple effect and our employees have been tremendous.”

But stepping up during the pandemic was a two-way street. “We chose not to lay off or furlough any employees,” Justin recalls. “We made the decision to absorb the losses. We figured our employees stayed with us when times weren’t so great, so we needed to be here for them.”

Another aftereffect of COVID-19 is the subsequent labor shortage—one of Hummel’s major challenges. “March 2020 changed the world and how people live, work and play,” says Justin. “Attracting and retaining workers have become the most challenging I’ve seen in 25 years—and it’s not just our industry. I serve on a lot of community boards, have a lot of client meetings and talk to a lot of customers. They all say they can’t find people to work; and when they do, the new hires only stay for a short time.”

Justin acknowledges that Amazon is another challenge: “In our 90 years, we’ve had a lot of different competitors. It used to be Staples and Office Depot; now it’s Amazon. But to Amazon’s credit, it has energized every human’s way of life at home, which bleeds into commercial.”

Again, rather than sitting back and waiting, Hummel’s has been proactive in its response. “One of our strengths is contract furniture: we’ve had record sales three consecutive years, and we continue to use this and janitorial to differentiate ourselves,” reports Justin. “We work hard on what we can do that Amazon and others before it cannot. In our 90 years, we’ve had to evolve and adjust to bring the best value to our customers. This includes getting in front of customers and communicating our value. At this point, this is not something Amazon cares to do.”

Justin’s suggestions on how to thrive depend on what dealers want to achieve. “What is your goal?” he asks. “Is it to make a lot of money, impact the lives of your employees or be an asset to the community? My advice depends on the answer. Any company in a capitalist society needs to make money to stay in business. But if it is strictly to make a lot of money, I think you are in the wrong industry.”

Summing up the keys to lasting success, Justin has the following recommendations: “First and foremost, make sure you are attracting and retaining workers have become the most challenging I’ve seen in 25 years—and it’s not just our industry. I serve on a lot of community boards, have a lot of client meetings and talk to a lot of customers. They all say they can’t find people to work; and when they do, the new hires only stay for a short time.”

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Sass Moves to EON Office

Former Source Office and Technology president David Sass has joined the leadership team at leading Denver, Colorado dealer EON Office as president of technology.

In his role, David will oversee EON’s new copier sales and service division and the company’s managed print services (MPS) and printer offerings, among other products and services.

David spent more than seven years at Source—which was acquired by Ashland, Virginia-based The Supply Room in 2022—before officially leaving at the end of last year. He has been a leader in the copier and MPS, office products, janitorial and packaging supply industries for more than 20 years, working for such entities as UPS, Corporate Express and Xerox.

His expertise will help EON continue to expand its offerings to customers in workplace products and solutions.

One Point CEO Recognized

Patrick McMahon, CEO of One Point, Scranton, Pennsylvania, is being honored with the Madonna Della Strada Award during an Evening of Gratitude ceremony on March 14, 2024, for bringing the Ignatian Volunteer Corps (IVC) to northeastern Pennsylvania (NEPA).

IVC volunteers commit to working one or two days per week (generally eight to 16 hours) for 10 months at a local service agency that addresses poverty and related issues.

Since being brought to the greater Scranton area roughly a decade ago, the IVC has matched men and women aged 50 and older with meaningful opportunities to work for a more just society.

McMahon is credited with organizing a planning committee and helping to raise money to bring the IVC to NEPA. McMahon continues to serve as the IVC NEPA Advisory Council chairperson and, through the program, serves as a court-appointed special advocate volunteer in Lackawanna County.

“It’s amazing,” McMahon says, describing the program he helped bring to the region.

“Writing donation checks or being on a board is one thing. Having your feet on the street is another thing, which is what I wanted. You get so much more back by actually serving others.”

A-Z Office donates to Central Elementary School

A-Z Office Resource, Nashville, Tennessee, recently donated four office chairs to the nearby Central Elementary School. A-Z copy tech Bobby Sircy, who has been servicing Macon County schools for over 20 years, knows school systems throughout the state need help to get the items they need. Sircy makes a point of donating to a school each year and Central Elementary was next on his list. It is his way of thanking the teachers and staff.

“Giving back to our community is a core value for us at A-Z,” says marketing director Robert Ty Phillips. “Our success is connected to the communities in which we all live and work. These investments bring us closer together as a team and help create a brighter future for everyone.”
Shine On

Express.
Impress.
Progress.
Blaisdell’s, Oakland, California, has announced the winners of its annual Nonprofit Choice Awards. Every year, Blaisdell’s customers provide nominations for nonprofits making an impact in their community. At the end of each year, the company sends an internal anonymous ballot to its entire staff. The nonprofits that receive the most votes for their region are then awarded a $1,000 monetary donation. Currently, Blaisdell’s offers awards in six areas the company serves. The winners of Blaisdell’s sixth annual Nonprofit Choice Award program are:

- Asian Woman’s Shelter (AWS)—West Bay, San Francisco Bay Area, California
- League of Volunteers—South Bay, San Francisco Bay Area
- Make A Wish Foundation—East Bay, San Francisco Bay Area
- Meals on Wheels by ACC—Sacramento, California
- St Paul’s Senior Services—San Diego, California
- Food for Thought—Northern Nevada

“Nonprofits are critical to improving the health of our community,” says Amanda Graham, Blaisdell’s public relations and marketing manager. “AWS, for example, addresses unmet needs of survivors of domestic violence and human trafficking, both of which are often interlinked and symptomatic of other fundamental causes that are impacting our communities. “Area nonprofits strengthen our community much like our customers and employees strengthen our ability to operate as a business. We started Blaisdell’s Nonprofit Choice Award in 2018 with the mission to expand our corporate giving in a more meaningful way. We did this by incorporating our stakeholders—employees and customers—in our philanthropic actions.”

COO Michael Witt adds: “We do our best to help wherever we can. It’s not easy at times, but we always put community first!”

Taylor Business donates to RHA afterschool program

Taylor Business Products, Roxboro, North Carolina, donated $1,000 to the Roxboro Housing Authority (RHA) afterschool program. The funding will be used to cover meals, snacks, supplies, cleaning products and academic activities.

The RHA was launched in 2019 to help give primarily elementary and middle-school children living in public housing a safe environment in which to receive help with homework and literacy, and participate in recreational activities. Currently, the program helps an estimated 30 children at the Harris Gardens public housing apartment complex.

“With assistance from Ray Wilkins, president of Taylor Business Products, we can carry out a program that will allow our students to be more successful,” says RHA executive director Felts Lewis. “Offering hot, nutritious food after a long day in the classroom will give students the boost they need to complete their homework assignments and participate in other academic activities.”
Perry Office Plus wears red for Millie

The furniture team at Perry Office Plus, Temple, Texas, celebrated National Wear Red Day in support of Millie, the niece of Perry project coordinator Megan Smith. Millie was diagnosed in utero with a double inlet left ventricle, a rare congenital defect that affects blood flow through the heart.

Now six months old, Millie was scheduled to have her first heart surgery in February, which is also American Heart Month. The Perry Furniture Team showed their support for Millie and her family with “I wear red for Millie” T-shirts. The surgery was successful, but her fight will be years long with more surgeries to come. Millie's parents and family continue to work to raise awareness of heart defects and the support families need in these situations.

Perry owner Lynnsay Macey snapped a picture of the furniture team in their Millie shirts to share on social media to spread awareness and show the kind of team Perry has: “We have a caring, supportive team at Perry. I love sharing that with our community.”
Winner’s Circle

Herald Office’s Brinson volunteers for orphan relief

Jennifer Brinson—Charleston, South Carolina-based interior designer and furniture rep for Herald Office Solutions, Dillion, South Carolina—recently volunteered to sort donations for Lowcountry Orphan Relief’s winter donation drive. She attended the event with fellow members of the Rotary Club of Charleston.

“Lowcountry Orphan Relief takes new and like-new donations for kids going into the foster care system,” explains Brinson. “Many of the kids are pulled from their homes with nothing but the clothes on their backs. If it’s at night, sometimes all they have are pajamas. Lowcountry Orphan Relief provides care packages with clothes, shoes, new undergarments, toiletries, books and a stuffed animal to every child to get them started in their new foster home.”

BOS-Business Office Systems plays ball to end hunger

The Tampa, Florida, team at BOS-Business Office Systems, Roselle, Illinois, participated in CBRE’s seventh annual softball tournament at Steinbrenner Field to help support End 68 Hours of Hunger—a nonprofit that aims to end childhood hunger one school at a time. The organization works to help tackle the approximately 68 hours of hunger that some school children experience between the free lunch they receive in school on Friday and the free breakfast they receive in school on Monday.

In separate news, at the beginning of February, BOS Orlando hosted an EDU Product Blitz: a mini tradeshow focused on the education market. The event showcased new products to purchasing professionals, facility management, procurement personnel, designers and others, and was followed by a networking happy hour.
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“I had my own trucking company,” says Bob. “I sold it and we started a trucking dispatch service. One day, Bailey’s previous owner came in for a delivery. She saw pictures of horses in Stevie’s office and said, ‘I’d love to retire and ride horses again.’ I asked how much and six months later we owned the company.” This is how the Witts became the fifth family to own the 99-year-old company.

The couple admit that at first, there was some skepticism.

“When we were buying the company, an S.P. Richards rep came and took us out to dinner,” explains Stevie. “By the end of the meal, he admitted he had initially been a little doubtful about us being able to run the business. But he realized I know customer service and Bob knows hard work. We don’t always do things the same way, but we complement each other.”

In 2020, the Witts bought a second small family-owned office products storefront in Oskaloosa, Iowa, to expand Bailey’s customer base. In both cases, they kept all the employees, contributing to the company’s success.

“We have one employee celebrating her 31st anniversary with us and several who have been with us for 25 years,” Stevie says. “All our employees are hard workers and go above and beyond. The customers know them by name and they know the customers.”

The Witts also believe this personal touch sets them apart. “I don’t understand why more dealers don’t meet with their customers face to face instead of just phoning,” muses Bob.

“Our customers know us. They know we are the owners, the decision-makers. We make the deliveries ourselves, so when there is an issue, they know we can take care of it right then and there.”

Yet Stevie acknowledges this type of customer service might not be possible for all dealers: “We are not a metropolitan area—where we are is very rural, so it might not be the same elsewhere. But our customers like the personal service.”

This approach extends to maintaining two storefronts, even though walk-ins account for only about 10 to 15 percent of Bailey’s business. Bailey’s is also the only stocking dealer in the area.

“We are right across from city hall and the courthouses, and down the street from the sheriff’s department,” Stevie explains. “You wouldn’t think there are a lot of emergency needs for office supplies, but there are. They come to us knowing we will have what they need and it saves them time, since they don’t have to drive or wait to get things online.”

Stevie believes that a physical presence can also bring in business. “If you have a storefront, it needs to be clean and attractive and stock interesting things, not just be a boring warehouse,” she explains. “We also ensure the window always looks attractive—we feature red, white and pink items for Valentine’s Day or green for St. Patrick’s Day to attract attention.”

According to the Witts, their recent decision to partner with DeVere Company out of Wisconsin to sell laundry and other chemicals to hotels, restaurants, jails and other local businesses has also increased sales.

And what about Amazon? The Witts aren’t worried, because they know their customers appreciate touches like personally labeled boxes delivered to the exact locations and with the correct PO—services Amazon doesn’t offer. But mostly, their lack of concern comes down to customer loyalty.

“Our customers will tell us when a representative from Staples or Quill calls on them,” says Stevie. “Our customers tell us they run them out because they are happy with us.”

Company info

Top management: Bob Witt, president/co-owner; Stevie Nelson Witt, vice president/co-owner; Adam Prose, service manager

Number of employees: 11

Main wholesaler: S.P. Richards

Annual sales: $2.5 million

Online sales: 85%-90%
In their 14th year, these awards honour excellence in the products, companies, and individuals in the business supplies industry. Winning brings industry-wide recognition and can significantly benefit your business. Don’t miss this opportunity to gain the recognition your team deserves.

Award Categories
- Best Product - Core Business Product
- Best Product - Furniture
- Best Product - Facilities, Breakroom and Safety
- Best Product - Technology
- Product Innovation of the Year
- People’s Choice
- Young Executive of the Year
- Professional of the Year
- Industry Achievement

Enter now!
Free and simple to enter
Both entries and nominations are accepted to ensure the industry’s best are rewarded

The awards will be presented at Industry Week ’24 taking place from September 21-26

The deadline for entries is 8th April.
Enter now at opi.net/naopa2024
OPI announces AI Online Summit

INDEPENDENT DEALER’s sister publication OPI has announced its inaugural AI Online Summit for business supplies executives to harness the potential of the latest AI technologies.

The summit will be hosted virtually on May 23, 2024 to ensure accessibility for professionals worldwide. The agenda includes inspiring talks and discussions, followed by presentations and panels led by industry leaders. It’s an opportunity to discover the latest trends, share breakthroughs and explore the untapped power of AI with thought leaders in the field.

The OPI team stresses the summit will not look at abstract AI that might impact the future, but will instead provide real takeaways businesses in our sector can act on immediately.

For more information and to book a place, visit www opi net/ai2024

ISG makes EPIC appointment, announces board changes

Dealer group Independent Suppliers Group (ISG) has made a key appointment at its EPIC Business Essentials national accounts arm.

The organization has hired Dante Ercoli as the new managing director of EPIC. Ercoli has spent over 20 years in the business products industry with major brands such as ACCO, Elmers and Velcro.

As the managing director, Ercoli will lead the day-to-day charge of continuing to grow the ISG national accounts program through the implementation of existing agreements, securing new opportunities for participating members and adding more members to participate in EPIC. ISG said he brings a wealth of expertise in strategic leadership and business development, and his experience will contribute positively to the continued success of EPIC.

“Dante’s proven track record of success in cultivating partnerships and delivering innovative solutions aligns perfectly with EPIC’s commitment to providing exceptional service and value to its members and customers,” the group stated.

“We are confident that Dante will lead the EPIC organization to further success,” said ISG COO Charles Forman. “This staff addition is a reflection of ISG’s overall commitment to helping our members successfully compete in the national and regional account space.”

Meanwhile, ISG has confirmed the election of four members to its board following its annual shareholders meeting in December.

The four members elected to serve three-year terms were:

- Bryan Kristenson—Office Plus of Kansas
- John Kenworthy—Storey Kenworthy
- Justin Carpenter—Stationers Inc.
- Mike Holland—Brame

Additionally, five members of the board were elected to positions on the executive committee:

- Yancey Jones Jr—TSRC: Chairman
- Paul McKinney—Eakes Office Solutions: vice chairman
- Jordan Kudler—Legacy Office Solutions: immediate past chairman
- Brian Kerr—Kerr Workplace Solutions: secretary
- Bryan Kristenson—Office Plus of Kansas: treasurer

Jones said the varied backgrounds of the new members would “enrich” the group’s collected vision. He added: “We also want to extend our deepest gratitude to former Treasurer Thomas Jordan and Tim Triplett for their dedicated service and invaluable contributions as members of the ISG board.”
Meet the newest addition to Pilot’s erasable line of products. This innovation in writing technology combines FriXion’s erasable gel ink with a patented synergy tip engineered to deliver an extra fine and super smooth writing experience. FriXion’s thermo-sensitive ink disappears with heat from erasing friction, making it a mistake-free writing tool.
AOPD welcomes Beachley Medical Supply

The board of national accounts organization AOPD has approved a new dealer for membership: Beachley Medical Supply, headquartered in White Marsh, Maryland. Beachley Medical Office Solutions is a privately owned company serving the mid-Atlantic region. It has been operating since 1991 exclusively serving the healthcare community. Its product lines include office supplies, office furniture, uniforms and scrubs, custom printing, promotional products, signs and badges along with other healthcare categories. Beachley Medical has 16 employees with over 10 years of tenure with the company.

Mark Leazer, AOPD executive director stated: “AOPD is pleased to welcome Beachley Medical Supply as a new member of AOPD. Beachley is a little different than your typical office products dealership. On their website you can see that their focus is on the healthcare industry. They sell a lot of different types of product categories. Their membership is a testament to the expanding types of members AOPD is reaching with its vertical markets contract offerings. Our healthcare contracts align well their product offerings.”

ACCO confirms Elisman retirement

ACCO Brands has confirmed that former CEO Boris Elisman will fully retire from the company, as planned, at the end of March. Last August, Elisman announced he was stepping down from the CEO role as of October 1, 2023, with COO Tom Tedford succeeding him. However, Elisman would continue as executive chairman before retiring during the first half of 2024.

Now, in a regulatory filing, the vendor has confirmed that Elisman will indeed leave the company on March 31. Following his departure, board member Mark Rajkowski—a former CFO of MeadWestvaco—will assume the role of chairman.

ACCO also announced that lead independent director Tom Kroeger will step down, having reached the mandatory retirement age under the company’s corporate governance rules.

Highlands announces promotions

International sales, marketing and e-commerce agency Highlands has promoted two of its staff in the US.

First, it has promoted Monique Sluzynski to director, strategic accounts. In her new role, Sluzynski will manage growth for Highlands’ clients at wholesale distributor Essendant. It is a company she knows well after a career spanning more than 35 years in a variety of sales roles with Sanford, Pilot and Frey Gaede.

Sluzynski joined Highlands two years ago as a business development manager, spearheading sales initiatives by actively engaging with distributor partners and end users.

Meanwhile, the company has also announced that Alex Gordon has been promoted to senior director, wholesale—a role in which he will oversee the channel’s business development managers. Highlands called the appointment a “strategic shift toward a streamlined approach in driving growth across the wholesale channel.”

Gordon joined Highlands nine years ago and was most recently strategic account director. He is also a member of City of Hope’s Emerging Leadership Committee.
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Be sure to check out other members of the Z-Grip family – Z-Grip Flight and Z-Grip Max to find your perfect writing tool.

* Based on data derived from NPD Commercial Market, twelve months through November.

Scan to view full Z-Grip product line.
Entries open for NAOPA

Entries and nominations are now being accepted for the prestigious 2024 North American Office Products Awards (NAOPA).

This year, the NAOPA will take place during ISG’s Industry Week, taking place in Orlando, Florida, from September 21-26. That may sound like a long way off, but with the event being held earlier than in previous years, the judging process has been brought forward as well.

Once again, there will be nine awards, split between six product and three individual categories. They are:

- Best Product—Core Business Products
- Best Product—Furniture & Design
- Best Product—Facilities, Breakroom, Safety & Infection Control
- Best Product—Technology
- Innovation of the Year
- People’s Choice
- Young Executive of the Year
- Professional of the Year
- Industry Achievement

The awards—which are free to enter—are open to any companies headquartered or with a physical presence in North America. They must also work within, or supply products and services to, the independent dealer channel.

One change that vendors should be aware of: a product can only be entered in one of the best product categories. However, there is no limit on the number of different products that can be entered, provided they meet the criteria.

The deadline for submitting entries and nominations is Friday April 5. More details about the categories and how to enter can be found here.

Key appointment at Logicblock

Technology solutions provider Logicblock has hired e-commerce entrepreneur John Jordan.

Jordan has joined the Atlanta, Georgia-based company as director of customer growth and experience. He was most recently COO at golf carts retailer Ultimate Carts, where he developed a fast-growing online channel. He was also instrumental in the growth of two online business supplies operations, iBuyofficeSupply.com and Zerbee Business Products (which is now part of the ODP Federation).

Jordan has also worked directly with Logicblock as a customer for more than 17 years.

“John’s 25 years of online experience, his Logicblock system experience, his eye for online retail design and the fact he’s built three successful online companies using our system make him the perfect addition,” said CEO Alex Nicolaides. “It only made sense to welcome him into the growing team here at Logicblock.”
A breakthrough to new cancer killing cells.

According to preclinical research recently published in Cell, one of the world’s premier scientific journals, researchers at City of Hope® have discovered that a type of immune cell in the human body, known to be important for allergy and other immune responses, can also attack both blood cancers and solid tumors.

City of Hope has the unique advantage of being able to manufacture these new cancer killing cells in on-site labs, speeding the discovery into clinical trials.

Michael Caligiuri, M.D., co-senior author of the study remarked, “It was a real surprise to find that human ILC2 cells function as direct cancer killers.”

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**CITY OF HOPE’S NATIONAL BUSINESS PRODUCTS INDUSTRY’S 2024 UPCOMING EVENTS**

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**Sunday to Monday, August 11 to 12**
Honoree Golf Outing Hosted by Harry Dochelli and Essendant
The Philadelphia Cricket Club, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

**Tuesday to Thursday, September 3 to 5**
Annual NBPI/HHI City of Hope Industry Golf Challenge at Pebble Beach
Pebble Beach Resort, Pebble Beach, California

**Wednesday, September 18**
The NBPI Memorial Golf Classic, Hosted by Essendant
The famous No. 4 Course – Dubsdread

**Thursday, September 19**
2024 NBPI Spirit of Life® Gala Honoring Harry Dochelli of Essendant
Renaissance Schaumburg, Schaumburg, Illinois

CityofHope.org

For more information, visit CityofHope.org/nbpi or contact Matt Dodd at mdodd@coh.org.
C-Line celebrates 75 years

Organizational items specialist C-Line Products, Inc is celebrating its 75th anniversary this year.

In 1949, four manufacturers’ reps in the office supplies industry purchased a small manufacturing facility and called it the Chicago Desk Pad Company. The business flourished under the sales and marketing leadership of Elmer Krumwiede, grandfather of current CEO Jim Krumwiede, who joined the firm in 1984.

In 1966, the Chicago Desk Pad Company became C-Line Products as it started to break into other product categories besides desk pads. New manufacturing and distribution facilities were added, and the company moved to new corporate offices in Des Plaines, Illinois.

Judi Krumwiede, current executive vice president, joined C-Line in 1986 and subsequently revamped the human resources/employee relations department. “We created and implemented new policies and procedures, expanded our benefits package and worked to create a fun, productive atmosphere for all our employees,” adds Judi. “Our employees stay with us for many years—we are very lucky in that respect.”

In 1998, C-Line relocated from Des Plaines to its current headquarters in Mount Prospect, Illinois. A larger, more modern facility and warehouse were needed to accommodate C-Line’s increasing space requirements.

Current VP of sales Jennifer Krach led the fourth generation tasked with the challenge of growing and expanding C-Line when she joined the company in 2014. She was joined in 2019 when another of Elmer’s great-grandchildren Lindsay Gomez, became vice president of operations.

“As our corporate tagline says, C-Line is proud to be ‘inspiring organization since 1949’—what a tremendous accomplishment! 75 years and still going strong!” said Jennifer. “Office and school supplies are a part of our family legacy and we are extremely proud of this 75th milestone achievement for C-Line.”

IAI to represent NDI

Atlanta, Georgia-based office furniture manufacturers representative group Institutional Associates, Inc. has been named an official sales and support partner of Nashville-based wholesaler NDI Office Furniture, LLC.

“I’m honored and thrilled to join the NDI family as a key partner,” said Peter J. Gebhardt, president and CEO of Institutional Associates. “NDI’s good name, high-character people, and approach to doing business aligns with our own company’s goals and core values. I expect nothing but continued success for everyone involved as we move forward.”

Since its founding in 1980 in Nashville, Tennessee, NDI has long been a privately owned and customer-oriented wholesaler in the commercial, education, healthcare, hospitality and work-from-home spaces. The company offers brands, including its own WorkSimpli line, that provide exceptional value and style to its customers for decades including desks, seating, tables, storage, panels and other business furniture accessories.

US court denies Ninestar injunction

The US Court of International Trade has denied Ninestar’s motion for an immediate lifting of its import ban into the country.

In a February 27 ruling, Judge Gary Katzmann ruled that Ninestar’s motion was unlikely to succeed on three counts of the amended complaint, that the company had failed to establish “irreparable harm” to its business, and that a preliminary injunction was not in the public interest.

“The embargo is still in force, meaning that Ninestar’s merchandise continues to be prohibited from entering the United States,” ruled Judge Katzmann.

It appears Ninestar will now have to prove to the US government—in line with Department of Homeland Security procedures—that it is not working with the Chinese government to “recruit, transport, transfer, harbor or receive forced labor or persecuted ethnic minorities out of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region.”

Ninestar has stated that it remains committed to moving forward with the litigation process.
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Fedrigoni confirms Mohawk acquisition

Italian specialty paper company Fedrigoni has confirmed a transaction with US firm Mohawk Fine Papers.

The Italian manufacturer first entered into a distribution agreement with Mohawk in September 2022. It has now acquired “certain assets” of the US producer in what appears to be some kind of “pre-pack” deal.

As Fedrigoni stated in its press release: “The transaction was finalized through a NewCo incorporated by Fedrigoni to acquire Mohawk’s assets in a sale process initiated by a financial institution … The transaction entirely cleared the new company from existing indebtedness, allowing [it] to preserve the majority of existing jobs, industrial activities and customer relationships.”

According to press reports in the US, two parts of Mohawk that were not included were the Crane Stationery business in upstate New York and a facility in Ashtabula, Ohio.

Domtar to reduce paper capacity

North American producer Domtar is to indefinitely curtail paper operations at its Ashdown facility in Arkansas.

The Paper Excellence-owned manufacturer has confirmed its A62 paper machine and associated sheeter will be indefinitely idled by the end of June, reducing Domtar’s annual uncoated freesheet capacity by 216,000 short tons.

Domtar had previously idled the A62 machine during the COVID-19 pandemic, but restarted it in 2021 when paper demand picked up again.

“Now, after careful analysis and consideration, we have determined our customer demand for these products has reached a level that no longer requires this production capacity,” stated Rob Melton, SVP of Paper & Packaging Commercial.

Domtar said a “tentative agreement” with local unions had been reached and that, if ratified, no workers would be laid off. At the same time, the company is restarting pulp drying operations at Ashdown, adding capacity of southern bleached softwood kraft pulp.

Imperial Dade makes another acquisition

Imperial Dade has bought Houston, Texas-based distributor Brawner Paper Company.

The transaction represents the 81st acquisition for Imperial Dade under the leadership of Bob and Jason Tillis. Financial terms of the deal were not disclosed.

Founded in 1946 by Thom Brawner, the company has been involved in the paper and janitorial supply industry for over 70 years. In 1976, the leadership transitioned to Leonard Beasley, who managed the business until his passing in 2016.

Following today’s announcement, Brawner will continue to be run by president Nell Harris and her team.
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In an age when information is power, consumers have become increasingly conscious of the need for transparency and accountability from businesses. The Information Transparency and Personal Data Control (INFORM) Act is a crucial legislative step toward ensuring that consumers are well informed about how their personal data is collected, used and shared. This article provides an overview of the INFORM Act and sheds light on its importance for consumers.

Enacted with the goal of enhancing transparency in data practices, the INFORM Act addresses the growing concerns surrounding data privacy and consumer rights. The legislation compels businesses to disclose their data collection and usage practices in a clear and comprehensible manner, ensuring that consumers have the information they need to make informed decisions about their personal data:

- **Transparency requirements:** The INFORM Act mandates that businesses be transparent about their data collection practices. Companies must provide clear and concise privacy policies, detailing the types of data collected, the purposes for which it is used and any third parties with which it may be shared.

- **User-friendly opt-out mechanisms:** To empower consumers with greater control over their personal information, the act stipulates that businesses must offer easily accessible, user-friendly opt-out mechanisms. These allow individuals to choose whether their data is used for certain purposes, such as targeted advertising.

- **Data security measures:** Recognizing the importance of safeguarding personal data, the INFORM Act requires businesses to implement reasonable security measures to protect the information they collect. This provision aims to prevent data breaches and unauthorized access, ensuring the confidentiality and integrity of consumer data.

- **Consent for sensitive data:** When collecting sensitive personal information such as health or financial data, businesses must obtain explicit consent from consumers. This provision enhances protection for particularly sensitive types of information, reinforcing the importance of informed and voluntary consent.

The INFORM Act is important for consumers in the following ways:

- **Empowering informed decision-making:** The INFORM Act empowers consumers by arming them with the knowledge needed to make informed decisions about their personal data. Transparent and easily accessible information enables individuals to assess the risks and benefits of sharing their information with a particular business.

- **Enhancing control over personal data:** With user-friendly opt-out mechanisms, consumers gain greater control over how their data
is utilized. This provision enables individuals to tailor their online experiences according to their preferences, minimizing unwanted data tracking and targeted ads.

- **Ensuring data security:** The act’s emphasis on data security measures provides consumers with assurance that their personal information is handled responsibly. This, in turn, helps build trust between businesses and consumers, fostering a more secure online environment.

- **Protecting sensitive information:** By requiring explicit consent for the collection of sensitive information, the INFORM Act adds an extra layer of protection for individuals. This provision acknowledges the heightened importance of privacy when dealing with certain types of personal data.

In a digital landscape where personal data is a valuable currency, the INFORM Act plays a pivotal role in safeguarding consumer rights. By promoting transparency, empowering informed decision-making and enhancing control over personal data, this legislation contributes to creating a more secure and trustworthy online ecosystem. As consumers become increasingly aware of the importance of privacy, the INFORM Act ensures businesses prioritize transparency and accountability in their data practices.

This legislation passed Congress in a bipartisan way. You may be wondering why I am writing about the INFORM Act. Well, if you support the principles of the INFORM Act and Congress felt strongly enough about it to pass it in a bipartisan way, shouldn’t the same energy and support be there for passing the INFORM Act 2.0, which would apply to the General Services Administration’s (GSA) online marketplace? I would argue the INFORM Act 2.0 is more important because it involves government websites.

Today, Congress needs to be concerned about the counterfeits flooding the government market. These are hurting manufacturers, resellers and taxpayers. Congress should be taking action against the “Wild, Wild West” style of selling these marketplaces offer, which harms small businesses and taxpayers. There is nothing today preventing counterfeitors from doing business on them. Today’s GSA online marketplace is also a threat to national security. China is the largest producer of counterfeit goods. There is nothing stopping China or anyone else from selling USB “listening” devices to the government.

If the original INFORM Act is important for consumers, the INFORM Act 2.0 should be equally important for government agencies. The Workplace Solutions Association is pushing Congress to work with industry on passing the INFORM Act 2.0 as a measure that protects small businesses, protects taxpayers and safeguards our national security. This is not a partisan issue. In a town filled with partisanship, this issue is one we can and should pass this year.

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**Not on my watch**

Mike Tucker, executive director, Workplace Solutions Association

Having spent over four decades selling office products, I think it’s fair to say I’m an industry veteran—hopefully not a dinosaur. Most of that time was in sales and management, including 25 years as the owner of George W. Allen Co. in Washington DC. Over the course of my career, I’ve read many books on how to sell more, be a better leader or “turn the ship around”. Nearly every industry event I’ve attended has had a motivational speaker explain how to work smarter, not harder and/or divulge the real secrets to success. I don’t recall much from the books I read, but I usually left industry events with a fresh attitude and some good ideas for working on the business.

I recently had the opportunity to read a book by a longtime industry friend and former Workplace Solutions Association board member: Not on My Watch, written by Skip Ireland, the president and former owner of Chattanooga Office Supply (COS). Skip and his brothers were third-generation owners of COS. The business was started in 1941 and the brothers took over in 1983 after the sudden passing of their father.

*Not on My Watch* shares principles for building a successful family business. In addition to being a great story of success and accomplishment, it offers insights and strategies that I think managers and owners of all ages can learn from. Topics covered include:

- aligning family values with business goals;
- navigating crises and creating opportunities;
- the superpower of common sense; and
- succession planning for a family business.

Whether you’re a young manager or a seasoned owner, I think you will find Skip’s journey interesting, entertaining and one you can learn from. For questions or to order a copy, contact:

- hhireland3@gmail.com
- www.SkipIrelandBooks.com
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- PERICLES
Is it time to update your technology to improve customer relations, increase profits and make your life easier? Lisa Veeck looks at the industry’s leading tech platforms.
Office Solutions Products and Services, Yorba Linda, California, has used Business Management Software’s (BMI) Microsoft Dynamic NAV since April 2009.

Bob Mairena, Office Solutions president and owner, explains why his company chose BMI: “Our biggest challenge was that we were using an ERP solution that was no longer keeping up with our needs and was soon to be retired. The lack of support and new development was hindering our growth, efficiency and data analysis capabilities.

“We looked at several software solutions. The decision came down to choosing between a general ERP solution, like Microsoft Dynamic NAV, and an industry-specific solution. BMI is a Microsoft partner specializing in ERP software and the company’s success rate with other implementations across multiple industries impressed us. BMI had also customized the package for the office product space, which at the time was our primary focus. The BMI team also really stood out. Their knowledge of Dynamics NAV allowed us to take advantage of the broad range of functionalities. All these factors played a part in our decision and it’s proven to be a good one.”

Since then, several things have confirmed they made the right call. “The software implementation was almost seamless and came in under budget,” recalls Mairena. “While we played a big part in the success, BMI was right there with us. Working together as a team was the key.”

The software’s user-friendliness is another advantage. “It is a Microsoft product; the user interface and navigation are remarkably similar to Microsoft Office,” explains Mairena. “This allows for quick adoption by new hires and facilitates training.”

But perhaps the most significant benefit has been the software’s effect on Office Solutions’ business. “BMI/Dynamic NAV is such a versatile solution—it has had a direct impact on our operations from day one,” he continues. “It has streamlined workflow for multiple departments, improved our data analytics and built efficiencies across our divisions. Dynamic NAV offers a broad range of functionality that covers various aspects of our business needs, from integrated financials and supply chain management to sales and customer service.”

While Mairena can’t put a dollar amount on how much labor or time BMI/Dynamic NAV has saved, he confirms that while the company has grown, “the headcount has not.” The software has also increased sales, he reports: “I can tell you we have had substantial growth and BMI/Dynamics NAV has played a role in that growth.”

Reflecting Office Solutions’ faith in BMI, the company is now embarking on the next stage of its journey with the provider. “We are currently in the process of moving to SaaS [software as a service] platform BMI SupplyAutomate, based on Dynamics 365 Business Central,” says Mairena. “We are excited to see the additional benefits and even more excited that this will be our last big upgrade. SaaS products are hosted remotely and updates and patches to the application or new features are automatically rolled out. The move to the cloud aligns with our company goal of forward-looking technology strategy and continuous improvement.”

Mairena wouldn’t hesitate to recommend BMI to other dealers: “BMI is a great partner—its team is responsive to any issue or need that may arise. The company is committed to being more than just a vendor. BMI is a partner in our success.”
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Stuart Stuart (yes, a double moniker!), co-owner of Brown’s Office Centre, Sylvania, Georgia, reckons the company has been using Dealer Commander software for about 15 years. “When something doesn’t work, you know when you bought it,” he says. “It’s when something works good, the way it should, that it’s hard to remember.”

He does know that he wishes the company had adopted the software sooner, though. “Our rep, Sonny [Arora], kept telling me we needed to upgrade and try the software,” Stuart recalls. “But I’m old school: you get into habits and it’s hard to change. Finally, I went kicking and screaming. If I’d listened to Sonny sooner, I’d be in really good shape!”

“It’s not that Brown had never tried out different software; it’s just that none paid off like Dealer Commander has. “It’s easy for people in the office to use and works well with our website,” Stuart explains. “The electronic invoicing works really well. Not having to do paper invoicing saves us a ton of time. So does customers being able to sign for deliveries digitally. We have 25 to 30 tickets every day. Before, if there was an issue, we’d have to sort through the tickets and find the invoices to see who signed. It’s saved us a full-time employee position and that’s a big deal for a business. The software is even improving our cash flow because some people pay when they automatically receive the invoice rather than waiting for us to generate a statement.”

The software also helps his team input customer orders. “When we input an order, it shows the catalog and description so we can see what we are ordering to be sure it is right, which also helps with new hires,” he continues. “Being able to see the customer history also helps a lot. It tells us the last time they bought an item and the price we sold it to them for, so we know to stay in the same ballpark.”

The software also displays the cost of items in each of the wholesaler’s programs so Stuart knows where to get the best deal without having to look each item up. Stuart believes Dealer Commander’s software is “priced fairly.” As for support, “I truly don’t think we’ve had any downtime; there’s never been a day when it didn’t work,” he enthuses. “If there is a problem, even though they provide good training, it’s usually something I don’t understand or forgot. So I post a support ticket and get an answer quickly—usually the same day, but never as long as two days. If I post a comment that the Dealer Commander team can’t understand, Sonny will call me and ask me what I am talking about.

“Another thing I like is that Sonny calls me from time to time—not because there is an issue but just to see if we are happy and everything is going smoothly. Not many sales reps do that anymore. I recommend Dealer Commander software to other dealers—I really do.”
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OCOP Express, Dallas, Texas, was losing time and money with its delivery system. Drivers weren’t always using the most direct routes, packages were overlooked and misdelivered, and the paperwork was unwieldy.

That was 13 years ago, before the company started using ECI’s JumpTrack proof-of-delivery software to reduce costs, increase accuracy and improve efficiencies.

“JumpTrack has allowed us to make more deliveries, saving us anywhere from five minutes up to an hour per day per route,” reports president Ken Caldwell. “It plans our drivers’ most direct delivery routes, including fuel-saving measures like making left turns whenever possible. It also integrates with Google or Apple Maps, providing turn-by-turn directions so drivers can find new accounts easily with the click of a button. The app saves gas and time.”

Another key feature enables drivers to scan all the packages on the truck before they leave the warehouse. “It accounts for every package and tells drivers how many they should have for each stop. They know if they have an extra package or one is missing,” Caldwell says.

Paperwork reduction is another significant advantage of JumpTrack. “We don’t have to search through printed papers to find the right order to see who scratched their name on a piece of paper,” explains Caldwell. He estimates the time savings to be 30 to 45 minutes per week.

According to Caldwell, the company also uses JumpTrack as a sales tool by highlighting its advantages for clients: “Customers like that it eliminates phone calls. They don’t have to call in to see if a package has been delivered. They can go to our website and log in, and it shows the number of cartons, the day and time the packages were delivered, that they are in receiving, and the signature and printed name of the person who accepted the package. If no one was there to accept the delivery, drivers can take a picture of where it was left.”

While setting up JumpTrack and getting all the elements tied together took a little time, Caldwell says the system itself was easy to learn and that by day three, it was as if the company had always used the system.

To host JumpTrack, OCOP Express provides its six delivery drivers with cellphones that can be used for their personal use after hours. Caldwell is confident the savings in fuel and labor, paperwork reduction and increased customer satisfaction more than offset the expense. “I definitely recommend JumpTrack for dealers looking to improve their delivery efficiency,” he concludes.
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When Benjamin Office Supply and Services, Rockville, Maryland, wanted to upgrade the website of its furniture division, Andy Stern’s Office Furniture, it turned to Fortune Web Marketing—a full-service online marketing agency based in Asbury Park, New Jersey. It helps clients establish and refine their digital presence through search engine optimization (SEO), social media and inbound strategies. The company has extensive experience in the IDC.

“The sites Fortune Web did for us four years ago worked great,” says Josh Benjamin, director of operations and communications. “But we were looking to expand our SEO and improve our content to get higher Google rankings and drive customers to our website. Fortune Web works with similar companies in our industry, so the team understands the mindset and type of customers we want to target. Fortune Web made sure we were headed in the right direction.”

Fortune Web used several methods to steer the company down the right path. “Their team sends us reports on how our SEO is doing and how we are ranking with Google, and explains what we need to do depending on what is working best,” says Benjamin. “Fortune Web also writes a blog with good content relevant to our customers. I can then use the blog in our newsletters with links to drive customers to our site and include links to products. Fortune Web gave us perspective so we can better focus on specific areas. They brought our furniture site into the 21st century.”

One of the improvements engineered by Fortune Web was the creation of subpages for everything from educational versus healthcare furniture to ergonomic design and collaborative space furniture. “It helps customers know where to find content they care about and products they would order,” explains Benjamin.

Seemingly minor tweaks that Fortune Web introduced to cater to online customers have also had a significant impact:

“They added a ‘contact us’ call to action on every page so customers can get in touch with us and inquiries are sent to me and our leadership team so we can respond to them.”

Andy Stern’s site now uses WordPress. While transitioning from one software program to another can sometimes be a nightmare, Benjamin says the switch could not have been smoother. “The transition to the new site was fantastic every step of the way,” he recalls. “I learned a lot. Jennifer [Stine, Fortune Web’s president] and her team explained everything, including terms I’d heard and vaguely understood but not completely. They explained things in simple terms, which really helps and is not something many tech companies do.”

According to Benjamin, Fortune Web’s overall support was equally impressive: “When there was a small hiccup, they would assess it and fix it and figure out how to avoid it in the future.”

All in all, “Fortune Web has been an amazing vendor,” Josh concludes. “They’ve given us so much time and attention. I think many companies would be lucky to work with them.”
“GOPD has all the bells and whistles we and our customers need … the owner and team really understand independent dealer challenges.”

Jackson Data Products, Inc., Ridgeland, Mississippi, knew it was time to try a new software provider. The system the dealer had been using was becoming increasingly expensive and the service wasn’t there: small bugs that disrupted business took too long to be fixed. Topping it off, the system was difficult to use. So the company started researching other options and in November 2023 switched to GOPD.

“GOPD has all the bells and whistles we and our customers need,” says co-owner Stacey Philley. “It offers a better price point and is user friendly and customizable; and the owner and team really understand independent dealer challenges.”

Of GOPD’s many features, Philley particularly likes that the customer experience can be customized. “We can add a logo, graphics and copy specific to each customer,” she explains. “We can put a school’s mascot on the shopping cart. It makes the experience more personal.”

She also likes the price comparison feature that allows Jackson Data to match or beat competitors’ pricing, with the option of letting the customer see the results: “It saves time because we don’t have to be constantly searching online to see what Staples is selling an item for. It helps us keep up with market trends.”

GOPD’s mobile version is another plus. “The mobile technology is a big feature for us because all the younger generation shop by phone,” reports Philley. “The GOPD version offers the same features as the website and fits in our budget.”

According to Philley, the transition to GOPD was easy: “With the old software, often we couldn’t figure things out ourselves and had to call support a lot. The GOPD team held our hand, but we found the software to be intuitive. There were not that many hiccups—maybe one or two—but the GOPD team were quick to fix them. They made sure we were happy through the set-up and it is still important to them. They call every two weeks to chat and make sure we are happy and all is going well.”

Philley also believes the switch to GOPD has boosted Jackson Data’s sales. “The website’s front end looks more professional,” she says. “We offer all the features necessary to keep up with the big boxes—for example, when customers click on an item, batteries or other items they might like or need pop up.”

Would Philley recommend GOPD to other independent dealers looking for a software provider? “Definitely!” she enthuses. “The price point is so good, yet it offers all the features of more expensive software. It helps our sales and is easy to use.”
Zuma Office Supply, Houston, Texas, started using Logicblock in 2009. However, president and co-owner Mason Kramer became acquainted with the software long before then. He clearly remembers why he switched to it at his former employer.

“We were more into the traditional office products then and were looking to get further into the e-commerce space, and the old provider we were using wasn’t suited for that and showed no signs of improving or wanting to develop in that area,” he recalls. “So, we looked at different options and came across Logicblock.”

The company liked what it saw and made the transition; and when the time came to pick a solution for Zuma, Kramer didn’t hesitate.

“We wanted a customized site and with Logicblock, we have that,” he says. “Logicblock offers an out-of-the-box website that is e-commerce friendly and allows them and us to customize. We can do anything we want. That was a big reason we chose it. The back end is also user friendly, which makes it easier for our team.”

Two years ago, Zuma completely revamped its website and again was not disappointed. “We fully customized the look and improved the experience for existing and new customers,” Kramer explains. “The types of reviews we are getting are usually reserved for big, well-known sites like Target or Walmart. The look and experience of the site have increased our sales. We’ve added sales because new customers feel comfortable placing an order; and it’s helped with customer retention because they feel comfortable coming back based on their initial experience. The back end also continues to improve.”

In fact, Kramer credits Logicblock’s back end with helping Zuma—once a strictly e-commerce company—become a hybrid and go national: “The back end allows us to tie into different areas nationwide with a local look and feel.”

“Logicblock has great integrations,” he continues. “We can add different nontraditional vendors and it works great with pay-per-click; and Google feeds to update pricing and add products instantly. That’s been huge for us. So has being able to pull reports to look at the business as a whole. We can analyze the data to make decisions, which has helped run the business.”

As for support, Kramer admits that initially he had his doubts. “I very much prefer picking up the phone and having a conversation versus email, as I find it easier and faster,” he says. “But Logicblock has an internal ticket system. You fill out and rank the importance of the request from ‘urgent’ to ‘it can wait.’ It works fantastically well. Of course, if we need to jump on a call, including with the executive team, we do.” Kramer is equally pleased with the training, reporting that the company’s Knowledge Base includes in-depth how-to videos on whatever his team is looking to do.

Kramer concludes: “If you are an independent dealer and want to stay relevant in office products today, you should probably use Logicblock. I don’t think there is a better system out there.”
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Office Express (OEX), Troy, Michigan, started using Prima software in May 2021. President Jeff Eusebio explains what life was like before Prima: “Our previous supplier’s approach was more like, ‘If we don’t have it, you don’t need it.’ The company didn’t want to integrate with anything it didn’t own. We also had ongoing issues that the company took forever to fix and there was often an extra charge for some features. They kept increasing our software costs every year without adding any new functionality. I had been looking for a better alternative to our system since I started in this industry in 2014. Prima finally had it.”

Eusebio explains what clinched his decision: “We chose Prima because it was built with a modern code base on a relational database. It had been in development for decades, was already in use in the United Kingdom and had all the capabilities we need.”

Eusebio also appreciated the smooth transition. “The company has a really responsive development team,” he recalls. “If a feature we requested would benefit everyone, they didn’t charge to create it. They built quite a bit into their product based on our needs at no extra cost. We have also saved a significant amount of money with Prima since things like proof of delivery, printing and emailing are built in at no extra cost. Prima has a modern architecture and user interface. Their onboarding and training were quite good and thorough. There was a lot to learn, of course, and they patiently helped us work through it. And this training didn’t stop after we went live—they continue to be responsive to our queries to this day.”

Eusebio gives an example of how this has helped sales: “When we were looking to make our final decision, we were courting a large customer with some unique requirements, including sending orders via PDF, tracking shipments in Aftership and real-time reporting. It’s only because we switched to Prima that we were able to land this customer, which resulted in a 10 percent increase in our overall supply sales over the next year.”

While Eusebio acknowledges it depends on the function, Prima has saved OEX time and labor overall. “It’s been an absolute shining star for our accounting department with the move to QuickBooks,” he elaborates. “We eliminated an entire paid role and the current accounting employees have a much better work-life balance. It’s also not embarrassing to show summer interns what we use for accounting. From an IT systems support perspective, it’s definitely a time saver. There is no more day-end or month-end processing. From a data maintenance standpoint, some things would take hours to accomplish before, such as mass data changes across hundreds of customers. With Prima, they are done easily in less than a minute.”

Eusebio concludes: “I recommend independent dealers look at Prima to see if it fits their business.”
I spend my time speaking with dealers one on one to answer questions. I head up the training department and we customize the training for each dealer. I have learned that it’s important to know the right questions to ask and to be able to make recommendations to help our customers with their workflow.

Melody Becker, GOPD Lead Trainer
Office Plus Nevada, Las Vegas, Nevada, opted to go with SSI software for one major reason. “We used another program from 2005 to 2019 and the number one reason we switched to SSI was customer service,” says Brandon Guthrie, Office Plus operations manager. “The customer service [with the old company] was good initially. But toward the end, trying to get things handled when we had an issue was a challenge. We were running into major problems getting any support. If the company isn’t responding when there is an issue, I can’t respond to my customers, which is a problem. The front and back end of the other program worked well, but I am service driven. I have to have customer service.”

This lack of service ended up costing Office Plus business. “I had a large account with a punchout that had an issue and couldn’t place an order with the old system,” explains Guthrie. “I was losing orders and money because it wasn’t being fixed.”

Just as Office Plus was experiencing this lack of responsiveness, SSI came calling. Guthrie decided to make the transition—a move he has never regretted. “SSI is far more service driven,” he reports. “I have Skype support if I need it, on top of the normal support, tickets and cellphone numbers. I haven’t had to use it, but it gives me peace of mind.”

Guthrie also likes that the service is personal: “I work with the key individuals. One was Charles Russell, who recently passed away. He was so supportive; I am sure many dealers will feel the loss. But it shows you how close we are to the people at SSI that we knew about his passing. With many other suppliers, you wouldn’t even know a person’s name.”

Customer service is so crucial to Guthrie that it overshadows everything else. “The features of SSI are good,” he enthuses. “They are user friendly and work well. I also like that SSI partners with other third-party vendors. These partnerships allow me to develop direct relationships with the reps and SSI to focus on what it does best. But why I like SSI comes down to its responsiveness and support. When I ask for a tweak, I can see it being made. When I have an opinion or something I prefer, SSI is very responsive.”

As the software is dealer driven, Guthrie admits that he may not agree with every change SSI makes based on other dealers’ preferences. Still, he likes the collaboration and thinks the more dealers involved, the better the system is for the IDC. And apparently, dealers are increasingly choosing SSI, as the number of dealers the company serves continues to grow.

While it’s all about customer service to Guthrie, this is not the only benefit SSI offers. “I am paying one-third of what I was paying before,” he elaborates. “We were also able to consolidate our warehouse positions because purchasing, deliveries and order filling are more reliable and take less time. This allows me to work on other things and spend less time watching what is happening in purchasing. I am willing to pay more for good customer service, but SSI offers the best of both worlds: great customer service and cost savings.”
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Oh, and I almost forgot: reduce your support team; minimize convenient delivery; raise your minimums for free delivery; backorder anything you don’t stock; “hide” contract items; make returns really hard to complete; and brag about how your prices are lower than ever before.

I can hear many readers saying, “Buxton’s lost it completely! What sort of nonsense is he trying to share this month?”

Don’t worry too much—I haven’t “lost it” (any more than usual); I just thought it might be helpful for independent dealers to consider the changes that our large competitors have been making.

These competitors reside in either or both the office products and janitorial sides of the distribution business. Because of their actions, the opportunity to grow sales within the IDC is almost unparalleled—with one caveat, which you will discover only if you read (or skip) to the end of this column.

Let’s discuss what has occurred in the past few months in the various companies we will call “the big guys.” One of our large competitors just made drastic cuts from its sales team for the third time in the past year. Another competitor acquired a local distributor in the Southwest during the fourth quarter of 2023 and immediately fired 12 out of 13 reps. And from what I have seen in the past few years, firing much of the sales and support team is common practice when large companies acquire smaller entities. By the way, one of the companies I work closely with was able to pick up two excellent reps from that debacle.

But wait: there’s more. Prospects are telling numerous independent dealers that they don’t know if they currently have a representative at one of the other companies because they haven’t seen a rep in so long. Many folks also state that they don’t receive reporting, consistent customer service, backorder reports or timely delivery from “the big guys.”


Ah, but they do state that they have “very low prices.” I recently received an email from a “chief sales officer.” I don’t know about you, but
I had never heard of that particular position before. She stated, “You will now find these [products] priced 5-10 percent lower than a major competitor!”

Thank your lucky stars that if you buy from them, with all of the subtractions that I just highlighted, maybe the lower price will save your company from certain bankruptcy. However, they are taking away the people and support that are vital to the efficiency of any company—especially when we consider that office products and janitorial products account for less than 1.5 percent of a customer’s overall spend. Do you see the opportunity “the big guys” have presented to us? They have given up on great service by betting that price alone will enable them to hold onto their market share. And if our reps continue to talk about the same sorts of things, they just might succeed. Too many of our salespeople go into smaller accounts than they should; they “pitch” their wares rather than find pain; and above all, they say stupid things like, “I can save you lots of money on what you buy.” Sorry: your reps can’t save you much if we are talking about their pen versus my pen. But way too many reps keep trying to pass off that same—pardon me—“BS.”

Every once in a while, a rep might win a new account with this process; but it usually doesn’t occur to them that the customer might have decided to buy from them for a totally different reason than the price of a pen. Maybe, just maybe, they have other pains that made them switch but the rep doesn’t know about because they didn’t ask.

Could it be possible that major problems with “the big guys” are making prospects more open to buying from your company than ever before? But here is the caveat I mentioned: maybe your company isn’t growing because your reps are too focused on the one thing that is not a weakness among your competitors. If a large competitor wants to win on price and the customer is focused on price, independents cannot win. However, there are millions of prospects that care more about good service than the very lowest price. Don’t you think that it is about time we changed our sales approach to focus on our numerous strengths, rather than just the area that may be our only weakness?
One of the biggest challenges for sales managers is discerning whether they are investing their time with reps or just spending it. According to Webster’s, to “invest” means “to expend money with the expectation of realizing a profit or material result”; while to “spend” means “to pay out money in buying or hiring goods or services.”

Note the difference? When you spend, it’s without the expectation of achieving a profit. And in over 25 years of managing salespeople and coaching other sales managers, I can state this as fact: far too many sales managers spend their time when they think they are investing their time.

Most sales managers spend their time working with, or on, the bottom tier of their salesforces. They work to raise low performers to a level of basic competence (quota) so that they won’t have to fire them.

“But Troy,” you say, “that’s natural, isn’t it? My top guys don’t need my time and some of them may not want me messing with them. Therefore, I can improve the skills of my bottom-tier salespeople and impact my salesforce’s performance that way.”

This is where we turn back to the old question of spending your time versus investing your time. Here’s a simple checklist to help you understand which is which:

- After a work session with a rep, do their skills improve? This might seem obvious, but it’s not to many sales managers. I recently had the opportunity to make joint calls with a client’s salesperson. I had previously made joint calls with him—three years ago. Back then, he was teetering on the edge of being released. Since then, the manager had made a project out of him, dedicating at least a half a day per week to working with him. What was the result? Well … nothing that I could see. His skills hadn’t improved to any measurable level. He was still asking the wrong questions, fumbling in his ability to present to a customer, missing buying signs and probably burning sales left and right. Yet his numbers were just sufficiently higher to take him out of the firing line. We’ll get to the “why” of his numerical improvement in a moment; but first, here’s the moral of this story: if your salesperson’s skills are improving when you
work with them, you are investing your time. If not, you are spending your time.

• Are your joint calls focused on teaching the salesperson how to sell or just on helping the salesperson get the deal? Here’s the “why.” It’s true that the salesperson’s numbers had improved. The reason was that the sales manager was joining enough important calls that more deals were getting closed. Those deals were closing because the sales manager was basically closing them himself—taking over the sales calls and making the deals happen. If you do this, you might think that you’re doing your job and benefiting the company; but you’re not. You’re only benefiting yourself and your rep—and then only in the short term.

• If you took your hands off the salesperson, what would happen? Back at the office, I began probing the salesperson’s sales and activity records for the past three years and cross-referencing them with the sales manager’s vacation and travel schedules. When the sales manager wasn’t there, the salesperson’s activity levels dropped by nearly half—and the salesperson rarely closed any deals when the manager wasn’t there. The manager was simply doing much of the work for the salesperson. If, after some time under your tutelage, a salesperson can function independently, you have invested your time. If not, you have spent it.

If you’re staying silent during joint calls and using them as a coaching opportunity, you’re investing your time. If you are selling, you’re spending your time.

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In my review meeting with the company owner and the sales manager, I gave my analysis. I was asked by the sales manager if the salesperson should be put on a performance improvement plan (PIP). I said, “That’s up to you. But”—turning to the business owner—“the sales manager should definitely be put on a PIP.” Both jaws dropped.

“Here’s why,” I explained. “You (the sales manager) have told me that you’ve spent at least four hours per week over the past three years with this person. That’s over 600 hours of your time. You haven’t improved their skills or performance; and you did this to save yourself from having to fire him, and because you liked him so much. That’s an incredible misuse of time and resources; and you have seven other reps who do not receive that level of attention. You should be put on a PIP; then how you handle improving your own performance is up to you.”

Harsh? Maybe. But the sales manager had become emotionally involved to a high degree and had abdicated his management duties in favor of basically being a part-time sales rep. Sales managers do this every day without realizing it. If that’s you, stop!

But do your top reps just want to be left alone and not to be messed with? Maybe that’s true in some cases. More often, however, time spent with a top rep builds relationships and produces dividends. If you get out and work with your top people, you may find coachable moments—and if you improve a top rep once, they will always want to work with you. Your top reps are the ones who always want to improve, to sell more and to produce more. If you can help them do this, that’s a good investment of your time.

To truly start investing your time rather than spending it, try this one simple guideline: apportion your coaching (and make it coaching, not selling) time evenly to all your mature reps, top to bottom. New reps take more time, as they should—but if you divide yourself equally among your mature reps, you’ll find out that your time is probably better invested with your top people.
The Coach’s Guide: Five Signs You Are Spinning Your Wheels

It’s easy to know when we are “spinning our wheels” as a salesperson: no callbacks, no responses, getting ghosted and so on. But how do we know if we are “spinning our wheels” as a sales manager/coach?

This was an interesting perspective I heard from a manager during a recent training session that made me pause to consider the issue from a management point of view.

Sales managers play a pivotal role in guiding their team members, providing feedback and fine-tuning strategies to optimize performance. However, despite their best intentions, sales managers may sometimes find themselves unknowingly “spinning their wheels” when attempting to coach or manage a particular team member. This blind spot can hinder progress and lead to frustration for both the manager and the salesperson.

But how do you know when you’re spinning your wheels; and once you realize you are, what should you do next?

Here are five signs you’re spinning your wheels:

• No implementation of your suggestions: After two to three scheduled one-on-ones, you’re still not seeing any of your suggestions or recommendations being implemented.
• Resistance or disengagement: Your team member appears disinterested or resistant during coaching sessions.
• Lack of progress: Your team member’s performance fails to improve despite repeated coaching efforts. They don’t self-correct what they can improve.
• Lack of ownership: Your team member wages war using the blame game—for example, delivery issues, service issues, etc. They don’t take ownership and there is a lack of self-responsibility.
• Low or no activity: Based on the model A x E = R (Activity x Efficiency = Results), your team member is lacking effort in one area (Activity) which is 100 percent in their control.

If you’ve seen one or more of these signs with any of your team members, it’s a red flag. Here’s what you should do next.

Time for a candid conversation

These discussions serve as pivotal moments for realignment, reflection and positive change. Here are key talking points and a framework you can use to guide the conversation:

• State your intention.
• Share your observations.
• Engage the team member.
• Share what will happen if there is no change.
• Why is it worth it for them? Energize them with a long-term view!

As managers, we’re very good at sharing our observations, but we often fail to share the intention behind the observations.

Let’s run through an example based on a team member with low or no activity:

• Intention: “Alex, my goal for you (and I know your goal for yourself) is for you to thrive in your role here, hit your goals and get compensated for what you deserve for your...”
skills and talents.”

• Observations: “I’ve noticed—as we have discussed before—your activity dropping. There is a proven formula for the level of activity it takes to hit goals and I’m seeing a trend in the drop to your activity levels. You have mentioned you need X number of meetings based on your appointment to close conversion ratio and that is right on pace with others in our company.”

• Engagement: “I’d like to hear your perspective on what might be contributing to the decline in your sales activity. What are the challenges you are encountering that are impacting your activity levels?”

• Consequences of no change: “Alex, I’ve had the unique position of seeing years of reps push through these slumps and thrive; but I’ve also seen times when there is no change and the impact that has. Sales will start to drop (even though you may not feel it right now) and you will be on a rollercoaster of results and not make the money I know you have stated you want to make.”

• Why it’s worth it: “I firmly believe you have the potential to turn things around and excel in your role. By increasing your sales activity and actively engaging with prospects, you’ll not only improve your performance but also position yourself for long-term success and advancement within our company. I’m happy to get out in the field (or on the phone) with you more, invest in training and/or mentoring with someone else or anything else that you see would better equip you for success. What can I do to better support you? What is your next step to turn this around and amp up your activity level?”

This conversation framework emphasizes understanding, support, accountability and the long-term benefits of improving sales activity, with the aim of energizing your team member while addressing performance concerns constructively.

Stop spinning wheels and start empowering your team!

Be a catalyst for helping your team experience more success and career fulfillment, cheering you on as you coach, manage and equip your team!

Marisa Pensa
Green is the new black in B2B digital commerce

As the landscape of B2B digital commerce continues to evolve, businesses are making sustainability not just a badge of honor, but a cornerstone of their operational ethos. Going green is not just about being part of a trend; it’s about acknowledging the importance of environmental responsibility in digital commerce and acting accordingly. Let’s look at why and how green has become the new black in the B2B digital commerce space.

Understanding the green consumer mindset

More and more businesses are joining the green revolution, realizing that for their customers, “sustainability” is no longer a mere buzzword but a critical criterion in B2B dealings. Once mere spectators, customers are now playing an active role in promoting sustainability by scrutinizing both the products they purchase and the environmental pedigree of their suppliers. This is no passing fad: it’s a fundamental shift toward a more conscious and conscientious way of conducting business.

This involves peeling back the layers to analyze not only the immediate benefits of a product but its long-term impact on the planet. This tilt toward sustainability is reshaping the B2B marketplace, driving forward a new era of responsible business practices.

The ecofriendly office space—a growing trend

The green revolution in today’s workspaces goes far beyond adding a splash of color with a potted plant or two: it’s a full-blown transformation. As companies seek to align their physical spaces with their environmental values, demand for sustainable office products and furniture has soared. Desks crafted from reclaimed wood; chairs made from recovered plastics—increasingly, each nook and cranny of the office reflects sustainable principles. For those in the business of decking out workplaces, this trend presents abundant opportunities to expand their client base.

Packaging with a purpose

In the new era of B2B digital commerce, packaging has also come under the spotlight. Companies are increasingly adopting more sustainable solutions, such as biodegradable peanuts, recycled cardboard and eco packing tape. Companies are highlighting their green credentials on their packaging, making every shipment a mobile billboard for environmental stewardship. Today, a package is not just a container: it’s also a statement of values.

Sustainable promo products

When it comes to promo products, items that not only catch the eye but also respect the planet have become the new benchmark. From recycled pens to sustainable tote bags, ecofriendly products signal that your business is serious about its environmental footprint.

Green logistics: rethinking supply chains

As companies examine the environmental impact of all aspects of their operations, they are increasingly switching to electric fleets and mapping out journeys in the smartest way possible through clever route-plotting software.

Today, it is clear that going green is no longer just a moral imperative—it’s smart business. Let’s make sustainability the standard, not the exception, in our digital commerce ventures.
What if you could save 30% on health insurance for your business?

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