INDEPENDENT DEALER
the official publication of WSA

MAKING WAVES WITH MRO

MAY 2024

Changing faces

I would like to open this issue by offering my congratulations and best wishes for the future to Harry Dochelli on his retirement from Essendant (see page 16). Harry has been a long-time champion of the IDC and has helped many dealers flourish along the way. The last few years at the wholesaler have been eventful to say the least, with the purchase by Sycamore Partners, COVID-19 and last year's cyberattack; but Harry kept the ship steady and did his best to allay the concerns of independent dealers.

He has also worked tirelessly to help raise funds for City of Hope and will continue to carry out his duties as this year's Spirit of Life honoree. Harry deserves a long and happy retirement and all at *INDEPENDENT DEALER* wish him well.

I'm sure Essendant will continue to be as supportive to the IDC under the interim leadership of David Boone, whom we welcome from Staples Canada CEO, and whoever takes over the role in the long term.

Rowan McIntyre, editor and publisher
rowan@idealercentral.com

We also welcome new leadership at the other major industry wholesaler, S.P. Richards (see page 18), as new(ish) owner CNG continues to refine the company's senior leadership team.

Finally, I think it is excellent news that our trade association, the the Workplace Solutions Association, is to welcome former members of the Business Solutions Association into its new Manufacturer Forum (see page 16). Dealers can only profit from a closer relationship with vendors and their rep groups. I look forward to seeing how the new group works together for the benefit of all members of the IDC!

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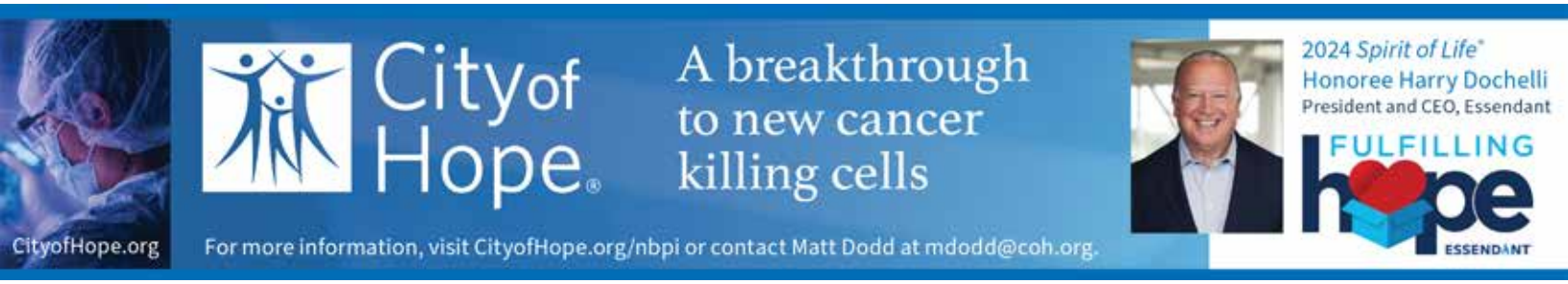

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DBI - We Do Office turns 40 and adapts for the future

For nearly four decades, Steve Klaver and George Snyder have had a hand in the evolution of DBI - We Do Office, based in Lansing, Michigan. Over the last 37 years, both Klaver and Snyder have served in every position within the company except interior design. Their journey with DBI began long prior to its acquisition by US Office Products in 1996 and they remained dedicated even as the conglomerate faced financial turbulence, eventually filing for bankruptcy in 2001. Unfazed by adversity, they seized the opportunity to take ownership of DBI—a pivotal moment that marked the start of a remarkable chapter in their entrepreneurial careers.

Steve Klaver and Nicki Zyla

DBI has evolved over the years to expand and focus on different areas within its offering. Klaver explains how important this has been to the company's position in the workplace solutions industry: "DBI began with a focus on office product supplies. Our customers depended on us for everything from copy paper and toner to cleaning supplies and pens. But as technology advanced and our customers' work environments changed, we found a growing need from our customers for interior design and office furniture solutions. Before we knew it, we had expanded our service offerings to include two primary divisions: office product supplies and workplace solutions."

Klaver goes on to sketch out how the company has pivoted as its customer base and industry needs changed: "I learned early on that if we wanted to futureproof DBI, we needed to be flexible and shift with our customers' needs. If we put all our eggs in one basket, we could limit our ability to grow with our customers. One pivotal moment for us, and many other businesses, was the pandemic. COVID-19 forever changed how people buy products, make buying decisions, communicate, plan for their business and even work with one another. It changed everything."

Building a business that can last for years to come requires a balanced business model. "We have to get creative and continue to have

(l-r) George Synder and Steve Klaver

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conversations with our customers on what they need to remain operational," continues Klaver. "We aren't like the big sellers such as Amazon and Staples. If a customer has an issue or needs support, they know they call the owner and have a direct conversation with us. It's one of the things we love most about how we do it—we focus on the relationships with our customers. It's also part of the magic of being a local business. During the pandemic, our customers looked to us for guidance and ideas on how they could enhance collaboration and communication with their own staff. That's what it means to offer workplace solutions. There was a real need for connection and we were able to provide the tools and resources to help our customers in a scary time for many businesses."

And DBI remained agile even at a time when many business owners were nervous and weary about the future. "I talked with many business owners that had one of two perspectives: they were either scared beyond control and decided to wait it out, or they saw the pandemic as an opportunity to take a hard look at their offerings and business model and shifted gears," recalls Klaver. "The more we had conversations with our customers, the more we learned they wanted to plan for the future of their office space. They wanted to look at flexible solutions that didn't have such permanence. What an opportunity to do a complete overhaul on your work environment—when your staff were forced to work from home!"

Although DBI's primary focus was on office products, Klaver explains how this brought about new opportunities for partnerships and service concentration. "We didn't want to put all our eggs into one basket, but we also knew there was a benefit to niching down. We recently announced a partnership with Smart Business Source to power our office product supplies division. The team at Smart is amazing and we are fortunate to have known the business owners for many years. When we took a hard look at the future for DBI, our passion and the growing needs of our customers, it brought us back to workplace solutions."

Niching down doesn't mean eliminating offerings, though. "Our customers still need office products—it just looks different today than it did five years ago," explains Klaver. "So we could have just eliminated the service all together or we could form a partnership. Which is exactly what we did. Smart is bringing to the table a deep tenure in the office products industry and is also a well-trusted, local Michigan company, which was important to us. While Smart is caring for our customers' needs with office products, DBI will be concentrating on expanding our workplace solutions."

The needs of workstations, conference rooms and office design have been influenced by technological advancements and shifting consumer behavior. DBI found that this emerging trend offers many businesses greater flexibility in how they work. "We couldn't be more excited about our partnership with Smart and the opportunity for us to dig deep into our office design, architecture and design and office furniture offerings," concludes Klaver. "There are so many solutions that we can bring to the table for our customers that we haven't even touched yet. It's an exciting time!"

Rebrand for Source

Denver, Colorado-based Source Office and Technology has tweaked its brand name.

Going forward, the company—acquired by The Supply Room at the end of 2021—will simply be known as Source.

"Rest assured, our commitment to providing top-notch breakroom services, cutting-edge printer technology and service, stylish furniture, high-quality custom printing, and essential office supplies remains stronger than ever," the dealer said in a news release.

»

Zuma Office acquires Anything Office

Anything Office, Lenoir, North Carolina, has merged with Zuma Office, Houston, Texas, effective April 1. Anything Office is now doing business under the Zuma brand and transitioning its online presence to www.zumaoffice.com. Anything's employees continue to work for the company, making for a seamless transition. The merger has expanded Zuma's national reach.

"I have no doubt that our 'by chance' connection was through divine power," says Michelle Colvard, Anything president and now Zuma's senior solution specialist. "I wasn't looking for it, but my heavenly Father made sure I found it.

"From my opening a random email, which any other day would have gone straight into trash, to our first face-to-face introductory Zoom meeting and the completion of the merger, every step has felt so easy and natural that there's never been a doubt it was meant to be. Our company cultures aligned perfectly and we both feel incredibly blessed for the opportunity to join forces and form an incredible team!

"This industry can be tough and I truly never imagined this opportunity would come along. I am super-excited to partner with these amazing folks and look forward to continuing to serve our Anything Office customers under the new Zuma Office brand!"

»

IQ Total Source acquires Harris American

IQ Total Source, Phoenix, Arizona, has acquired Harris American, Los Angeles, California, effective April 1. All 20 Harris employees have been asked to stay on board with the company, which will eventually transition to the IQ Total Source name. The company was founded in 1955 and was purchased by the Zelden family in 1977. The acquisition will expand IQ's reach and furniture offerings, which have been a strong category for Harris.

"I've known Richard [Zelden, Harris president] for several years, and getting to know him better made us realize where our strengths lie," says Ryan Puccinelli, IQ Total Source's chief culture officer. "Harris has a robust furniture division which will complement our janitorial and office product categories. We have offices in Phoenix, San Diego and Houston. We are looking to grow in the LA area, which made Harris an obvious choice. We are excited for the opportunities afforded by the second-largest market in the country."

Suburban driver saves man pinned under vehicle; dealership named top family business

Randy Miller, a delivery driver for Suburban Office Products, Middletown, Connecticut, has been credited with potentially saving a life after witnessing an accident between a vehicle and a man on an electric scooter.

According to Springfield, Massachusetts, police spokesperson Ryan Walsh, at around 12:40 p.m. on April 1, officers were called to an intersection following a report of a crash. It transpired that the man who had been driving the electric scooter was trapped under the car.

Miller, who was passing by on his usual delivery route, witnessed the scene and used the lift gate of his vehicle to free the man, allowing officers to begin first aid. He was taken to Baystate Medical Center with serious injuries but is expected to recover thanks to Walsh's quick and decisive actions.

"All of us at Suburban are so very proud to know and work with Randy," says CEO Jeremy Bourret. "This was just a glimpse of the kind of man Randy is. His courage and heroism are truly incredible. He is always kind, caring and compassionate. Randy is always willing to help others and always puts others before himself. He is an inspiration to us all."

Meanwhile, Suburban has scooped the 2024 Family Business Award for medium-sized companies from the *Hartford Business Journal*. The winners were chosen from nominees in three categories: small (less than 25 employees), medium (25 to 75 employees) and large (75-plus employees). Hartford currently has 48 employees. The winners were featured in the April 29 issue of the journal as well as online, and will be celebrated at a dinner on June 12 at Farmington Gardens in Farmington, Connecticut.

Founded in 1979 by David Shulman and Raymond Bourret, Suburban has served the Connecticut community and its surrounding areas for over 40 years. In 2011, the second generation of the two families—Robert "Bob" Schulman and Jeremy Bourret—took over as president and CEO respectively. Today the company has $20 million in annual sales.

Bob explains the secret sauce that makes this an award-winning company: "In an 'old-school' industry such as office supplies, which has continued to decline each year, Suburban has taken a progressive and strategic approach to foster growth by looking at adjacent categories such as office furniture and packaging supplies. We have also expanded our physical footprint into the Western Massachusetts market. This has resulted in consistent growth for the past several years. Our success comes from our people: their dedication, teamwork and drive to see our company succeed." »

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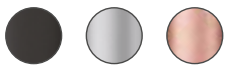

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Blaisdell's packs Meals on Wheels

Blaisdell's Business Products, Oakland, California, recently moved its weekly sales meeting to a Meals on Wheels provider in order to participate in a charitable team-building event. The 14 employees prepared 2,240 meals for the elderly.

"We've been doing this for a few years," says chief operating officer Michael Witt. "It's a great way to get the whole team away from the office in a different and fun environment while helping the community. When COVID-19 hit, we had to wait a few years to come back; so when the opportunity arose, we jumped in. We put together as many meals as possible in three hours. Our team members enjoy this event. They find it fulfilling and always want to beat the previous year's record—which we did! As far as why this is important, it's just in Blaisdell's DNA. We've been giving back to the community for 15 years and I don't see us stopping."

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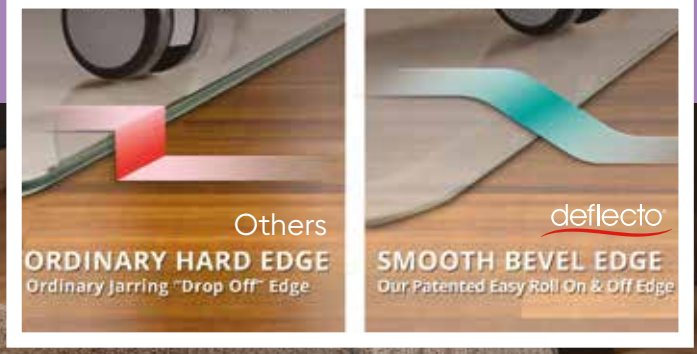

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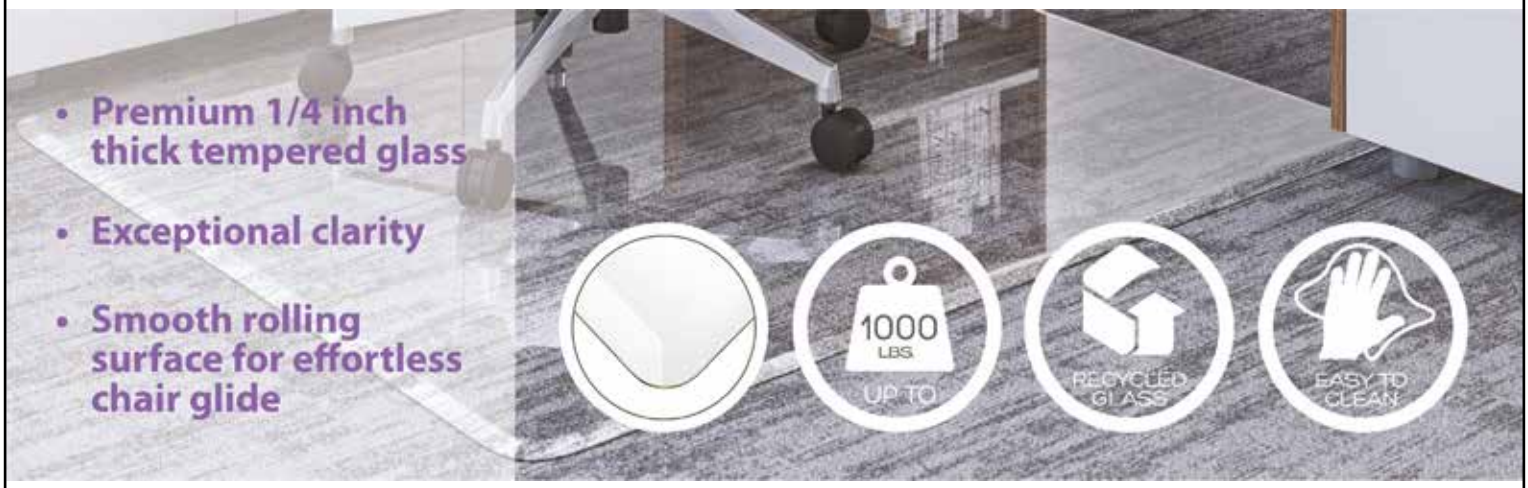

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Advance Business Methods acquires The Office Shop

Advance Business Methods, Fargo, North Dakota, has purchased The Office Shop, Aitken, Minnesota, effective April 1. All 18 employees are expected to continue to work for the company, which will operate as The Office Shop, a division of Advance Business Methods. Jodie Johnson, The Office Shop co-owner, stayed on through the end of April and her husband and co-owner, Scott Johnson, will stay on through June to help with the transition.

"Since the COVID-19 pandemic, we've been approached many times by corporations in a five-state area, but we always said no," explains Jodie. "We knew what the outcome would be. They would close both our locations [Aitkin and Brainerd, Minnesota], so we told them we were not ready or interested. Scott and I spent 41 years serving the communities where our customers are and we have many employees who have been with us for 14, 15 or even 20-plus years. We had to think how selling would affect them. With Advance, it's a win-win-win—for us, the employees and our customers."

According to Jodie, there are several reasons why Advance was the right choice: "Number one, the people who operate Advance are good people. Their vision, goals and character match how Scott and I ran our business. Number two, Advance is an employee-owned business, not a big corporation, and now our employees have a piece of the business. Number three, Advance's owners are in it for the long term. They are keeping both our locations open, which means a lot. We want our customers to get the same personal service, deliveries and ordering they are used to, and they will be dealing with the same employees they have always been."

Jodie explains that the merger gives Advance more buying power, extends its sales territory and expands its product categories: "There are a few local dealers, but there are not a lot of furniture and office product businesses in Fargo, which have been strong categories for us. And The Office Shop customers will now have access to more business machines and IT products."

For Jodie, the sale has been bittersweet. "Some days I am so excited to be retiring and starting a new chapter, and some days not so much," she admits. "There are so many we have impacted and who have impacted us in the communities. Our employees and customers are our friends and family."

Yet it sounds like the couple will now be doing anything but kicking back: "We are going to be helping our son adjust to a new living arrangement—we have a grandbaby we will spend lots of time spoiling; and we also have a groundwater filter manufacturing business. In between, we want to travel, so we have plenty to keep us busy."

The Office BOSS hosts art contest

The Office BOSS, Truckee, California, is hosting its ninth annual pARTicipate amateur art contest. This year's theme is "The Fire Within!" Submissions are accepted in three categories: children aged 1-13; youth aged 14-18; and adults aged 19 and over. Last year's contest attracted 42 submissions and the company expects a similar number this year. Submissions include photography, illustration, digital art, sculpture, painting and collage. The art is exhibited at The Office BOSS so that people can vote for their favorites.

"The Office BOSS is the largest art supplier in the Truckee, Tahoe area, and we put on our ninth annual pARTicipate amateur art contest to bring these upcoming artists to light," says director of marketing Nathan Gamett, who coordinated the event. "We love to work with each artist to understand their favorite media and brands so that we can stock them with what they need to grow as artists. If you haven't visited Truckee or Lake Tahoe for the art scene, we highly suggest stopping by to view all the galleries and art installations around Lake Tahoe. We are a family-friendly, art-packed, adventure-filled little mountain town."

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OCOP Express, Dallas, Texas

OCOP Express, Dallas, Texas, is 101 years young this year. Founded in 1933 as a retail store in the basement of a building in south Dallas, the store was purchased by a second owner in the 1940s. In 1964, Ken Caldwell's father bought the company. Ken joined the family business in 1995 and took over as president when he purchased the company from Caldwell Sr. on his retirement in 2000.

Over a century in business, the company's product line has expanded to include janitorial, breakroom, water, printing and furniture, "which is our fastest-growing category in the last four or five years and is close to taking over office products," Ken reports.

To stay in business this long, an independent dealer must be doing a lot right. According to Ken, "The biggest reason for our success by far is service. We bend over backward for our customers, whether it's good for us or not. We may have to go outside and kick a tree or a few tires, but whatever our customers want, they get.

"We also are able to pivot direction quickly; we're flexible and nimble. When the superstores opened, we closed our retail store and changed the way we went to market. And we are always looking for new categories. Right now, my focus is on expanding our janitorial, IT and print management offerings."

Ken also sees OCOP's ability to adopt and adapt to new technologies as a major plus: "We are just completing a total revamp of our online storefront. We are switching from ECI Interactive to EvolutionX and will launch the site in a month or two."

Despite its longevity, the company has met with its share of challenges, especially in recent years. "One big hurdle for us has been learning to compete with the changing dynamics in the marketplace," says Ken. "For example, the wholesalers stopped producing paper catalogs but a lot of customers still want to order that way, no matter what they say. Also, wholesalers are limiting the traditional office supplies they offer. There are products customers still want, but the wholesalers don't carry them or only carry a few. So we have to stock more ourselves and buy more from other vendors."

Competing against Amazon has been another challenge. "We have to have conversations with our customers to educate them on the difference," continues Ken. "We have to explain how Amazon may look better initially, but there is a membership fee and the orders come in pieces from all different vendors. Deliveries are rarely next day and aren't delivered where they want them. Also, an item may be cheaper, but whole orders often are not." And perhaps the most convincing argument? "When there is a problem, our customers can call us and get a person, and we can figure out a solution. They can't do that with Amazon."

Ken has some sage advice for independent dealers who are in it for the long haul: "We need to work together to survive. For example, dealers should assist other dealers with deliveries outside their zones. Instead of paying expensive wholesaler, UPS or FedEx direct drop shipment rates, area dealers can deliver orders for a reasonable fee. That's worked out well for us. It's also important to look for new products and areas of growth. The more products you offer, the more relevant you are and the more reasons you have to get in front of customers. If they turn you down for office products, you've got alternatives."

Company info

Top management:
Ken Caldwell, president; Judi Caldwell, vice president
Number of employees: 24
Main wholesaler: Essendant
Online business: 56%*
Annual sales: $7 million

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Wednesday, September 18

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WSA welcoming former BSA members

The Workplace Solutions Association (WSA) has opened its membership to the former members of the now defunct Business Solutions Association (BSA).

The BSA—which represented the interests of the vendor and manufacturer rep community in the US—quietly folded at the end of 2023. Now, the WSA will establish its Manufacturer Forum to provide a platform for business products manufacturers to meet, network and discuss pertinent business issues. Additionally, WSA will invite manufacturers and manufacturer representatives to join its advisory committee.

"In our discussions with the former BSA leadership, we wanted to cultivate an attractive landing spot for these leading manufacturers and reps in the office supplies and business products space, while also finding ways to connect suppliers with the independent dealer community that we serve," said WSA executive director Mike Tucker.

The WSA said this move "aligns with its mission to serve the entire workplace solutions industry and establish important connectivity between the supply chain, independent dealers and service providers." Manufacturers and manufacturer reps will enjoy dual membership in WSA and its parent organization, leading cleaning and hygiene association ISSA.

"On behalf of the former BSA executive committee, we are pleased to partner with WSA and ISSA to establish this new platform for our community," said Travis Kaste, former BSA president and 3M director, independent office channel. "This move underscores a shared vision to foster excellence, sustainability and competitiveness in the workplace solutions industry, and we remain dedicated to delivering value, advocacy and leadership for workplace solutions manufacturer and reps through this specialized platform. I encourage all business and workplace solutions manufacturers and reps to join WSA and reap the benefits that come with belonging."

"We are thrilled to welcome these manufacturers and rep firms to the WSA and ISSA community," said ISSA executive director John Barrett. "Together, we can further our mission and deliver excellent value to the industry."

For more information about the move and the prospective benefits to manufacturers joining the WSA, see Mike Tucker's regular column on page 30.

Essendant announces Dochelli retirement, appoints interim CEO

Industry wholesaler Essendant has announced the retirement of CEO Harry Dochelli.

Dochelli has made the personal decision to retire after a 12-year tenure with the firm and a successful career in the business products industry spanning more than 30 years.

While the decision appeared to come out of the blue, Dochelli has been discussing this move for some time and it is clearly a decision he has made on his own terms. The fact he will stay on in an advisory role until the end of the year also suggests he remains on good terms with Essendant's shareholders.

"A lot of thought is put into these types of decisions and [my retirement] has been very well planned," Dochelli told *INDEPENDENT DEALER*.

The wholesaler has appointed David Boone as interim CEO. Boone is an experienced finance and leadership exec who was most recently CEO of Staples Canada—a role he held for more than six years. His LinkedIn profile currently lists him as a board member at Staples Canada as well as operating advisor at Sycamore Partners, the owner of both Staples and Essendant.

In a statement, Essendant said: "Moving forward, we remain focused on our mission to deliver 'The Better Way to Commerce' while developing and executing new and innovative growth opportunities. Customer-centric service also remains a core value. We will continue to support our customers' businesses and partner with suppliers as part of our category strategy."

In addition to the advisory role at Essendant, Dochelli will continue as a strategic advisor to the ISSA Board and to carry out his duties as the 2024 Spirit of Life Honoree for City of Hope.

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Leadership changes at SPR

S.P. Richards (SPR) has confirmed the appointment of a new president as well as other senior management developments.

Bill Meany, who was appointed SPR president last year following the wholesaler's acquisition by Central National Gottesman (CNG), has now switched to an advisory role. This will allow him to focus more fully on his duties as president of CNG's paper, packaging and facilities supplies distribution arm, Lindenmeyr Munroe.

Meany is replaced as president by Andrew Wallach, the CEO of CNG and a fifth-generation member of the founding family. Wallach has been working at CNG since 1996 and initially held a number of positions at its Central National and Lindenmeyr Munroe divisions. He was named SVP of CNG in 2003, EVP the following year and CEO in 2015.

Although based at CNG's group headquarters just north of New York City, *INDEPENDENT DEALER* understands that Wallach is spending a lot of time in Atlanta, Georgia and is taking very much a hands-on approach to running the wholesaler.

Joining Wallach on the senior leadership team is Jason Horst, who has been appointed SPR's chief commercial officer. Horst is a veteran of the North American paper industry and has been commercial director at CNG since 2014. He has a strong track record of selling into the retail and e-commerce markets, and SPR said he will leverage this experience to navigate new customer channels.

Andrew Wallach

Jason Horst

Horst reports directly to Wallach; as does EVP Jack Reagan, who remains as the wholesaler's EVP.

Meanwhile, SPR exec Kimberly Fulford has announced she has left the wholesaler.

Fulford rejoined SPR as VP of strategic accounts in 2021, having spent nine years at the company from 2006-2015. She was most recently SVP of sales.

In a social media post dated March 29, Fulford wrote: "Today marks the end of an amazing three years back at SPR. Thank you to my SPR family. Now it's time to determine my next chapter."

ISG appoints marketing manager, helps tackle hunger

Independent Suppliers Group (ISG) has appointed Ashlee Hunt as its new marketing manager.

Hunt has more than 15 years of experience in the office products and school supplies vendor channels. Most recently senior channel marketing manager at Uniball, she has also worked for Fellowes and K-12 provider Follett Educational Services.

In her new role, Hunt will assist in driving ISG's marketing efforts, developing strategic marketing programs and spearheading initiatives to support the growth and success of ISG and its members.

Meanwhile, in March, ISG demonstrated its commitment to making a difference by partnering with Feed My Starving Children in Schaumburg, Illinois, for ISG's Day of Giving Back. While the dealer group's remote staff took part in activities benefiting their local communities, the staff based in the Rosemont, Illinois headquarters volunteered their time to hand-pack meals specially crafted to combat undernutrition and empower communities worldwide.

Feed My Starving Children works to tackle hunger on a global scale. Its mission is to provide life-saving meals to children and families in need, ensuring no one goes to bed hungry. Through its dedicated staff and the support of volunteers, it has distributed over 2.4 billion meals in over 70 countries since 1987.

"I am incredibly proud of our team's commitment to making a positive impact in our community," said James Rodgers, ISG president and CEO. "Volunteering at Feed My Starving Children not only embodies the spirit of ISG's Day of Giving Back but also reflects our collective dedication to creating meaningful change. At ISG, and also with so many of our members in their own communities, we believe in giving back and are dedicated to making a tangible difference to the lives of those in need."

To learn more about the amazing work being done at Feed My Starving Children, visit this link. »

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Gentile joins ESG

US office products industry veteran Mike Gentile has joined consultancy firm Execution Specialists Group (ESG) as a partner.

Gentile recently retired as CEO of leading US dealer group Independent Suppliers Group after a successful career spanning more than three decades.

"A customer-driven leader and critical thinker, Mike's background in creating and executing effective B2B and B2C business development strategies for new channel development, sales re-engineering, supply chain streamlining, product development and operational workflows has led to rapid, impactful and consistent results," said ESG in a press release.

ESG CEO Mark Newhall added: "I have had the privilege of knowing and working with Mike for decades and the value he brings to clients undertaking technological innovation and business transformation is unparalleled."

ECI teams up with Pros Elite

ECI Software Solutions has announced a strategic alliance with US business analytics provider Pros Elite.

ECI's small and midsize business customers in the office technology space that use its e-automate managed print software will now be able to more easily tap into Pros Elite's PIVOT data analytics functionalities.

The companies say this alliance "provides customers with a secure method to safely share their data from e-automate for use in PIVOT, providing the critical data points needed for end-to-end business analysis."

Read more in this ECI press release.

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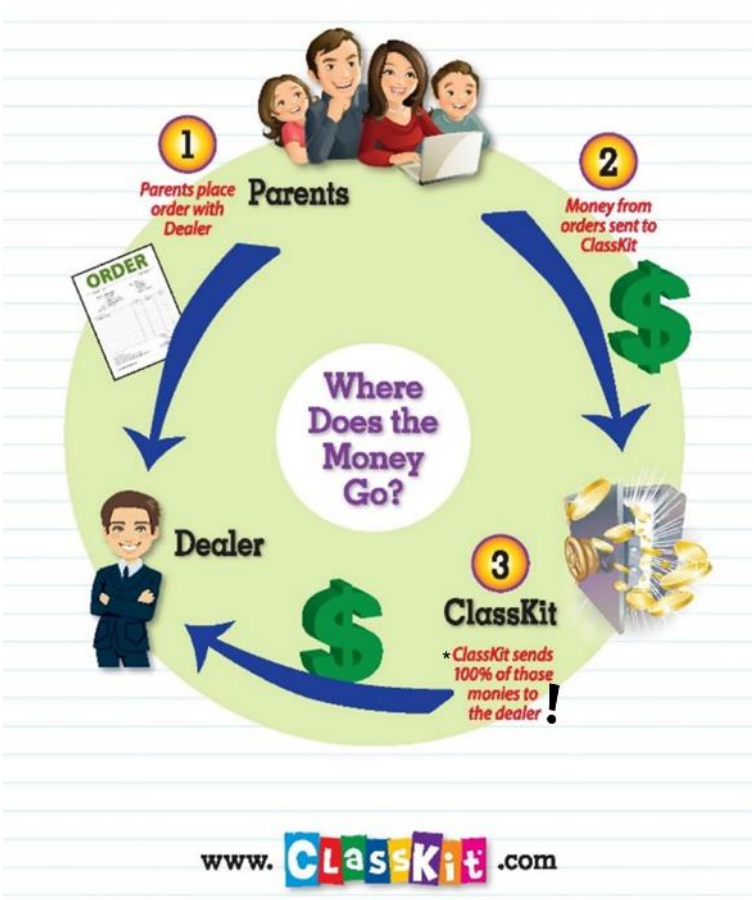

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HP names solutions VP

HP Inc has appointed former Amazonian Nadia Bollinger as VP of solutions.

As well as working for Amazon, where she had a senior role at AWS, Bollinger spent more than 17 years in the energy sector at ExxonMobil. At HP, she heads up the new solutions management team within the firm's managed solutions organization.

"As customers increasingly seek guidance from HP to navigate the hybrid work era, empower their workforce with AI and redefine IT management, it's crucial that our solutions evolve to meet these challenges," said HP managed solutions president John Gordon.

Bollinger and her team will be responsible for developing end-to-end solutions, including hardware, software, services and supplies from both HP and third parties.

CEO change at Katun

Aftermarket print consumables and parts vendor Katun has appointed Kuoying Wang as its new CEO, on an interim basis.

Wang, who has been Katun's chairman since April 2021, was recently named COO at General Plastic Industrial (GPI), the Taiwan-based group that acquired Katun in 2017. He represents the next generation of the Wang family that founded GPI in the late 1970s.

Wang's appointment at Katun comes following the sudden departure of company veteran Bob Moore. Moore, who joined Katun in 1994, had been CEO since 2016.

In a stock market announcement, GPI confirmed that Wang's CEO appointment was a temporary one, with a new leader to be announced following board approval.

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GSA makes Commercial Platforms awards

Grainger and Staples are two of six new companies to have been awarded contracts for the US federal government's online marketplace initiative.

For the past three years, Amazon Business, Fisher Scientific and Overstock.com have been serving federal purchasers as part of the General Services Administration's (GSA) Commercial Platforms Program (CPP).

In the next round of the CPP—which was delayed by at least two protests—Amazon and Fisher (but not Overstock) are joined by six new suppliers:

- e-Procurement Services (ePS)
- Grainger
- Noble Supply & Logistics
- Pacific Ink
- Social Glass
- Staples

While Grainger and Staples are well-known national resellers, the other four awardees are all small businesses.

CPP manager Todd Keil called the expansion a "pivotal turning point" in the initiative. Now, the GSA will be working closely with participating agencies to educate them about the expanded pool of new platforms, features and benefits through a series of webinars and one-on-one sessions throughout the remainder of the fiscal year.

New figures released by the GSA show that purchasing through the CPP grew strongly in the 12 months to the end of September 2023.

Total spend and the number of orders doubled to $80 million and 305,000 respectively. The amount spent with small business suppliers grew more than threefold to $25 million; while so-called "green spend" increased from $1.8 million in 2022 to $5.2 million in 2023.

The number of participating agencies also rose significantly to 34, of which 14 were designated as "large," representing more than 55,000 buyers.

IT peripherals was the top-selling category, followed by office equipment and supplies, and office furniture.

Veritiv ups packaging capabilities

US B2B distributor Veritiv has announced the acquisition of AmeriPac for an undisclosed sum.

Dallas, Texas-based AmeriPac is a provider of turnkey contract packaging and fulfillment services with annual revenue of approximately $60 million. Veritiv said the deal would enhance its existing kitting and co-packing platform with complex packaging processes and the ability to flex resources to rapidly respond to business seasonality and customer needs.

This is Veritiv's second acquisition in the packaging sector since it was taken private by investment firm CD&R. In February, it bought Vivabox, a firm which provides solutions for global luxury and premium consumer brands.

Logicblock confirms Gatens appointment

US e-commerce solutions provider Logicblock has confirmed Paul Gatens as its VP of marketing.

Gatens is a familiar face in the US office products industry after spending 23 years at S.P. Richards (where he was VP of marketing), as well as seven years at the Hammermill Papers unit of International Paper (now Sylvamo).

"Paul brings with him a wealth of experience and a proven track record in driving digital transformation and enhancing e-commerce capabilities within the business products sector," said Logicblock president Alexander Nicolaides. "His extensive background in coordinating sophisticated marketing strategies and managing significant e-commerce operations will be invaluable."

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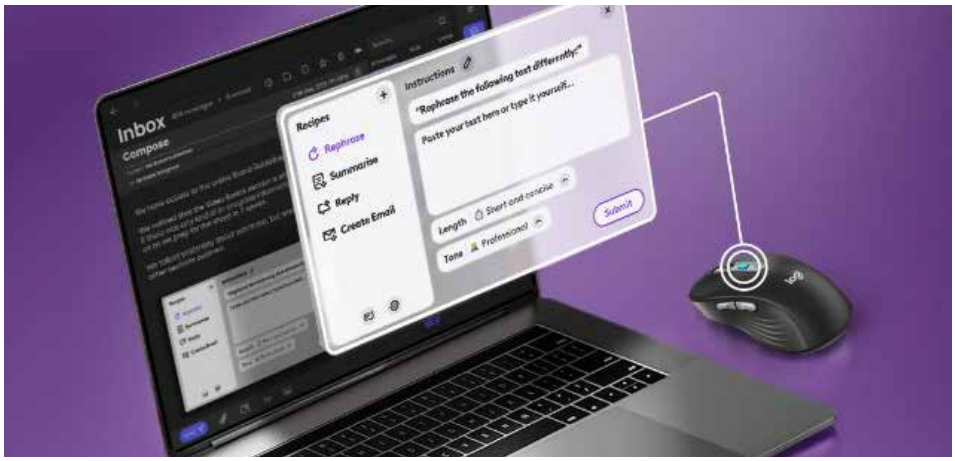
Logitech adds AI integration to devices

Logitech has introduced a free app to help users more easily use ChatGPT in their workflows.

Logi AI Prompt Builder is a software window that pops up via the Logi Options+ app, meaning Logitech keyboards and mice can be used to create shortcuts to open ChatGPT faster. In addition, a new mouse that is currently available in the US has its own dedicated AI prompt button.

The Logi AI Prompt Builder can be accessed by anyone with a Logitech keyboard or mouse supported by the English language version of the Logi Options+ app. Within the app, users can identify a shortcut key on their keyboard or a mouse button that will open and close the tool whenever it is needed.



"As the bridge between people and their digital experiences, Logitech has a critical role to play in the evolution of AI, both with new innovation and in our existing portfolio," said Delphine Donné, general manager of the vendor's personal workspace business.

"ChatGPT alone is seeing approximately 1.6 billion visits each month—a reflection of AI's ability to enhance and accelerate people's productivity and creativity."

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Kimberly-Clark sells PPE business

Kimberly-Clark has agreed to sell its PPE business (KCPPE) to Australia-based firm Ansell.

The companies have entered into a binding agreement for Ansell to acquire KCPPE for $640 million in cash. KCPPE comprises the Kimtech and Kleenguard brands that are sold into scientific and industrial safety channels. Products include gloves, protective apparel, masks and safety eyewear.

The scope of the transaction includes products, intellectual property, customer lists, supplier contracts and inventory, plus a workforce that supports marketing, R&D, regulatory, supply chain and scientific sales. It does not include the sales force for the industrial safety business (currently supported by the generalist KCP sales team), or back-office functions or IT systems.

Ansell said it had been eyeing KCPPE "for many years" as one of its "most attractive acquisition opportunities." The Kimtech and KleenGuard brands

will give it good market recognition in North America, complementing its other brands, such as BioClean and AlphaTec.

Following the transaction—which is expected to close in the July-September quarter—Kimberly-Clark's B2B focus will be on the washroom segment with its KCP, Scott, Kleenex and Wypall brands. »

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Xerox revamps board

Print OEM Xerox is nominating no fewer than seven new candidates to its board of directors.

The company currently only has five board members, one of whom is CEO Steve Bandrowczak. He is to remain on the board; as is chair Scott Letier and Nichelle Maynard-Elliott. Incumbent directors Phil Giordano and Margarita Palau-Hernandez are not standing for re-election.

The seven nominees will therefore bring the total number of directors to 10, which seems a more sensible number for a business of Xerox's size. They are:

- Kenny Wilson, CEO, Jabil
- Amy Schwetz, CFO, Flowserve
- John Roese, global CTO, Dell Technologies
- Edward McLaughlin, CTO, Mastercard
- Priscilla Hung, former COO, Guidewire Software
- Tami Erwin, former group CEO, Verizon Business Group
- John Bruno, COO, Xerox

It's interesting to see Xerox nominate its COO to the board, in addition to its CEO. That is perhaps a precursor to a leadership transition at the company which is undergoing a major restructuring project called Reinvention.

Imperial Dade continues spending spree

Imperial Dade has made three more acquisitions.

The most recent purchase strengthens the company's presence in Canada with the acquisition of Wolfpack Packaging, announced May 1.

The Canadian firm is one of the leading industrial and jan/san distributors in Ontario. It upped its presence in the packaging segment a couple of years ago when it purchased Supreme Packaging

The move follows the addition last month of Boston, Massachusetts-based reseller Harbour Food Service Equipment to its portfolio.

Harbour was founded in 1929 as a woodworking shop. Today, it is an equipment and supply dealer for independent restaurants, local chains and a variety of corporate, educational and government institutions in New England. Harbour will continue to be run by the Kalick family, led by President Kelly Kalick.

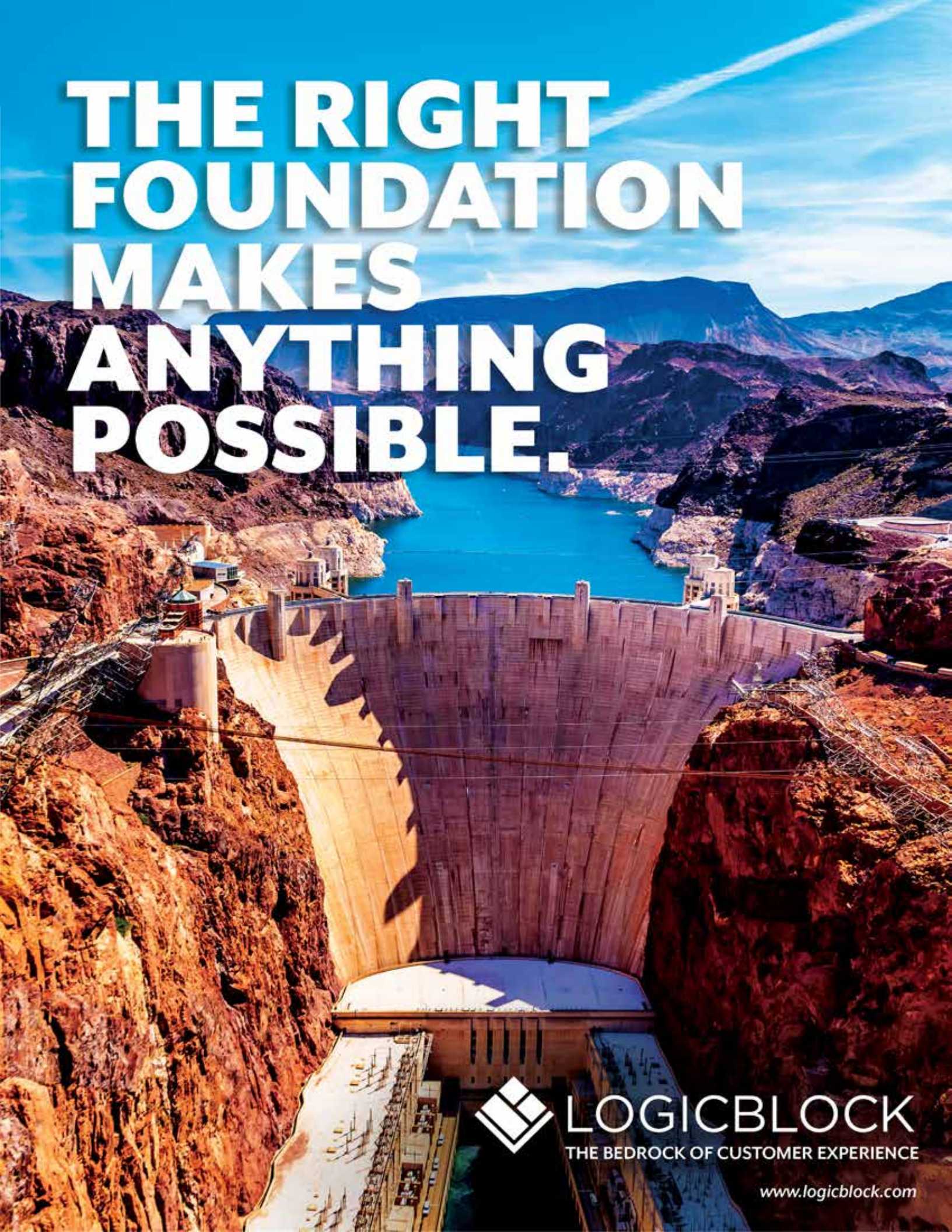
Finally, mid-March saw the purchase of Queens, New York-based JAD Building Maintenance Supplies for an undisclosed sum. Run by the Dussich family, JAD has been in existence for more than 60 years and supplies clients in all five boroughs of New York as well as Long Island, New Jersey, Westchester and southern Connecticut.

BradyPlus acquires in Pennsylvania

US B2B reseller BradyPlus has acquired a leading distributor in the northeast of the country.

In its first acquisition since the rebrand to BradyPlus, the organization has purchased EcoIndustrial, a leading player in the northeastern Pennsylvania marketplace. Led by Sean McCormack and Dan Frascella since 2011, the EcoIndustrial family of companies includes Keystone Packaging, Northeast Penn Supplies and Northeast Industrial. They offer a wide array of industrial packaging, foodservice disposables, jan/san and safety products.

BradyPlus CEO Ken Sweder said the deal—the terms of which were not disclosed—will enable the company to "scale a priority geography."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"Why my business matters": independent dealers take their voices to Capitol Hill

By: Paul A. Miller, legislative counsel, Workplace Solutions Association

It's not hard to understand the anger and frustration around the country. It's not hard to understand why people are finally fed up with Washington. It's easy to sympathize with those who step back and ask, "Why bother participating? Washington is a mess." Our political system looks like a circus. Our partisan fighting looks like a grade-school playground spat. All things that turn most people off, while driving others to pour gasoline on the fire. The problem is: there is no one solution that can cure the dysfunction we see in Washington today. Partisanship is at an all-time high. No longer is it Republican vs. Democrat; it's Republican vs. Republican and Democrat vs. Democrat. It makes "picking" sides even harder.

I share this doom and gloom with you because it's a reality check of sorts. All these negatives make it very hard to be heard or break through the noise. Democracy can be messy, as we are witnessing today. Getting the attention of our leaders is challenging, especially when everything they do instantly goes viral. It used to take a week or longer for news to travel. With social media, it takes seconds; and what is being posted doesn't even have to be true. All this makes it even harder for you to break through.

All these reasons are exactly why you need to be involved and be in the game. I've been working in Washington for 27 years and I still believe in the process and those we elect to represent us (not all, but most). I will admit that it's harder to be heard; but the alternative of sitting on the sidelines and becoming forgotten and irrelevant can't be an option for our businesses.

The old adage, "I don't vote or get involved in politics because Washington isn't listening" no longer really applies. Elections are no longer won by tens of thousands of votes; today, elections are won by hundreds of votes—or even single-digit votes. Your voice is more important than ever. With so much noise and what I will call "big-ticket" issues like border security, inflation, foreign aid and the escalating situation in the Middle East dominating the headlines—and the attention of lawmakers—it is imperative to step up and remind them that we are here and we are not going away. This is why we need you to be part of our advocacy efforts. We need our own grassroots army to keep reminding Congress that we matter. We need Congress to understand that not supporting us impacts the global economy. If you're not in Washington speaking up, your opponents are. If you're not in Washington speaking up, you will be ignored. Today it's not about strength in numbers; it's about targeting your messages and being precise in your requests. Blanketing Capitol Hill in a shotgun-style effort is no longer an effective advocacy tool. Targeted, precise, solution-driven efforts are what get you in the door today. Attracting the masses comes after you break through and are on the path toward passage. The masses now become the pile-on

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strategy: once you have secured the buy-in and are moving the needle, you can then bring them in to ensure Congress cannot turn back.

For all the reasons above, the Workplace Solutions Association (WSA) continues to go to Washington. Our members know that if we aren't there, we can't complain. We have a lot of issues facing our industry and this month we took the time to fly to Washington so that our elected leaders could hear directly from us.

This year, the industry hit the Hill with the message that Congress needs to protect small businesses, national security and federal government buyers. When it comes to selling to the federal government, there are different rules for different companies. On the one hand, you have the General Services Administration (GSA) Schedules program, which has rules and safeguards in place to protect the federal government. On the other hand, you have the GSA online marketplace, which to date feels like the Wild, Wild West of selling and is allowing counterfeits to flood the market. This style of marketplace also allows China to sell items to the government, which poses a national security risk; and it hurts legitimate businesses like yours. That's why independent dealers sat down with key leaders in Congress to talk about the need to protect the federal government, taxpayers and legitimate businesses alike. Our message was heard. We had the opportunity to share our concerns and talk with leaders about commonsense bipartisan solutions. At the end of the day, we can chalk the week up as a success. We broke through and now we are working on the path that gets this issue signed into law by the president.

Melissa Ball, owner of Ball Office Products, spends time talking with Rep. Rob Wittman (R-VA)

WSA members take time out of their busy day to enjoy some of the fun spots on Capitol Hill

Today it's not about strength in numbers; it's about targeting your messages and being precise in your requests.

WSA executive director Mike Tucker, Steve Noyes of Noyes Associates and GSA assistant commissioner Erv Koehler

When it comes to lobbying, it's no secret that small businesses are outspent by the large corporations in this country. This is also the case when it comes to the Credit Card Competition Act. Congress has been inundated from all sides on this issue, including small businesses. The Credit Card Competition Act is simple: it requires big banks with over $100 million in assets to provide small businesses and consumers with options when it comes to credit card processing platforms. Today, Visa and Mastercard have a monopoly on the system, which costs consumers and small businesses. The Credit Card Competition Act requires big banks to offer a second option. This legislation lets competition win the day. Congress should not be picking winners and losers. The act puts an end to the big monopolies that control the market at our expense. It lets the market decide—the fundamental principle this country was founded on.

This month, WSA and its members broke through the noise and made a difference. We aren't at the goal line yet, but we are over the 50-yard line—and we have momentum. The closer we get to the goal line, the more challenging the work becomes; but we have a plan and are off and running. Succeeding on these two issues will save independent dealers tens of millions of dollars each year. This month, independent dealers proved just how important and relevant they are.

Nothing in life worth having comes easy. That definitely applies to making changes in Washington. It's not easy. It's messy. Its frustrating. And it doesn't happen overnight. This month, we made a difference, proving that with a large group of people and a targeted message, we can break through the noise.

"Never underestimate the power of a small group of committed people to change the world. In fact, it is the only thing that ever has."
-- Margaret Mead

BSA now part of Workplace Solutions Association

Mike Tucker, executive director, Workplace Solutions Association

Unless you are a manufacturer or manufacturer's rep, you may not be aware that the Business Solutions Association (BSA) was dissolved at the end of December 2023. Throughout its 109-year existence, the BSA provided members with a forum for meetings, education, social gatherings, conventions and City of Hope fundraising. For nearly a year the BSA executive team has been in negotiations to merge the existing membership into the Workplace Solutions Association (WSA), creating a new forum for manufacturers and rep groups to collaborate on their unique industry issues. This new partnership required the approval of WSA's parent association, ISSA, and was completed at the end of February.

This new partnership will bring manufacturers, manufacturer reps, service providers and their dealer partners under the same tent for the first time in decades, while at the same time eliminating association management fees and reducing dues.

Here are some of the benefits BSA members now have available:

- Insightful industry trends and benchmarking: Stay ahead of the curve with exclusive access to market studies data and analytics geared to manufacturers' needs, helping you understand industry trends and guide your corporate strategy.
- Virtual education and networking: Participate in and host virtual education opportunities where you can share your expertise, learn from fellow members and stay up to date with the latest industry trends through roundtables, townhall meetings and webinars.
- Networking/events: Maintain an environment in which members can build relations and dialog with industry peers. Facilitate opportunities at industry events where members can meet for conversation and socialize.
- Dual membership with ISSA: Enjoy exclusive dual membership benefits, including access to ISSA events, webinars, conferences, discounted advertising across ISSA's media channels and listing on the global ISSA Member Directory.
- Strategic employee benefits programs: Access comprehensive programs designed to save on critical expenses, including health, dental, vision and life insurance plans, offering you greater peace of mind and financial stability.
- Advocacy and government affairs: WSA advocates for a pro-business environment, providing you with a voice in shaping policies and regulations at the federal, state and local levels through its dedicated lobbying efforts.
- Additional benefits for manufacturer reps:
  - Rep locator.
  - Advertising and promotional opportunities on WSA/ISSA website and newsletters.
  - Seat on ISSA rep council.
- City of Hope: Continue to position BSA and its members as ambassadors and supporters of the City of Hope charity.

WSA is very excited to welcome our new BSA members and explore the opportunities for collaboration and communication with our industry partners. As our industry continues to blend, the opportunity for manufacturers and reps from different verticals to work together and learn from each other is huge.

If you are a manufacturer or rep, please consider joining WSA; you'll not only gain access to invaluable resources and networking opportunities but also become part of a supportive community dedicated to your success. Should you have any questions or require further information, please don't hesitate to reach out to me via email at miket@issa.com.

I look forward to welcoming you to our community!

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Dare to be different with Pukka Pads

Pukka Pads of Poole, Dorset, in the UK, was founded in 1998 by Chris Stott, who identified a gap in the notebook and notepad market and sought to fill it with cool designs and enticing colors led by fashion and trends.

"Chris was working at a printing company and, given his entrepreneurial spirit, one day he wondered: as long as he was printing pads and things for others, why not start a brand of his own?" explains global sales director Alex Bonarius. "There were black, blue, red and other solid-color notebooks, which have their place and purpose. But he thought, 'Why not start a brand that would bring different colors, shapes and themes to the category? Why not create pads that are well suited for business but led by design?'"

And so the company was born, with what some might consider an unusual name. "'*Pukka*' is the Hindi word for 'authentic' or 'real,'" Bonarius explains. The term is well known in the UK and is gaining popularity in the US. "It's nice to have a meaningful brand—something you don't see everywhere. *Pukka* is the force behind everything we do."

Today, the company sells about 200 SKUs in the US and thousands in the UK, offering everything from leopard print and pastel colors to floral and gold and silver leaf designs. Pukka Pads has 80 employees and sells in more than 40 countries. This year, the company is planning for significant growth, including opening a distribution center in mainland Europe and expanding into countries such as Canada, Australia and New Zealand. Some of this expansion has been made possible through partnerships.

"We plan to expand in the United States as well," says Bonarius. "We signed agreements with Staples and Quill last year. We will launch our lines

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through Essendant in a few months and we have the paperwork started with S.P. Richards. We can also sell directly through our new vendor status with ISG and Office Partners."

Benefits for the IDC

According to Bonarius, Pukka Pads offers many benefits to independent dealers. For starters, its unique products can set dealers apart from the competition, catching the eyes—and dollars—of existing customers and attracting new clients: "We work closely with independent dealers to help drive sales and make their clients happy with products that are so different. We help dealers expand their customer base and add value. And this growth continues because we are always keeping up with current trends and introducing new products and materials. For example, one rage right now is cork-based notebooks and pencil cases. Our pads' quality is another selling point: Pukka Pads use bleed-proof 80 gsm [grams per square meter] weight paper compared with most of our competitors' 60 or 70 gsm."

Pukka Pads also appeals to customers concerned about the environment. "We are trying to take a holistic approach to sustainability," explains Bonarius. "We are steadily changing almost all our products to FSC [Forest Stewardship Council]-certified paper and packaging to make our products more sustainable. We are cutting down on single-use plastic and using vegan glue and inks where we can. We are even changing the wire we use. Traditionally, the wire on spiral-bound notebooks has had a thick coating that is not environmentally friendly. We are reducing or eliminating this coating wherever possible to make the wire more recyclable. We are committed to making sustainable and recycled products people want. Our products show them they don't have to sacrifice design to be sustainable."

The flashier designs also help dealers gain business from remote workers. "You've got up to 50 percent of employers following some type of hybrid work model with people spending more time working from home," Bonarius elaborates. "Employees are consumers and they want esthetically pleasing products in their homes—something more than classic primary colors; something nicer. When they are in the office, they want nice-looking products like those they use at home. If the price point is similar, why wouldn't people want quality and a pleasing design?"

Bonarius says the less traditional colors and trend-setting pad designs are also perfect for retailers looking for products that stand out on the shelves.

More good news

In addition to geographic expansion, the company plans to give dealers additional options by introducing new products two to three times a year. This year, it is launching Pukka Party, allowing companies to order more environmentally friendly party supplies and tableware for birthdays, meetings, retirement parties and other office events when they place their regular order. "It makes it easier for dealers to buy them from one place, so no one has to run out to Walmart or a party store to pick up supplies," explains Bonarius.

And the benefits don't end with the products themselves. "We want to forge relationships built on trust with our dealers and make our products as accessible as possible for the IDC, so we are offering $250 order minimums," continues Bonarius "We work closely with dealers and make it easy for them to onboard with us. We provide marketing materials—including PDFs, content and multiple images per product—that dealers can download from the ISG website. We create tailored banners and flyers. We are also happy to look at private label opportunities in the US—something we do a lot of in other parts of the world."

If you are a dealer seeking to differentiate yourself from the boring competition, Pukka Pads might be just what you need to brighten up your offerings while putting more green in your pocket.

For more information or if you have any other enquiries about Pukka Pads, please contact Alex via email at alex.bonarius@pukka-pads.co.uk

MAKING
WAVES
WITH
MRO

Maintenance, repairs and operations (MRO) is a product pool which an increasing number of successful independents are exploring in an ongoing bid to diversify their offerings. Lisa Veeck takes a deep dive into the sector and finds that while some dealers are still testing the waters, others have taken the plunge and are now buoyant

While MRO accounts for less than 10 percent of sales at Supply Chimp, New York City, New York, president Joe McKenna expects this percentage to climb in the coming years. "We became involved in the category based on what customers were asking for," he says. "We do mostly GSA [General Services Administration] contracts and the person responsible for business machines is also responsible for purchasing MRO-related items. We could see what customers were buying on the contracts, so we got a GSA contract that allows us to sell MRO specifically." Supply Chimp's biggest MRO customer is US defense, including the Air Force, Army and Navy.

According to McKenna, the MRO segment dovetails neatly with office products. "There are some similarities, in that both include equipment and consumables and have broad catalogs," he says. "We are just dipping our toes in the category, selling locks, door fasteners and other security-related items. We are on GSA Advantage, but it's a competitive marketplace, so we make our money on volume versus maximum margins."

The precise percentage of MRO business at The Supply Room, Ashland, Virginia, depends on how the category is defined. "If you include janitorial and facility maintenance supplies, it's about 20 percent of our business," explains chief operating officer Yancy Jones Jr. "If you exclude those, it's below 5 percent. But it is a natural addition for customers buying janitorial from us. Our customers would ask us if we could get them an item—that's how we got into it."

The Supply Room's non-janitorial MRO includes safety gear and facility supplies, such as ladders, stools and power tools. Jones says that while the company generally doesn't get involved in small hardware, like bolts and screws, it will for large volume orders. "Lighting is another area we are considering," he continues. "Some dealers do well in it and we are thinking it might make a nice addition."

At Office Express Office Products, Cedar Rapids, Iowa, MRO accounts for 8 percent of sales, up from zero two years ago. Here, the category includes products focused on safety, such as vests, hard hats, fluorescent jackets and locks; floor chemicals and other industrial supplies; and personal protective equipment separate from janitorial products, such as hard hats, sweatbands, face shields and more. According to president Ben Keel, the company remains on the lookout for new areas within the category, as well as new suppliers.

Selling MRO was part of a well-thought-out business strategy for 1st Source Business Supplies, Minneapolis, Minnesota, where it now generates 30 percent of sales. "COVID-19 was a horrible time, but it pointed out to us that we must sell items that are needed in good times and bad," recalls CEO Greg McLeod. "MRO includes those items. It was a learning process and getting to where we are has taken a lot of hard work. The journey took longer than

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expected, but it's a good category for us." Major MRO clients include food and electronic manufacturers, road construction, hospitality and gaming, such as casinos.

"We sell fasteners; for one account with a million-square-foot warehouse, we supply all the fasteners for its assembly line," says McLeod. "We also sell tools, metal grading and even decking. We've sold $100,000 in air filtration. We sell ladders and tool chests. Then, we throw safety and a wide variety of PPE into the mix, like hard hats, vests, eye protection and gloves. We sell nine different color-coded gloves to one food manufacturing plant."

Product procurement

When it comes to purchasing MRO, Office Express turns to different sources, reports Keel: "We buy MRO from our traditional office product wholesalers like Essendant, other distributor/wholesaler partners like R.J. Schinner and direct from manufacturers through our buying groups."

The Supply Room also sources MRO from traditional office product and janitorial wholesalers and redistributors. "But we've also become part of the Do It Best INCOM Supply program, so we have access to products from that organization locally and online," says Jones. "It allows us to buy direct in volume so we can do larger bids and orders."

McKenna notes: "A key difference between office products and MRO is Supply Chimp buys MRO from distributors, our competitors. It's not like office products; there are not a lot of MRO wholesalers."

Sizing up the competition

At Office Express, MRO accounts for anywhere from 5 to 10 percent of the company's spend, compared to 3 to 4 percent for office products. "Profit margins are more lucrative in MRO and there's less competition, since there is not an abundance of players," explains Keel.

While the competition may be limited, top suppliers include such behemoths as W.W. Grainger, Uline and Fastenal. Yet their size doesn't concern Keel: "The disadvantage for us is we don't have a million-square-foot warehouse, so we can't stock and get some MRO to customers that need it tomorrow. It may take us two to three days. But the companies that deliver next day charge a premium and freight. Some customers think they don't pay for freight with the big suppliers, but when I suggest they look at the bill, they usually find they do. We don't charge freight and we don't have minimum orders. A lot of the big MRO companies don't offer service and support. We do and we team up with other local companies to help educate our customers in this category."

According to Keel, the buy local trend also helps: "Everyone understands a business needs to make money and we keep the money local and hire local people. So, we make healthy margins and keep it local while our customers get a one-stop shop, cost savings and better customer service. It's a win-win."

McLeod is equally undaunted by the MRO giant suppliers and says dealers can compete and win, including on price. "I have a lot of respect for the Graingers and Fastenals that have been able to make billions of dollars," he acknowledges. "They

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have all-powerful websites and name recognition. However, we perceive a weakness in the biggest MRO players. They've gotten sloppy and arrogant, with out-of-control pricing and poor service. Customers find they don't have to put up with that for the price they pay. We offer great service and can compete on price. Sometimes it's hard to convince customers. But we are hitting our stride in MRO, and it's getting easier because we have a good track record and are building a resume of satisfied customers. Also, as the big guys are falling down on their value proposition, customers are more likely to pick up the phone and hear what we have to say."

Reaping the benefits

In Keel's opinion, the main advantage of MRO is its ability to strengthen customer relationships. "If you have partners that allow you to give fair prices on what you are selling now and add MRO, you have completed the package. Today, we can offer office products, furniture, janitorial, breakroom and MRO. It allows dealers to further infiltrate their accounts, which is an advantage."

McLeod agrees: "There's no question it leads to stickier relationships. The products are mission critical—these customers have to have them or they will have to shut down. And they get you higher up the chain versus office products, where you might find yourself talking to the third receptionist in nine months. With MRO, you are dealing with people with more stripes on their sleeves: decision-makers, CEOs, presidents, division managers, operations managers and key people who control the purse. They are more business-minded people who look at the whole picture—shipping, pricing, delivery and service. Also, unlike office products, if the company doesn't have some of these items, it will have to shut down its manufacturing."

Jones takes a similar view. "The Supply Room's ability to add MRO products gives us an advantage over the competition," he suggests. "Our customers prefer to come to us and not have to go to 10 different vendors. We are selling them towels and tissues, so they can easily add MRO to the order."

He also considers the limited calls for next-day deliveries a plus: "Most companies don't need MRO products the next day. They are like the janitorial customers—they are good with agreed-upon scheduled deliveries. Of course, sometimes you get an urgent order, but it's not the norm."

Keel concurs: "The need for next-day delivery isn't there like it is with office products. It's like janitorial customers that are good with once-a-week scheduled deliveries."

Facing the challenges

When asked how easy it is to expand into MRO, McKenna admits that "there is definitely a learning curve": "You need to understand the SKU assortment. You may carry 100 types of screws, but the customer needs the

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101st. The others won't do because the screws are very specific. It requires inventory management and catalog maintenance. We are mainly an e-tailer and keeping the website updated with all the product images, pricing, etc. can be a challenge."

For Jones, "Having the right vendors and support partners as you expand in the area is crucial. Customers like our service, but being cost-competitive and having the right stock available is a main hurdle that we need to keep working on. We don't need to be the lowest price, but we can't be way off; we need to be in the range."

McLeod believes the biggest challenge to entering MRO is sourcing: "Some wholesalers don't get it. They focus on other categories or retail, and there's such a wide range in their pricing. We are looking for a B2B partner, a direct manufacturer or a wholesaler committed to MRO that can help us with fulfillment with enough margin for the supplier and us to make money and still save the customer money."

Diving in

Supply Chimp's McKenna recommends MRO as an area ripe for expansion into, but warns: "This is a broad category and can require significant inventory. So choosing bite-size chunks can make it more attractive. Pick some general areas you want to be in and find distributors."

Jones would also espouse a little-by-little approach. "MRO is vast," he explains. "Thinking that you will sell MRO to all customers is not effective. Start expanding with a subset of customers. Focus on specific industries and customers that use more MRO. Establish what you want your program to be and find who can get you access to those items. Establish your network before you begin selling and set realistic expectations."

As a starting point, Office Express's Keel suggests: "Ask your customers general questions like, 'Are you buying from Uline and if so what products? What are your pain points? How do you handle returns? Do you get usage reports? Do you have a dedicated rep?' Dive deep into what makes you different—better than the competition."

And once you've taken the plunge, 1st Source's McLeod advises: "Give it time to incubate. Don't sit back and do nothing, but be patient; continue what you are doing in other categories. Also, tap into your network. Bounce ideas off other dealers and manufacturers, and don't be afraid to ask questions and ask for advice. And as the owner, be involved—especially in the beginning. The two types of leaders are 'Kiss my ring' and 'Follow my lead.' Be the second. Once the program is up and running, let your reps take over. But at the start, they don't know enough; and many of the big deals we've made are because they know they are dealing with the owner. This means learning about the MRO you will be selling, since it's tough to teach people what you don't know. So, determine the value proposition, develop the talk track and attend the meetings. MRO isn't the panacea for all dealers' challenges but it can bring significant and sustainable sales."

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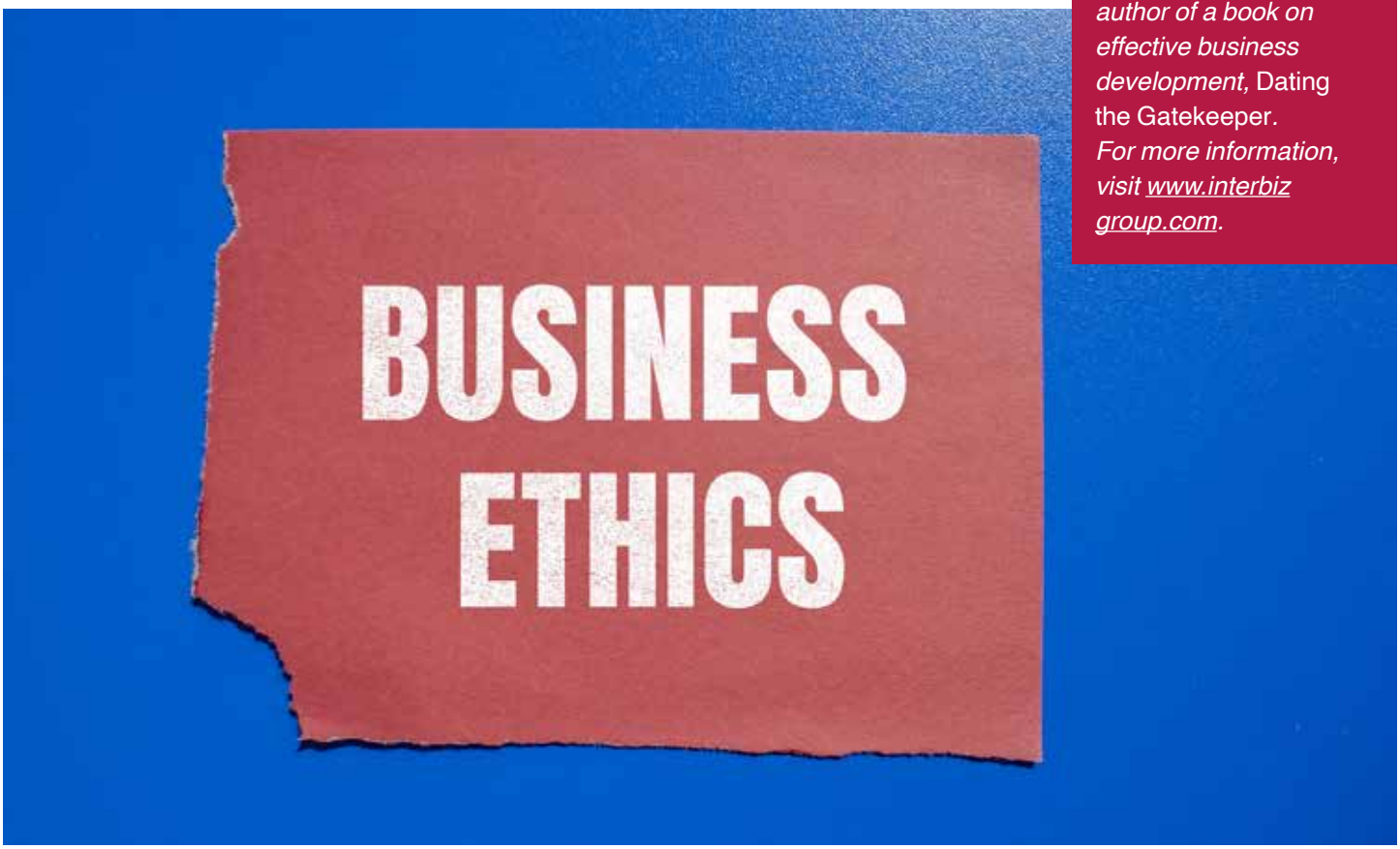
In addition to serving as national sales manager for AOPD, Tom Buxton, founder and CEO of the InterBizGroup consulting organization, works with independent office products dealers to help increase sales and profitability. Tom is also the author of a book on effective business development, Dating the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



This column is a follow-up to the one I shared last month. Please accept my apologies if some of the ideas seem redundant to you. My goal was and is to prove to you that this could be the very best time in recent history to be an independent office solutions distributor. And given what I have seen and experienced in the past month, I believe this more than ever.

As a consultant, I have the opportunity to ride with and strategize with many salespeople. Selling is a difficult profession and it is sad to see so many good people “wash out” after putting their personal and professional egos on the line trying to grow their business. And I have an ugly secret for you to consider if you are an owner or manager: it might be your fault when they fail.

Lack of training, pressure to “close” business very quickly and unrealistic goals make companies, and their reps, say stupid things like: “I can save you lots of money if you just share your invoices with me.” In my humble opinion, this statement is obnoxious, dishonest and annoying; but too many reps have fallen into this trap due to a lack of skilled sales training.

Let me expand on that last sentence for a minute. I think the offer to save them money is obnoxious for at least three reasons. First, your large competitors are not “gouging” their customers as a general rule. Second, if the prospect has a current relationship with another vendor—which they probably do—you have just said they are cheating them and you will rescue them from that person/company, which they may like. Third, our large competitors all buy better than we do, because they can purchase everything from direct

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sources, so they often have prices lower than your cost.

Now to the second part of the phrase: "… if you just share your invoices with me." How dare you ask a prospect for their invoices? The Bible remains the best guide for life that there is and it states: "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." Would you want your invoices reviewed by your competitors? I can hear some of you say, "But it happens." Who cares if it happens! Your rep is breaking ethical norms by asking for pricing; and worse, the prospect will believe that your company should be evaluated on its prices because that is what your rep is indicating differentiates you from other suppliers. No wonder there is so much failure with new hires in our industry.

"Ok, Tom—if we aren't supposed to sell on price, what are we supposed to do to entice a prospect to become a customer?" First, I recommend that you look back at my column from last month entitled "Fire your reps and cut all your prices" for some suggestions. Next, I would like to share a totally different sales methodology that has moved prospects toward becoming customers very recently.

Full disclosure: in each case, the rep I accompanied had set up appointments with each of the prospects. He made that happen through one or in some cases multiple phone calls and emails to high-level leaders at large prospects. Some prospects answered on the first call; some took months to respond for the first time. But he didn't give up. No one told him to stop bothering them, so he just kept following up. Note to reps: find a way to schedule a meeting. If someone doesn't want to meet, either delete them or follow up a few months later.

When each meeting began, I said something that could have brought about a quick conclusion: "If the only issue with your current supplier is price, we won't be of much assistance, because everyone's prices are still rising with inflation." In each case, the prospect asked us to continue—because, as it turns out, they were all experiencing pain besides price with their current supplier. Also, in every meeting, the tone changed. No salesperson had ever said something so honest to them before, so our credibility with them skyrocketed!

We found many of the same pains in every call. Small order fees are annoying; a constant turnover of reps is discouraging; a lack of consistent reporting and no one to request it from are troubling; and little to no customer service support is frustrating. Are these weaknesses among our competitors enough to make a prospect switch to your company? Absolutely! Every one of the calls we made that day ended with the prospect wanting more information about everything from furniture design to janitorial support, and we sent each one of them data management examples from the dealer's CX Intelligence by ECI. (I strongly believe in the value of this tool but am not paid by ECI to sell it. Find something else that provides this type of information if you like; but prospects love the ability to manage data.)

Lastly, let me provide a few recent examples of prospects becoming customers through AOPD dealers. Within the past few weeks alone, these members have won or reacquired accounts worth $25 million-plus without having the lowest price. These new customers were impressed by the responsiveness of our team, the presence of a long-term representative and consistently available reporting that sometimes includes online data tools. More than ever, prospects and customers want what your company has: great service; a personal touch; knowledgeable and consistent salespeople; and a local presence. If a prospect just wants the best price, move on—there are too many entities out there looking for what you have, and it is not the best price.

Your sales results have changed. Do you know why?

Troy Harrison is the Sales Navigator and the author of Sell Like You Mean It *and* The Pocket Sales Manager*. He helps companies navigate the elements of sales on their journey to success. He offers a free 45-minute sales strategy review. To schedule, call 913-645-3603 or email troy@troyharrison.com.*

I've been getting a rash of calls and emails lately from business owners and CEOs complaining that their salespeople "just aren't working hard enough anymore." When I ask why, the answer is always the same: "Because our sales are down." "Okay," I reply, "how do you know that your sales are down because your salespeople aren't working hard enough?"

All too often, I get silence. Or, sometimes, I hear: "Well, that's what happens. When sales are down, it's because the salespeople have become complacent." At this point, I'm pretty sure of the answers to the next questions I'll ask; but I ask them anyway.

My next questions are about the sales team's activity metrics. How many prospect meetings are they getting per week? How many attempts at meetings? How many discoveries/presentations/proposals? All too often, I hear: "We don't track that. Our sales manager doesn't want to be a bean counter."

And there's the real problem. Sales activity metrics and tracking aren't just about "bean counting"—at least, they aren't if you do it right. Knowing your metrics (not just results) is the only way to genuinely troubleshoot sales problems and help you spot changes in patterns. If you don't track numbers, you have to resort to cracking the whip and screaming, "WORK HARDER!" at your salespeople.

Sales activity metrics mean that you are tracking and managing your salespeople to achieve certain volumes of activities that, based on predictable and historical ratios, will give you a desired result. For instance, X number of prospecting attempts leads to Y number of discoveries, leading to Z number of presentations, leading to B number of proposals, leading to C number of sales. If you know what these numbers are and the ratios between them, you can very quickly spot changes in sales patterns and changes in buyer behavior—which means that you can work to solve problems.

And here's where you may be finding yourself right now. The sales profession is undergoing fundamental changes that have affected our historical ratios. As an example, the last time I worked a sales territory was in the early 2000s. At that time, when I picked up the phone to make a prospecting call, I could predict that about one in every three times I dialed the phone, my targeted contact »

would answer, giving me an opportunity to use my prospecting approach to get an appointment. If I did it well, I'd get an appointment on one of every three conversations. So, on average, I'd get an appointment every nine dials. Since I knew I could easily make 20 dials an hour, that meant that every hour of prospecting time would achieve two or three fresh appointments into my funnel.

I needed eight new appointments per week to hit my numbers. So, in a normal week, three hours of phone time filled my dance card and I was off to the races. That's not bad! But it's different today. Buyer behaviors have changed.

Now, only about one in 10 people are even answering the phone—and that's on a good day. Buyer skepticism is up, too—which means that the successful appointment-setting call is happening one-quarter of the time, instead of one-third of the time. Remember those 20 dials per hour? Now, I'm spending two hours to get one appointment, instead of three hours to get eight. That's a big shift. I'm working just as hard (my inputs—dials per hour, the measure of effort—haven't changed), but my results are off. If you're not tracking sales activity metrics, you don't know this, so you think that I'm not working as hard.

The reality is that in most sales environments, the ratios have changed—both at the top of the funnel and down the funnel. Buyers' access to information has affected their behavior at every step of the buyer's journey, which means that it's time for you to respond to this change. Here are some recommendations to help you adapt:

- Track sales activity. I know, I know—you don't want to "micromanage." But there's no better way to know when change is occurring, and get in front of it, than by knowing your activity ratios and your target activity metrics, and managing your salespeople to achieve those metrics.
- Get out in the field. Spend time in the field with your reps. See what they do, what questions they ask, how they present and how their customers react to them. Is it different than it used to be? Are your customers coming to the table with more information (hint: yes!). All of this has implications for how your salespeople sell. It's not 1970 anymore and you aren't the only conduit of information about your products.
- Research your own company. When I do a sales audit with my new clients, I always ask them what their Google Review score is. I get a lot of blank looks because they don't know. They usually know what a Google Review score is—they check out restaurant reviews and the like—but often it doesn't occur to them that they are also reviewable on Google. Sometimes, their scores are shocking. Not that long ago, one client was explaining to me that they provided a premium service and deserved a premium price—but when I checked their scores against a competition, they were a full star lower than any competitor. It's not just Google Reviews, either. Your customers and prospects are researching you. You should know what they're seeing.
- Update your methodology accordingly. If you're using a sales process or methodology that hasn't changed in the last three years or more, you're probably falling behind. You can't sell to a 2024 customer as if you're selling to a 1994 customer, or even a 2019 customer.

When I see management saying that the only problem is that their salespeople "aren't working hard enough," I know I'm talking to out-of-touch management. Don't be that person. Get tuned back in to your current sales environment. Adapt to the changes, even if those adaptations are hard. And then you can drive your market, instead of being left behind.

Marisa Pensa

Marisa Pensa is founder of Methods in Motion, a sales training company that helps dealers execute training concepts and create accountability to see both inside and outside sales initiatives through to success. For more information, please visit www.methodsnmotion.com.

DON'T LET ANYONE LOOK DOWN UPON YOU BECAUSE YOU ARE YOUNG

It was 20 years ago that I signed on the dotted line and opened my business.

I was 26 at the time. Can you relate, having also started out young in your career in the IDC?

I remember questioning whether I was too young to start a business or had enough experience. Despite being certified to deliver proven programs, I doubted whether anyone would hire me.

But what I lacked in experience I made up for by surrounding myself with wise counsel and a boatload of activity.

I threw myself into the world of entrepreneurship with determination and a willingness to learn. I sought guidance from seasoned professionals and absorbed every nugget of advice they generously shared.

The first couple of years were filled with early mornings, late nights and endless hustle. Come to think of it, not much has changed—although I have learned to recharge my batteries more often (more on that below).

In a world where age is often equated with experience, young professionals may find themselves facing doubts and challenges as they navigate their careers. However, the scriptures say, "Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young." This was an anchor for me, especially in the early years.

Being young doesn't mean lacking capability or insight; it simply means having a different perspective and a unique set of strengths to offer.

HERE ARE FIVE ENCOURAGING TIPS FOR YOUNG BUSINESS PROFESSIONALS.

Embrace mentorship

Mentorship can be a powerful tool for career development, especially for young professionals. Seek out mentors who can offer guidance, support and wisdom based on their own experiences. The IDC has structured groups for this exact purpose. Take advantage of the resources available. Approach possible mentors with humility and a willingness to learn. Remember, mentorship is not about finding someone who has all the answers, but rather someone who can help you navigate the challenges and opportunities that come your way.

Learn to process criticism productively

Learning to process criticism productively is an essential skill for personal and professional growth. Rather than engaging in the blame game, approach feedback with an open mind and a willingness to learn. Here are a couple of questions to ask yourself:

- Is there any truth to this?
- Is this feedback a trend?

If it's a recurring theme, maybe that's a sign you need to pay closer attention to that area.

While we all like praise and compliments, how often have we grown from compliments? On the flipside, how often have we grown from criticism? Learn to process it productively and then learn when to make adjustments and move on!

Don't be afraid to be wrong

Mistakes are inevitable, especially when you're just starting out in your career. Instead of fearing failure, embrace it as an opportunity for growth and learning. Don't let the fear of being wrong hold you back from taking risks or trying new things. Be open to feedback, learn from your mistakes and use them as steppingstones toward success. Remember, some of the greatest innovations and achievements have come from individuals who were not afraid to fail.

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Winston Churchill captures it this way: "Success is the ability to go from one failure to another without a loss of enthusiasm."

Recharge your batteries often

Stress kills creativity. It also kills our health and relationships, and robs our joy if we let it. Recharging your batteries early and often is key to keeping the flame going over the long haul. Early on in my career and early in my marriage, there was an unhealthy focus on the business—so much so that after a three-month separation in my marriage, it reminded me that nothing is more precious than our relationships. It highlighted the need to prioritize taking time to recharge and make sure life wasn't solely about business. I'm thankful now for a marriage of 26 years and counting. Prioritize your health and relationships, and do those things often that recharge your batteries—especially with those you love the most.

Always be learning

We live in a world where there is a wealth of knowledge available at our fingertips. Yet simply having access to information isn't enough; actively engaging with it is crucial for professional growth. Whether it's enrolling on a course, tuning into a podcast or delving into a book, the act of continuous learning is essential. These deliberate efforts not only expand our skillsets but also foster adaptability and innovation in our careers.

If you're looking for recommendations, follow @MarisaPensa on LinkedIn—I share a book of the month to help you sort through it all.

Remember, age is just a number; and with the right mindset, mentors and an ongoing commitment to learning, starting young can be a tremendous asset to you. As I celebrate two decades since I took that leap of faith, I am grateful for the journey that has shaped me into the entrepreneur I am today.

For IDC entrepreneurs, if you also started when you were very young, we'd love to hear your story. Please email marisa@methodsnmotion.com with the subject line: "IDC/Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young."

Hats off to you for working through many of your own challenges to continue to thrive as an independent dealer!

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