Building On A Manufacturing Legacy

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Since 1953, Morrison Industrial Equipment Company [1] (Grand Rapids, MI) has lived by a simple credo: provide unparalleled customer service. Beginning from a six-employee office with a focus on selling lift trucks [2], Morrison Industrial Equipment has grown to include 13 facilities in 11 cities spread across Michigan and northern Indiana. Branches are located in Elkhart and South Bend, Indiana; and Brighton, Greenville, Holland, Kalamazoo, Mason, Muskegon, Saginaw and Traverse City, Michigan.

More than 350 employees now strive to maintain the goal of providing excellent customer service while providing products including lift trucks, aftermarket parts, batteries [3], chargers [4], loading dock equipment [5],sweepers [6], scrubbers [7], personnel carriers [8] and more. The second and third generations of family leadership have helped grow the company to its position as a still-thriving material handling [9] dealership that achieved 2009 sales in excess of $50 million.

As Greg Morrison, Morrison Industrial Equipment vice president, begins his term as 2010 MHEDA President, *The MHEDA Journal* called upon one of MHEDA's most experienced members to find out more about Greg, his company and his mission for the year to come. Howard Bernstein, chairman of The Atlas Companies [10] (Schiller Park, IL) and 1965 MHEDA President, has done business with the Morrison family since the early 1950s. Howard opened his company in 1951 and met Greg's grandfather, Al, shortly thereafter. Howard provides a unique perspective on MHEDA's new leader.

Howard Bernstein: Can you explain the family structure of the company? How does everyone fit in?

Greg Morrison: My grandparents, Al and Mary, started the company in 1953. They had three sons. The oldest was my father, Bill Morrison, and then came my uncles Jack and Dick. Now there are four of us in the third generation—myself, my brother A.J. and my cousins Jeff and David—and we each have specific roles in the company. There are also some non-family members who have executive positions at Morrison Industrial Equipment. For instance, President Roger Troost, Executive Vice President Dale Monticello and Vice President Greg VanderLende play vital leadership roles in our company.

Howard: As a third-generation Morrison, how did the successful backgrounds of your grandfather and father affect your business philosophy?

Greg: One thing I learned was how to keep debt to a minimum. I never quite understood that when I was younger. I thought my grandparents were a little too frugal, but I really appreciate it now. Having low debt is so important, especially in very tough economic times.

Howard: Listening to you, I can't help but think of your grandfather. I first met him when he came into my office in Chicago in the early 1950s. He had just been awarded the Clark territory in Grand Rapids, Michigan, and requested three used Clark trucks that he could use for his rental fleet. He didn't have the money to pay for them but promised he'd pay me three installments over the next three months. I got one payment in 30 days, another in 60 days and a third in 90 days, right on the nose.

Greg: My grandparents prided themselves in paying their vendors on time. That was extremely important to them.

Howard: Even though your grandfather had a strong dealership and probably could have gotten away with leaning on the manufacturer a little bit, Al didn't operate that way.

Greg: Beyond honest business practices, the other key thing I learned from him is to be very respectful to our employees. I consider myself as just one part of the team. Having grown up in the family business, I think that's very important. We must be worthy of respect as owners, and there's no better way to do that than to work up through the ranks. At Morrison Industrial, there's never been a position created for a family member. I've worked in shipping/receiving, parts and sales, and I've had to earn the respect of my fellow employees.

Howard: Being third generation, there must be a lot to live up to.

Greg: Our goals remain constant—to maintain financial strength and align ourselves with the best suppliers. If we continue to do that, we can better serve our customer base. I make sure that I'm up-to-date on computer skills and everything IT-related. It's a continuation of what my grandparents started 50-plus years ago—offering

excellent service to our customers.

Working with Partners

Howard: You mentioned something that my generation certainly did not grow up with—computer skills. How do you personally, and your staff, inject new ideas into your company as the ways of doing business change?

Greg: The computer is just one tool we use. I rely on my people skills to relate with our employees and customers. It's important to be accessible to them, but it's also very important to be out visiting customers and listening to their needs.

Company founder Al Morrison stands next to one of his first service vehicles in 1953. Today the company has 130 service vehicles in operation.

Howard: You're talking about the things that I live by, certainly getting out and listening to and seeing your customers.

Greg: Many of the ideas and growth that we've had have come by being good listeners and offering new products and services that people out there are looking for.

Howard: I've always liked to visit my suppliers and see what their people are like because I consider the supplier as important as the customer.

Greg: Suppliers are important, too. We view suppliers as partners in our business.

Howard: How do you feel about diversification? How do you select different products?

Greg: The company has grown in a host of different areas. It has always been our belief that if you know how to operate a successful distributorship, you can apply those same best practices and be successful in other areas related to forklifts [11]. Our approach is to be a total solutions provider and offer a multitude of services to our forklift customer, such as operator training, loading dock equipment, overhead

doors, fire doors, high-speed doors, floor cleaning equipment and all types of allied products. Most recently, we've gotten into perimeter fencing and security gates. We also must be proficient in financial merchandising. Many end-users are looking for a distributor to provide a wide array of services for them, and we have tried to fit that bill.

Howard: The various items you mention are all things that I hope to be successful at too. Are you involved in Mor-Value Parts?

Greg: Not directly. Mor-Value Parts is my uncle Jack Morrison's sweeper/scrubber aftermarket parts supply company, and he's considered an industry guru when it comes to supplying and cross-referencing parts. To add to what we talked about a moment ago, when we do look at diversifying into other products and services, we want to find products that require parts and service. We place a high emphasis on that.

Howard: I agree with you there.

Greg: Our goal has been to dominate aftermarket sales in the territories we cover. New equipment sales are very important, but we lead with the aftermarket products.

Howard: People have to buy parts and service, particularly in a down market. People don't want to make capital investments, but they do have to maintain their equipment.

Greg: Exactly. Parts, service, rental and used sales will eventually lead to new equipment sales.

Morrison Industrial Equipment Company's Grand Rapids location is one of 11 branches throughout Michigan and Indiana.

What's in Store for MHEDA

Howard: You took office as president of MHEDA on January 1, 2010. Do you have any particular objectives that you'll focus on during your presidency?

Greg: The way the Board is set up with MHEDA's strategic planning process, there's a great flow from one presidency to the next. We're going to continue with the current education, membership, networking and industry advocacy initiatives. My

biggest emphasis will be on pointing out the value of MHEDA membership and how important it is, in this bad economic time more than ever, to utilize all of the services that are available through MHEDA.

Howard: Has the association been successful retaining members in this economy?

Greg: Membership retention is a challenge currently facing our association. That will be another focus of mine. Morrison Industrial has been a MHEDA member since 1958, so we know the value MHEDA membership gives us.

Howard: Education and attracting people to our industry were on my agenda as well when I became president 45 years ago. I traveled around to different universities to talk to students about our industry. I had a lot of fun and learned a lot from them.

Greg: You should never stop learning. And you said something there that I've heard you say a number of times. The reason that you keep doing what you're doing is because you're having a lot of fun doing it.

Howard: Even at my age, I continue to go to all the Conventions because I still pick up information and see what you younger guys are doing.

Greg: And you surround yourself with a lot of interesting, creative people. That is very much a part of our culture, too. We love getting up in the morning and going at it again. It's fun for us. It's fun to be on a winning team.

Howard: It sure is. Well, Greg, I'm impressed. I believe our trade association is going to have great leadership again this year.

Greg: Thank you, Howard. I really appreciate that.

Howard: I've always said, you get more than you give when you take the challenge of being president of this association. I wish you continued success, and give my best to all the Morrisons.

Greg: Thank you very much, Howard. It's been a pleasure.

For more details about Morrison Industrial Equipment Company, read this earlier Member Profile *[12] or visit the company's Web site at* www.morrison-ind.com *[1].*

The original article can be found at http://www.themhedajournal.org/content/1q10/Member_Profile.php *[13].*

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