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Strategic Leader

by Tom Polischuk

Frank Gerace, president and CEO of Multi-Color Corporation, has guided the company to the upper echelons of the industry, earning him packagePRINTING's 2008 TLMI Converter of the Year Award.

Add a note...

Many of today's leaders of package printing companies have spent their entire careers in the industry; not so with Frank Gerace, president and CEO of Multi-Color Corporation (MCC). A relative newcomer to the field, he spent the first 20 years of his career working for consumer products companies, learning and managing business operations from a different perspective.

Gerace has used his experiences to make a significant impact in the package printing community. Since taking the reigns at MCC, he has transformed the company into an industry powerhouse, with 10 consecutive years of record revenue growth.

This stellar business performance is well-recognized by his peers in the tag and label industry. "Frank has proven to be a leader for one of the premier growth label converters in North America and now he's moving it international," notes John Hickey, TLMI chairman of the board and CEO of Smyth -Companies. "He does this with his focus on execution and follow-through, which he also exhibits as a TLMI board member." Hickey has worked closely with Gerace during their time together on the board of directors and recognizes him as "a wonderful friend and colleague, as he is a truly genuine person."

For his impressive impact on the tag-and-label industry and contributions to TLMI, Frank Gerace is *packagePRINTING's* 2008 TLMI Converter of the Year.

Rapid rise

Gerace began his career working for companies in the food processing industry. From 1974 to 1993, he held general management positions with Beatrice Foods Company and -ConAgra Foods, Inc. Included in the portfolios of these two companies were such well-known brands as Egg Beaters, Healthy Choice, Swiss Miss, and Hunt's. This view from the "other side" would prepare him well for future success as a supplier to some of today's most demanding consumer products companies.

In 1993, Gerace left the confines of the food industry and ventured into the world of printing and packaging. As plant manager of James River Corp.'s Wausau,

Wis., folding-carton plant, he was introduced to a variety of printing and converting technologies. By 1998, he held the position of director of strategic business systems for Fort James Corp.'s Packaging Business—Fort James resulting from a 1997 merger of James River and Fort Howard Corp.

In April of 1998, Gerace first entered the tag-and-label industry, joining Multi-Color Corporation as vice president of operations. MCC was an established gravure label printer with a history of innovation, having introduced in-mold labels to the North American blow molding industry in the 1970s. However, in 1998, MCC was a \$48 million company with one wide-web gravure printing plant and was in the throes of some significant financial problems.

Gerace wasted no time making an impact on his new company. He engineered what he called “a very difficult, but successful operational turnaround of Multi-Color” that helped restore the company to profitability by early 1999. He was rewarded for his successful leadership with a promotion to president and appointment to the company's board of directors. Just a few months later he was named CEO.

For Gerace, restoring the company to profitability was just the beginning. With a clear eye on the future, he established Multi-Color's long-range business strategy to be a label solutions provider with multiple product offerings. “Our goal is to deliver a wide range of innovative, cost-effective, and value-added decorative label solutions with a customer-centric approach,” he says.

Gerace wasted no time in expanding the company's portfolio of label technologies. Before 1999 came to a close, MCC acquired the assets of Buriot International of Batavia, Ohio and entered the narrow-web flexographic pressure-sensitive market. This purchase was just the start of a series of strategic acquisitions that continued into this year.

In 2000, MCC acquired Uniflex Corp., which added capabilities in the growing market for shrink labels and tamper-evident bands. Gerace brought Premiere Labels into the fold in 2001, which added complementary technology for the pressure-sensitive label market. Two years later, the purchase of Avery Dennison's Dec Tech Division added heat-transfer labeling and narrow-web gravure printing capabilities. It also brought along a solid sales base in Latin and South America.

Early in 2005, MCC acquired NorthStar Print Group, its seventh and largest acquisition up to that time. In addition to its three manufacturing plants, NorthStar provided a strong glue-applied labeling capability.

Earlier this year, MCC made two notable moves to further position itself for continued success. It moved into a new 249,000-sq.-ft. facility in Batavia, Ohio, consolidating two nearby operations. It also completed the purchase of Australian-based Collotype International, which brought along a leading position in the worldwide pressure-sensitive wine-and-spirits label market. With this latest acquisition, MCC expanded its international presence and worldwide customer base.

Since 1999, Gerace has taken the company from a one-plant operation to an international company with 14 facilities worldwide—eight in North America, one in South -Africa, and five in Australia. In line with its long-term strategy, MCC now provides a full range of decorating solutions, incorporating all of the leading printing processes.

Successfully integrating such a large number of new people and new operations under one umbrella required strong, focused, yet flexible leadership. That is exactly what Gerace provided. “I believe very strongly in listening, being honest and open to different perspectives, and building trusting relationships,” he says. “I do not negotiate or compromise on core values like integrity, truth, respectful treatment of others, or creating customer and shareholder value. I am, however, open to using different styles or approaches to achieve our goals.”

The key to MCC’s impressive metamorphosis has been its people, notes Gerace. “It is critical to attract and retain the best people with the right attitude and aptitude who share our values,” he says. “Values matter! We demand an open and truthful work environment and depend heavily on the talents, skills, and judgment of our regional leaders and associates.”

Another key to MCC’s successful strategy has been -Gerace’s emphasis on listening to the needs of its customers. “What our customers think is far more important than what we think,” he stresses. “God knows we are not perfect and so do our customers. But what they also know, based on our track record, is that we will stand behind our commitments, swiftly respond to their needs, and have their best interests at heart.”

Time for TLMI

Gerace joined TLMI in 1999 when he first took the helm at MCC. The membership had particular value for a relative newcomer to the industry. “Having had no previous tag-and-label industry connections, TLMI created a great venue for me to meet, network, and build industry relationships, which over the years have developed into good friendships,” he says.

It wasn’t long before his broad interest in the industry and his leadership qualities led him to join TLMI’s board of directors in 2003. His impact and contributions have been readily evident. “Frank is one of those quiet leaders who has shown great insight and strategic thinking on the board,” says Frank Sablone, president of TLMI. “He is well respected and admired by his peers.” In 2006, Gerace was selected as TLMI chairman-elect.

On the home front

Gerace lives in Maineville, Ohio with Linda, his wife of 34 years. Together, they raised four children, all college graduates and married. He and Linda have three grandchildren under the age of two, with another on the way in January. Along with the time he spends with his family and friends, he enjoys boating, tennis, golf, and reading history books and biographies. *pp*

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