

MAINTENANCE SALES NEWS

A photograph of two men in dark suits and ties standing in a warehouse. The man on the left has blonde hair and is wearing a yellow patterned tie. The man on the right has brown hair and is wearing a patterned tie. They are standing in front of metal shelving units filled with cardboard boxes and pallets. The background shows a typical industrial storage area with various boxes and supplies.

**Belson Co.
Nears Diamond
Anniversary**

**Service Powers Growth
At
5 Featured Distributorships**

ISSA/INTERCLEAN 2006

October 4 - 7

CHICAGO



Belson executive staff (left to right): Tim Enright, vice president of Sanitary Maintenance Division; Rita Collins, customer service manager; Tom Hall, president/CEO; Mike Kane, director of purchasing; Randy Biebel, vice president/COO; Dick Sauberlich, IT/warehouse manager; Jeanne Nelson, controller; and Mike Rusch, service manager.

A Diamond In Green Bay

By Perry J. Littrell

Maintenance Sales News Associate Editor

Green Bay, WI, is a proud community. It is home to one of professional sports most storied franchises: the Green Bay Packers. It is considered by many to be the birthplace of the paper and packaging industry, and was the original home to many giants in that market. It is not surprising, then, to hear the level of pride that the management staff of **Belson Co.**, speaks with, when discussing the impressive 74-year history of one of Green Bay's most respected jan/san distributorships. This staff is also confident about its future.

"We are on the verge of joining a very elite group of businesses, not just in our industry, but throughout the history of American business. Next year (2007) Belson will have been in business for 75 years. There are not many compa-



Tom Biebel, chairman of the board, is pictured next to the portrait of his father, Belson founder, Arnie Biebel.

nies in the United States, much less among jan/san distributors, that have been successful for that length of time," **Tom Hall, president/CEO**, said.

Maintenance Sales News recently inter-

viewed the management team of Belson Co., as the distributorship approaches its diamond anniversary.

"If It's Belson, It's Good"

Arnold "Arnie" Biebel and Harry Jacobson founded Belson Co., in 1932. The company started as a fireworks distributor, but quickly began adapting to an ever-changing marketplace, a trend that would set the course for the business for the next 74 years.

"The name Belson is derived from the last three letters of my grandfather and Harry's last names. This has often caused a little confusion for some newer customers who 'want to speak to Mr. Belson,'" **Randy Biebel, vice-president/COO**, said. "Shortly after starting the business, Arnie and Harry realized that while they made money during the summer, there wasn't much money to be made in fire-



The Belson inside sales department (above, from left to right): Luanne Cathey, inside sales rep; Karen Simcik, inside sales rep; and Debbie Schumacher, telemarketing manager. Members of the Belson outside sales team: (seated in front) Dave Gresl, sanitary sales rep; (seated in back) Brian Janssen, industrial sales rep; and (standing) Tim Enright, vice president of Sanitary Maintenance Division.



works distribution during the winter. They knew that they would need to sell something other than fireworks for their business to be successful. Arnie's father, my great-grandfather, owned a small grocery store, known as Biebel's Supermarket. Arnie and Harry proposed to Arnie's father that they begin distributing perishable and impulse item products for small independent grocers. My great-grandfather agreed to buy from them, and let them have some space in the back of his building to use as offices and a warehouse. Soon after, Arnie Biebel purchased the other half of the business from Harry, but he kept the name Belson because they had already built a reputation for quality."

After Arnie Biebel purchased the entire company, he began developing the young distributorship. Randy Biebel said that after Arnie took sole possession of Belson, the fireworks business was eventually phased out as Belson began carrying school supplies, panty hose, and toys. This was also when Belson began carrying some paper goods such as paper bags and meat wrap.

During this time, Belson was a private label distributor. Everything the company sold bore the Belson label, and was guaranteed to be of the highest quality. The distributorship began running newspaper and magazine ads in local media, and even ran some television commercials. In each advertisement and on all of its products' packaging, a slogan was displayed, "If It's Belson, It's Good." This was the foundation of a reputation that continues to serve the business today.

"This company was built on passion, and doing things the right way. Nowhere is this more evident than with Arnie (Biebel). He built a reputation for this company; he built a reputation for himself. He was held in high esteem throughout the community, and was often praised for his leadership. Arnie's word was as good as gold, better than any contract anyone could have ever signed and everyone knew that.

Even today, that reputation for honesty, integrity and quality still has an impact on customers, and it is something we strive to hold ourselves accountable to and build upon," Hall said. "When I call on customers and say, 'Hi, I'm from Belson,' it still has an impact on customers. The older ones remember the products from when we sold school supplies, and they remember the quality that we always have provided. For those who are too young to have purchased Belson school supplies, they know us from our reputation as a quality jan/san distributor. We do not have to explain who we are too often."

Despite Belson's success in distributing to independent grocers, the distributorship was in a marketplace that was heading for some significant challenges.

"Our business never stopped evolving. Eventually, the big box stores started coming to the

"I used to try to find (sales) people who were like me, and that just was not the way to go. We have a variety of people here who accomplish our mission in many different ways. We have to be open-minded as a company. They are all different, and they are all successful in their own way."

— Tom Hall; President/CEO

area, and my father, **Tom Biebel (chairman of the board/owner)**, saw the hand writing on the wall," Randy Biebel said.

"We were selling to mom-and-pop stores, small locally owned grocers, and all of our customers began drying up with the advent of the discount stores," Tom Biebel said. "We had always sold paper items, but the main focus of our business was retail. At the time, **Don Sharp** was our vice-president of industrial sales, and was expanding to selling industrial items to manufacturers, convertors, and school districts. As the business grew, we expanded the department, added more sales people and gradually made the transition. It was not just that one day we stopped selling to our retail customers and became solely a jan/san house, it was a gradual thought out transition."

Belson sold its last school order in 1980.

Since that time, the company has been committed to achieving the same excellence in the jan/san market that it had attained in its previous field. However, the company was not entering a completely new field. Belson has a rich history of distributing paper products for many of the industry leaders.

"Arnie was one of the first distributors of Fort Howard (Georgia-Pacific) and Bay West (Wausau) paper. Paper has always been a large part of Belson's product offerings, and today on the side of our trucks, of our building, and on our business cards it reads, 'Belson Co. Paper • Packaging • Janitorial,' but paper comes first," Hall said.

In the Belson office, there is also displayed a plaque that the company received in the 1980s for 50 years of business with Wausau Paper. The leadership of the company is proud of its rich history in the industry and of the relationships and partnerships they has formed.

Everyone Is A Partner

Partnerships are one of the keystones of Belson's continued success, and a foundation upon which the company is building its future. Belson, however, is unique in its partnerships.

"We look at every relationship as a partnership. Our customer service reps are partnered with three or four sales people to serve the customer. We view our relationships with our customers and vendors as a three-sided partner-

ship," Rita Collins, customer service manager, said.

The sales team works in cooperation with one another on most of Belson's accounts.

"Each member of our sales staff has a certain

"We separate ourselves with our service. We do what we must to win a new customer, and maintain current customers... We are singled out on a yearly basis for our excellence in service by our customers, and this is no accident. We are very methodical, and we take great pride in making sure that we service our customers in a manner that elevates us to a higher standard."

— Randy Biebel; Vice President/COO

area of expertise. Some specialize in paper and systems, some have a strong knowledge of floor treatments, while others have a strong knowledge of warewashing and laundry. It is not unusual for two or three salespeople to call on one customer. This way, we give the customer an expert in all of their jan/san needs to answer questions, provide training, and to solve problems. Obviously, we only do this if the customer wants that type of service. If the customer wants an expert, we give him an expert, and if he only wants one person calling on him, then we'll only send one sales person. The customer calls the shots," Hall said.

In fact, the company's move to becoming a full-line jan/san distributor was the result of Tom Biebel's commitment to being a better partner to his current customers.

"We really committed ourselves to being a jan/san distributor because we noticed that all of our customers (both retail and industrial packaging) were also buying janitorial products. I thought to myself, 'Why couldn't we expand our market through our existing customers' jan/san needs and provide them with the service and quality that we were known for in our other business,'" Tom Biebel said. "We could provide them with a one-source shop for their packaging and jan/san needs, while increasing our orders from maybe \$500 to \$700 with relatively low impact to our cost. Simply, the move to becoming a jan/san distributorship was just a continuation of our philosophy of being a good partner with our customers."

The management staff of Belson takes pride in its relationships with customers.

"We cannot sell everything to everyone. We are not trying to do that, but if a customer wants a partner in its distributor, there is no better partner than Belson Co., period. We'll communicate to them our needs, our issues, our problems, and what we need. The customers communicate back the same to us, and that is what we are building our business on. Belson is not looking for bid business or one-time orders, we are looking for long term relationships and to grow with those customers," Hall said. "We have been very successful at that, and we have had customers who have been with us for over 50-60 years, exclusively. We have never lost their business. I am talking about every size of

customer, including very large end-users, and that is because we earned the business, and we earned our keep everyday. Everybody at Belson does, and it is not just the salesman. The salesman will do what he needs to do, customer serv-

ice will do what they need to do, service department, accounting, IT, everybody. If that customer has different needs, or if its business is changing and it communicates that to us, then we have to change to meet those needs. Our customers don't change for us, we change for them."

Because of these relationships, Hall said that Belson has never "fired" a customer.

"That term has never been used here. Many of our best customers started out as very small businesses, but we treated them with the same respect that we treated our largest customers. Over time these customers grew, and our busi-

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ness grew with them. However, if we would have ever said to ourselves, 'These guys are just too small to sell too,' we would have missed out on the opportunities they provide now," Hall said. "When it comes to the customer, we do not know the meaning of the word 'no.'"

The customers are not the only ones who benefit from these relationships. Tom Biebel said that Belson's customers are also its greatest promoters.

"In the distribution business, there are prospects, customers and advocates," Tom Biebel said. "Customers simply buy products, but advocates not only buy products, they also recommend a distributor to other companies

and provide us new business or prospects. Belson has many advocates along with many customers."

Partnerships are not simply limited to customers. Belson has also built, over time, close-knit ties to its suppliers.

"We have been a Bay West distributor for more 70 years. We've been with Fort Howard (Georgia-Pacific) for an extraordinary length of time. We do not distribute for everyone who calls on us. Because of our size and success, we could sell any line we want, but we don't need 10 paper lines or 10 machinery lines. We want one or two quality lines. We want suppliers we can build a relationship with, to be treated fairly, and suppliers who want to be successful with us," Hall said. "That is why we are a branded house, we do not sell seconds, we are not a converter house. If a customer wants to buy those types of products, then we are not going to be a good match for him. We represent premier companies, because we are a premier company, and we have been very successful with this philosophy. Our vendors have been very pleased with our results."

Success With Service

Belson has a simple philosophy when it comes to servicing customers: Give them good pricing, service, delivery, and be honest and ethical. While this may seem simple enough, carrying through with this concept is hard work, because every customer has a different idea about service.

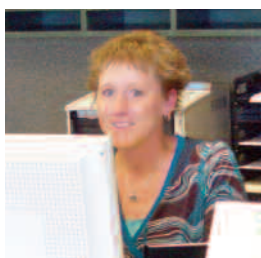
"I do not feel that we can say that there is any one aspect of service that is the most important. The definition of service depends on the situation and the customer. If a customer is out of a product on Monday and needs it immediately, then speed is the most important aspect of service. On the very next day it could be something else entirely," Hall said. "For us, service means continually striving for greatness. We constantly look at what we do well and what we do great, and we put emphasis on improving every aspect of our service so that we do everything great."

"Vince Lombardi once said that, 'If you strive for perfection, you just might be excellent.' That is a pretty powerful statement, and one that we take to heart," Randy Biebel said. "There are many companies that sell the same type of products we sell. Some do it very well, and some don't do it very well. We separate ourselves with our service. We do what we must to win a new customer, and maintain current customers. Our service has helped us win several vendor of the year awards," Randy Biebel said. "We are singled out on a yearly basis for our excellence



Belson service department (above left, left to right): Ron Vlies, service tech; Mike Rusch, service manager; and Dan Laurent, service tech.

Belson's customer service department has 87 combined years of experience. The team consists of (above right, front row, left to right) Laurie Laho, CSR; Terrie Krefl, CSR; Stacie Glass, CSR; Barb VandenLangenberg, CSR; and (standing in back) Rita Collins, customer service manager.



Lanette Schabow, receptionist

in service by our customers, and this is no accident. We are very methodical, and we take great pride in making sure that we service our customers in a manner that elevates us to a higher

standard. Service for us is plain and simple: do things the right way."

Listening to the customer and developing customized service is one way Belson separates itself from competitors.

"What is so unique about Belson is that the customer calls the shots on how we provide him with service. If the customer likes a certain salesman and only wants to work with him, then only that salesman will call on the customer. However, if the customer wants an expert on each of the products he is purchasing from us, then it is not unusual for us to send him a salesperson who has very good product knowledge when it comes to floorcare, another salesperson with warewash expertise, and we send **Mike Rusch (service manager)** to help the customer with his equipment needs," Hall said. "Whatever the customer wants, drives our business."

"If a customer wants to simplify his ordering process then I will go with a salesperson to talk to the customer about our customer service department, and how he can use our EDI to order more quickly," Collins said. "I will set up a template for the customer with all of the items that he requires, and that customer can simply fill in what is needed and fax or e-mail it to us. In some cases, a customer will simply give a salesperson a min/max limit to operate with and give the authority to go into the customer's facility and pick their orders for him to maintain inventory."

The management team is also not above meeting with the customers.

"Sometimes we have a customer who asks to meet with Randy (Biebel) or me, simply because he/she wants to meet one of the owners. So Randy or I will go and visit the customer to discuss how we can further provide service. We may discuss our IT capabilities, how we can do things electronically, how we can stock special items. If he wants to discuss warehousing and delivery with us, we also send **Richard ('Dick' Sauberlich, IT/ warehouse manager)**. Potentially, Richard, Rita (Collins), Randy, and a salesperson could all be calling on the customer. And we do this with any account. We

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— Tom Hall; President/CEO

love our small accounts, our medium accounts, and our large accounts. They are all important to us," Hall said.

"We are a service oriented company. We will do what the customer needs. I, personally, as the COO of the company, have taken an order, and if the customer really needs it immediately, have delivered it to the customer in my own car. This isn't a common occurrence, but it happens, because our customers are our No. 1 priority," Randy Biebel said. He added one aspect of service that can never be taken for granted is education and training.

"I cannot imagine not providing that (training/education) to my customers. Again, a lot of people sell what we sell, but do they have the expertise when there is a problem? Can they

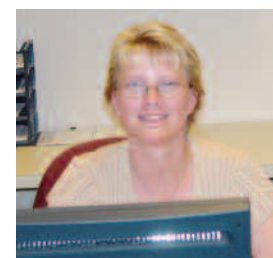
walk a customer through the different uses of each product? It is really easy to sell jan/san products as long as nothing goes wrong, but when things do go wrong, that is when an excellent distributorship separates itself from a mediocre one," Randy Biebel said.

"Motivation, inspiration and education: We were inspired by the men who founded and built this company to excel in everything we do. We are motivated to be as informed as possible about our products so that we can educate our customers," Hall said. "We view our customers as partners, and just as we want our employees as educated as possible about our products and how to use them, we want to educate our customers in the same way. That is why we do job site training, why we have product seminars, and why we have on-site training at our facility. We have a training room that we built when we expanded our headquarters expressly for the purpose of bringing in our customers to train them."

Due to the emphasis that Belson places on education and training, the sales staff and the management team work to make sure that they are always available to serve the customer.

"If a customer wants to do something at midnight, on the weekend, or on a holiday, we'll be there. If he needs to know how to apply a new wax product at 2 a.m. on Monday morning, someone will be there to help them," Hall said.

"Sometimes a customer needs a third shift crew trained, so one of our sales staff, or I, will go and train that shift. That means that sometimes we are there at 4:30 a.m. or at 11 p.m. so that we can be there when that shift is there," **Tim Enright, vice president of Sanitary Maintenance Division**, said. "It is not unusual for one of us to be at a large customer's facility



Melissa Cline-Pamperin, asst. buyer

from early in the morning to late at night to train all three of its shifts.”

The management staff at Belson sees service as more than a way of maintaining customers or gaining new customers. For them, service is a key role in the partnerships they have developed with customers, and a way of growing through their customers’ success.

“We bring customers in, train them how to use and maintain the equipment they bought from us. We want to make sure they understand how to maintain their equipment so that they get the most out of it,” Rusch said. “We look at the equipment, and products, they buy from us as an investment for both the customers and ourselves, we do not want our customers to waste money on things they do not need, because they are our partners and if they are successful, so are we.”

To educate customers, the staff at Belson must be up-to-date with product information, and cognizant of the trends and developments in the industry.

“We are always educating our sales force. We are sending our entire sales team to the upcoming ISSA show (October 4-7) in Chicago, along with our purchasing department. Essentially, the whole company will be there for two days, talking to vendors, learning about new products, building relationships, and re-educating ourselves so that we can take the information we learn back to our customers,” Hall said.

Having a complete product line is also an important aspect of service for Belson. Hall said that one of the company’s goals with every customer is to be a one-stop source for jan/san products.

“We always want to be a sole-source provider for our customers jan/san and packaging needs. It helps us with profits and growth, but it also helps the customer. It is more convenient for the customer to have a one-stop source,” Hall said. “As more customers turn to us for all of their jan/san needs, we have more clout with our vendors and can push for better pricing, make larger orders, and in turn, pass those savings on to our customers. It is a win-win situation for both us and our customers.”

Even with Belson’s commitment to service, mistakes are sometimes made. How mistakes are prevented and remedied are two more keys to Belson’s success.

“We do not make a lot of mistakes. Not

because we are perfect, but because everyone at Belson is constantly checking to make sure we do not make mistakes. We strive to be perfect,” Hall said.

Being honest with customers is, according to Tom Biebel, the easiest way to avert problems.

“My motto is, ‘There is nothing stronger than the truth, and nothing weaker than a lie,’” Tom Biebel said. “Honesty goes a long way toward developing advocates, and advocates tend to be more forgiving if there is a mistake.”

Part of prevention is identifying a potential problem before it becomes an issue with the customer. Belson employees are encouraged to pay close attention to any comments a customer

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might have about a product or the service he is receiving.

“If we (customer service reps) are on the phone with a customer and he comments about something that is bothering him, we immediately contact the sales rep responsible for that customer so that he can address the problem before it grows,” Collins said. “I actually happened to be at one of our school system customers one time for a football game, and I was talking to some people in the stands. They mentioned that one of the toilet paper dispensers was shredding the toilet paper every time they tried to pull a piece out. When I got back to work the next Monday, I mentioned it to the sales rep for that

truth. Tell them what happened, what we are going to do to correct it, how long it will take, and then follow through on our promises.”

While distributors must strive not to make mistakes in dealing with the customer, sometimes a customer can make a mistake. It is important, Hall said, for a distributor to have a short memory about a customer’s prior decisions.

“Sometimes customers make poor decisions. They go with a discount distributorship that cannot provide service, and must rely on undercutting its competition. If we lose a customer to one of these types of distributors, and then get a call because the customer did not receive any training on how to use the products he bought and

cannot get service from that distributor, we will go and help the customer out,” Hall said. “We see this as an opportunity

to strengthen our relationship with that customer. A distributorship cannot keep a list of customers who have ‘wronged it’ nor hold grudges against these customers. In the event that something like this happens, our willingness to go out and service that customer generally brings his business back to us, and usually he becomes one of our more loyal customers.”

“It (servicing another company’s product) happens in equipment a lot,” Rusch said. “We have helped customers even if they didn’t buy the equipment from us. We are here for them. When they see how we are there for them; the next time they buy equipment, we’ll get the business.”

Hall related a story about a customer who had done business with Belson for many years, but left because he felt that another distributor could provide more options.

“After a few months, I received a letter from this customer. He had been working with Tim (Enright) to re-establish his business with Belson. The letter was an apology for doubting our ability to provide service. The customer has continued to do business with us, and is thrilled at the level of service we provide,” Hall said. “Obviously, I had every right to refuse to do business with this customer, but how would that have helped Belson, and how would that have fit in with our concept of the customer as a partner?”

People Are No. 1

When a company relies on quality service for success, it must employ the right type of people to maintain its

school system. The rep immediately contacted the school and said, ‘We understand that some people have been having difficulty with your toilet paper system, let us get that taken care of for you.’”

When there are problems, however, Belson is fast to remedy the issue.

“If we do make a mistake, we fix it quickly. Speed is of the utmost importance. The problem is not going to go away if we wait, it is going to get worse. I don’t care what the problem is, in this business it gets worse the longer we wait,” Hall said. “We had a situation last Friday. I will tell you it was a major problem, but within two hours we had it solved. And sometimes solving problems is as simple as admitting the truth, whether it is good or bad. Just tell customers the

reputation. The management staff of Belson has long been committed to finding these people to and keeping them loyal. Each department has employees with many years of combined experience in the jan/san distribution industry. The five-person customer service department (including Rita Collins) has a total of 85 years of experience. The 15-person sales team boasts an average of 16 years of experience. The 3-man service department (including Mike Rusch) has a combined 57 years experience. Many on the management team have over 25 years of experience.

"We are a great company to work for, most of our employees have been with us for a very long time. However, we are very demanding in regard to the type of individual we hire. We want dedication, we want loyalty, and we want professionalism. We want that throughout our entire company, whether it is in our warehouse, accounting, customer service, sales, administration — we hire the steady, high-quality type of person. And we invest in that person," Hall said. "I spend a lot of time, and Randy does too, trying to find experienced sales people who can work in our environment — family owned company with ethics. This is a company that has vision on how it wants to move forward."

Despite the premium Hall, Randy and Tom Biebel place on finding qualified individuals, they are both wary about hiring sales people away from other distributors.

"If a sales person is experienced and is with another company, why would he want to leave? So, unless the distributorship he is coming from is sold, goes out of business, or something else happens to the company, we are very wary of a salesperson coming to us from another distributorship. We do not want somebody else's throw-aways," Hall said. "It is very difficult to be successful in this field as a salesperson. We have trained them, and we've been successful. However, it takes three-to-five years, and a salesperson is still just learning the business. It takes a long time, because the field is very technical, and our sales people, when they make calls on our behalf, must meet a certain level of expertise on what we carry."

Randy and Tom Biebel added that it takes a special type of person to be a successful jan/san salesman.

"I always say that salesmen are born, they're not made. Certain people are born to sell," Randy Biebel said. "The one key I see is organization. Sales people are always promising the customer something, and they must be able to follow up. If they are organized, then they are more likely to follow up with someone than if they are not organized."

"Honesty, integrity, and an urgency to get things done yesterday rather than today: these are things we live by at Belson. Anyone who wants to work for us, must have these same values as well," Tom Biebel said. "We are a sales

driven company, and must hire the right kind of people. We need someone who is honest, energetic, and goal-driven. We hire people who know the value of putting in a full day's work, and works smartly and efficiently."

Hall said that he has learned some valuable lessons in hiring individuals for the company's sales staff over the years, and has adapted his methods accordingly.

"I used to try to find people who were like me, and that just was not the way to go. We have a variety of people here who accomplish our mission in many different ways. We have to be open-minded as a company, that all of these sale people are different. They are all different, and they are all successful in their own way. We have some guys who specialize in floor waxes, some who specialize in laundry and warewashing, some who specialize in schools, governments, industry, hospitals, with different chemicals for different applications. We do not rely on one person to do everything. But finding someone who can specialize in a field is still very difficult. If I could find 5 or 10 of those people I would hire them tomorrow."

Even though hiring the right person is a challenge, Hall said that it is definitely worth the effort. The company also works hard to treat its employees right.

"The time, energy and money we have invested in our people has been worth it to the company. Our people are the foundations of our past, present and future success. They have given so much to this company, through their professionalism, their motivation, and their education. So, we must give back to them, not just monetarily, but in how we treat them. We don't have employees here, we have partners," Hall said. "All of our success is due to our people. Anybody can have a building, anybody can have a truck, but it is the people who make the difference, and I honestly believe that we have the best management staff, sales force, warehouse staff — the best people in the industry. I'm sure that is true of any other distributorship that has had the longevity and success that Belson has had. Companies like ours don't just stick around for this long, unless they are good."

"From my standpoint, when people ask me why I am still with Belson after all of these years, I tell them, 'Because of the family leadership of Belson, and the family environment that the company provides for us,'" Collins said. "The company is very family oriented and it cares not just about its employees, but each employee's personal family as well. That means the world to me as a mother and a working woman, and it means a lot to the other individuals who work in the company."

Tom Biebel said that he trusts his management staff's decisions and that a successful distributorship owner must surround himself with good people.

"A good owner surrounds himself with good people, people who are smarter than him," Tom Biebel said. "I'm a smart guy, do not get me wrong, but I do not let my ego get in the way of making sure that the best decisions are made for the future of this company. If I could give one piece of advice to other owners in positions such as myself, it would be to never be the smartest guy in the room, be humble and amendable, and willing to let the reins go, so that the people who have been hired to do a job can do it without someone standing over their shoulder."

Hall and Belson's executive team use the example set by Tom Biebel to give employees the opportunity to succeed.

"People stay with us because we give them the resources and the training they need to succeed. We allow them to make decisions. We do not micro-manage. Our sales staff has the ability to make decisions on the fly without going through some committee," Hall said. "People are held accountable for their decisions, but they enjoy a level of responsibility that many in their similar positions can not claim."

Investing In The Future

Hall and the Belson management team know that they operate in an ever changing marketplace, and that the only way to remain relevant is to stay ahead of the newest trends and to meet challenges head on. That is why the company has embraced technology so full-heartedly.

"We made a choice about 10 to 15 years ago to spend capital money on technology and to hire people like Richard (Sauberlich). Today, we appropriate over \$100,000 a year in our budget for upgrading our operations. We strive to be more efficient in our warehousing, billing, ordering and purchasing. Especially as the cost of labor continues to increase, we look for ways to grow without expanding our employee base," Hall said. "The goal is to be as lean as possible."

Belson has long had a company Web site that offers product data and company information. It is currently exploring e-commerce and laying the groundwork for being able to offer its entire product line to customers electronically.

"Everything we do at Belson must be done to a certain standard of excellence. The same holds true in our plans for e-commerce. While we have had a Web site for many years, we have not implemented e-commerce because we want to be able to offer our entire product line to our customers when we finally offer that choice," Hall said. "That means organizing our data, and continuing to improve our warehouse efficiency. The goal is to have automated warehouse management implemented before we begin organizing our e-commerce structure."

To achieve this goal, Dick Sauberlich was brought in to implement a state-of-the-art warehouse management system. Belson's automated

75,000-square-foot warehouse utilizes an ABC system.

"With the ABC system, we have our high-turnover SKUs or 'A' SKUs located close to our loading bays, our 'B' SKUs are located further back, and our 'C' SKUs are the furthest from our loading bays," Sauberlich said. "We have a staging area that is organized so that each order is placed in relation to the bay by its delivery location and time. This area is then cleared out by the end of the day, and we begin setting up for the next day's deliveries."

Data processing is another aspect that Sauberlich has improved since joining Belson.

"We have spent a lot of time organizing our data, so that if our salespeople want background information about their customer, they have it readily available. If Randy needs statistics on a certain industry, we can call these figures up easily and present Randy, or the salespeople, with the information in a organized manner," Sauberlich said. "The customers can also use this information to create long-term ordering plans, or set up min/max levels for their sales reps to use if they chose to turn over inventory to us."

"We will continue to improve our processes, and eliminate repetitive administrative tasks with automation and technology," Hall said. "We have already implemented electronic banking, and pay all of our bills electronically. Everything we have done is important to keeping our costs down and our processes efficient, and we have been successful in doing so."

An Optimistic Outlook

Belson has experienced many changes over the last 75 years, and has been successful in overcoming the challenges that it has faced. The management team of Belson is confident that with hard work the company will continue to be successful in the future.

"Business continues to grow. Last year was a record year for Belson in sales; this year looks to be even better. However, we cannot become complacent and rest on our laurels," Hall said.

"In one way, this is a very simple business. If a distributorship offers quality products and works hard to service customers, it will be successful. But, we must be passionate about our work. This is not a 40-hour a week job; this is something that we must live and breathe. The business is evolving daily, so every day we must work hard to exceed the previous day's expectations and do something bigger and better because if we don't, a competitor just might."

"We have to be able to recognize and seize new opportunities as the market changes, and it changes rapidly; it is ever moving, never stagnant. We have to remember to react fast, and service the customer directly. As long as we continue to do that, I do not see how this company can ever fail. The key is to remember that it is not about the Belson Company, it is about the customer," Randy Biebel said.

"To add to that, the future of this company will depend on our ability to further expand our markets in our current service area," Tom Biebel said. "My goal for this company is to see it con-

tinue to prosper and be a family-owned business. The way we will achieve that goal is to further the business we do with our current customers, leaving no stone un-turned as to how we can further partner with these individuals. With the cost of fuel and personnel continuing to rise, the best thing we can do is to, 'tend to our back 40,' or make sure that we have grown all that we can in this market area before expanding further away from our home."

Hall said that he looks to the past and the previous leaders of the company for inspiration when he finds himself challenged by the industry.

"This business comes down to leadership, management, and people. Tom Biebel, our chairman and owner, while not active in the day-to-day operations, is still here and still communicates with us. Tom (Biebel) led this company with passion, and transformed it from a small but profitable business into what it is today," Hall said. "He provided a path to follow — integrity, honesty, and hard work — and we strive each day to follow in those footsteps. If we continue to do so, then I am confident that the Belson Co., will be around for another 75 years, and more."

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