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Huston Patterson Invests To Enhance Litho Services

by Anna Dutko Rowley

Executives at Huston Patterson, a top-sheet printer of litho labels for corrugated converters, know what it takes to be a successful printer: You need to stay up with current technology to remain



Huston Patterson's new six-color KBA press should be operational in two months, said company President Tom Kowa.

ahead of the competition. In late 2005, the Decatur, Illinois based printer bought a second KBA six-color press to keep up with growing demand. "It was always my vision that we would get another press, but it happened sooner than I ever dreamed," said company President Tom Kowa.

"We want to be the largest privately owned printer in North America. The second press should be up and running in a couple of months," he added.

Huston Patterson's 100,000-square-foot facility houses another KBA press, a seven-color 47 1/4-inch by 63 3/4-inch with inline aqueous coating and UV coating, as well as a VLF scanner 5067 Laser Plate Setter, a six-color 39-inch by 55-inch Roland 800 press, a two-color 44-inch by 64-inch Royal Zenith coat press, a five-color 44-inch

by 64-inch Royal Zenith blanket coater, and a Kongsberg XL20 CAD table and drawing system.

Long History Of Printing

A look at Huston Patterson's history gives an insight into the recent progression of printing. "First, the company started out using a letterpress, then later [moved] to an off-set press. By early 2000, we had moved almost entirely to Computer-To-Plate, nearly eliminating film altogether," said Kowa. "We can now take files and do anything that needs to be done," he added.



Kowa, at right, with daughter Tonya Kowa, Client Services Manager, standing in front of picture of Robert Kowa.

The printing business was founded in 1895 and used to be part of a local newspaper, *Decatur Herald-Review* Printing & Stationery. Two men that worked for the business, Jesse Patterson and Ernie Huston bought the printing division from the newspaper, which is how Huston Patterson got started in 1939. "My father, Robert Kowa bought the company from Patterson in 1961 and decided to keep the name," said Kowa.

Business Growing Steadily

Since his father bought the company, business has seen strong growth. "At that time, Huston Patterson was a letterpress printing company with print revenues of \$200,000," said Kowa, who started working full-time in 1976. As the company grew, Huston Patterson added two-color and four-color presses, and bought some new presses in 1978. In the mid-1980s, the printer added another printing segment for top sheets and labels for packaging and point-of-purchase displays.

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Huston Patterson (Cont'd from Page 1)

During the same decade, Robert Kowa purchased Sigma Graphics, a printing company in Ottawa, Illinois. Today, Sigma Graphics is Huston Patterson's specialty printing division, with four multiple-color presses and aqueous coating and four single-color presses. Tom Kowa became president when Robert passed away in 1991.

In 2001, the company expanded by adding an 18,000 square-foot building to house its first KBA press. The company also installed a Densitometry "S", ACR (automated camera register), and all-new jogging and cutting system in the finishing area. Daughter Tonya came on board in 2004 as a Client Services Manager.

Fast Turnaround Times

Huston Patterson strives to excel with customers by providing fast, consistent service. Job orders usually take a minimum of three to five days. "Our niche is our commit-



Samples of the printer's label work.

ment to the client's needs to get the job done. We correct issues before they become issues," said Kowa.

This year, the printer appointed Jeanice Gillett to the newly created position of Chief Experience Office (CXO) to ensure the printer exceeds customer expectations. Gillett will lead the company's new HPx program, which is designed to provide Huston Patterson's clients with unprecedented, high-quality processes and procedures. The company has about 400 clients in the corrugated industry in North America.

"The HPx program is tailored for our company only and is simply a unique way for us to enhance the client experience. We have always placed a high priority on providing top quality service and stressed the importance of relationships, and now we are taking that to a new level," said Kowa.

The printer's clients can check on the status of their orders on the company's web site, www.huston-patterson.com. "Our customers can view the status of every job, shipment and packing slip, estimate invoicing and upload files to our FTP site," said Kowa.

Taking Care Of Clients, Employees

Recently, Huston Patterson formed a task force comprised of company executives. "I use them like a Board of Directors to bounce ideas off them. We're always trying something new, to try to get better," said Kowa. Earlier this year, the company celebrated +100 years in the printing business with its employees. "After we had our celebration, all of our client service managers brought out napkins, knives and forks, a cake and put them all in a bag. We would bring the party to the clients. People usually bring

doughnuts, bagels, and etc. to clients. Nobody would think to bring a celebration cake. We said, "We're bringing the party to you," said Kowa. "They loved it."

In addition to making clients happy, the company has a mission to make its employees happy as well. "We have something called Smile Squad, to bring a smile to everyone's faces. It's made up of two employees. Around Easter, they brought around easter eggs, jelly beans, etc. One day we had a 50s-60s day at the plant where everyone wore nostalgic clothes. In the afternoon, the Smile Squad came



A printing class in session at Huston Patterson.

by and gave out root beer floats. A happy workforce is a productive workforce," said Kowa.

Huston Patterson recently began offering training classes for its employees. "When given training and education, our employees not only learn something, they try harder. When you do that, you will achieve what is expected of you, both internally and externally. Classes are offered in Press 101, history of printing, front-end plate making, problem solving, banding, etc.," he said. "With all the enhancements and employee participation, Huston Patterson not only believes, they automatically do what is necessary to achieve," said Kowa.

Connecting With Industry

This year, Huston Patterson became a member of AICC. "This gave us the ability to have a closer interaction with people that use our products on a regular basis. A lot of our clients suggested, 'Join AICC', so we did. We went to our first national meeting a year ago. We're very active and involved. I'd like to be on the board and help direct the association. I think it's a great organization," said Kowa.

The printer will have its entire staff at the next AICC national meeting in Chicago this October. "We attend all the regional meetings. If there's a function involving the region, that client service manager is expected to attend the meeting, whether it's in L.A., Atlanta, etc.," he said.

The future growth of the corrugated industry will be steady, predicted Kowa. "I think our portion of it will continue to grow. I don't think that the market is going to be bigger, but I think our piece of the pie of that market will continue to get much bigger," he said.

"Year-to-date, we're 20 percent ahead of where we were a year ago. If you go from under \$10 million [in sales] in 2001 to over \$20 million in 2005, you tell your team that we are going after 20 percent in 2006, that's an additional \$4 million dollars. To increase much more than that, you have to have more equipment," said Kowa. With the probability of more equipment purchases in the future, Huston Patterson seems well on its way to continued success.