

An eye for success

Minneapolis manufacturer meets owner's high expectations

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MINNEAPOLIS — Tim O'Keeffe first saw the G.L. Huyett Co. on a scorching summer day in 1992. Bob Hahn, the third-generation owner of the machine bushings distributor in downtown Minneapolis was there to meet the Kansas City business broker and possible new owner of the firm. "It was 105," O'Keeffe said. "The place was a mess." Boxes everywhere. Rotting wooden floor. Furniture that was more Tom Joad than Thomasville.

But O'Keeffe looked past what was and saw what could be; however, his bankers who toured the site wondered if they were all looking in the same direction. "When they walked away, they said, 'We want you to know we're loaning you money on your character.' "

Even with the reluctant financing, a potential deal-breaker loomed: O'Keeffe was more impressed with Hahn's company than Hahn was with O'Keeffe. "I didn't like Tim the first time I met him," Hahn said. "I thought he was brash, cocky — a smart aleck." Three other suitors were courting Hahn at the time. "But the more I got to know him, the better I respected him and liked him," Hahn said.



Bob Hahn

Today, he said he was "150 percent right" to sell to O'Keeffe. "I absolutely made the right decision," Hahn said. "He'll fly off the handle now and then, but that's not unusual for someone in a high-growth mode. Nobody else would have done what he did."

What he did was transform a four-person, \$1.4 million business into one with about 70 employees and annual sales of more than \$5 million.

In the beginning

Guy L. Huyett founded the company in 1906 to supply implement dealers with bushings, which are glorified washers used to take up slack in machines and equipment. These were ordered in bulk and repackaged, a procedure that continued under the Hahn family. Later, it also sold keystock, crucial bits of metal used to lock pulleys onto shafts. Without these various-sized keys, pulleys would spin freely on the shafts. But even these were not manufactured by Huyett but farmed out to a Minneapolis machinist.

Today, the company's products fill a 50,000-square-foot manufacturing and distribution facility in Minneapolis' industrial park, from where Huyett supplies a host of industrial firms with power transmission parts, grease fittings, retaining rings, bearings, pins, O-rings, flat washers and miscellaneous items such as hose clamps, electrical connectors and set screws. It also uses 15,000 square feet at its downtown site.

Customer satisfaction

Huyett powered its way into the competitive industrial supply market with service as finely honed as its precision parts. According to its product flier, Huyett "will beat any published distributor price on parts with equal quality." It promises to ship orders the day of receipt, and there is no such thing as a minimum order.



Tim O'Keeffe, owner of G.L. Huyett Co., stands in the manufacturing area of the Minneapolis firm. O'Keeffe, 41, has led the transformation of the industrial supply distributor from a four-person staff into one with 70 employees and annual sales of more than \$5 million.

"They are a large company, but at the same time, they have a small, personal aspect," said Doug Hampton, branch manager of Fastenal Industrial and Construction Supplies in Lexington, Neb. Huyett prides itself on being fast on its feet, which is why Ed McIlhon rings them up when he has a crisis. "Sometimes we're in trouble and need an answer in five minutes, not five days. Tim does that," said McIlhon, president of BIP, the acronym of Bossard Industrial Products. "That kid has put together a service-oriented company that knows how to react. Companies like Tim's make my company more successful," he said.

O'Keeffe would cringe at hearing Huyett referred to as "Tim's company." He wants it known G.L. Huyett is much, much more than Tim O'Keeffe: It's the employees working together as a team, a quality Hampton recognizes and appreciates.

In Fastenal's market, the least expensive product is not always the best deal, Hampton said. "I'd pay more for the service we get from (Huyett)," he said. "The knowledge of their staff is very good. No matter who you talk to on the phone, every one of the sales staff knows every piece of product they offer."

They better know, because all incoming calls go directly to someone in sales. There is no receptionist or automated phone system for callers to fight through. This is because O'Keeffe hates voice mail. In one of the company's earlier product brochures, the words "voice mail" have thick, black diagonal lines slashed through them. "Sales people answer the phone," the pamphlet boasts. "Talk to a human now!"

"I am where I am and we are where we are because (O'Keeffe) pushed us," Debra Andrews said.

She has been a member of the Huyett team the longest. She started as a temporary employee 10 years ago to help set up the company's first computer system. Today, she's the administrative manager. "We do expect our employees to work hard," Andrews said. "Sometimes, (O'Keeffe) goes too fast. He pushes people and makes people do better."



Debbie Andrews

He's also fair, she said. "He could have moved (the business) to Kansas City or Salina," she said. In fact, that was a concern of Bob Hahn's when he sold it. "He wanted me to keep the business in Minneapolis," O'Keeffe said. "I wouldn't promise him that." As it turned out, it not only stayed but expanded beyond Hahn's wildest expectations. "It's an amazing state-of-the-art plant," Hahn said. "It's equal to any plant in Chicago, New York or anyplace across the country."

"He's an entrepreneur of the first class," Hahn said of O'Keeffe. "I've never been around a guy more intelligent who knows more about business." Hahn said he stayed on for a few years after the sale. "I worked with him for four years. I could see where my usefulness was not needed," he said.

Welcome to Huyett

First-time visitors to the Huyett plant may think they've entered the wrong door.

They find themselves alone in a small foyer. Against one wall is a display of relics from the old days: a desk that looks more like a shipping crate than a work station, a beat-up wooden door that easily could have come off a chicken house, antiquated office equipment and type-written invoices from Huyett's modest beginnings.

On the other side of the room is a single phone on a table. It summons someone in the mailroom, who personally greets visitors and puts them in contact with whomever they have come to see. Once inside, the observer notices that this must be casual-dress day. Jeans, T-shirts, even shorts are the predominant fashion statements. But at G.L. Huyett, every day is casual day.

One of its leading practitioners is the 41-year-old O'Keeffe, who bears a passing resemblance to actor Jim Carrey and possesses some of the comic's manic intensity, especially when talking about business in general and G.L. Huyett in particular. He polished his business style first at Procter and Gamble, then as a business broker in Kansas City, along the way acquiring "nuggets of ideas" from other companies.

His degree in economics and minors in computer science, business and philosophy from the University of Nebraska didn't hurt, either. Neither did his drive and brains: a Phi Beta Kappa, he finished his degree in three years with a 4.0 grade-point average.



Production assistant James Belden, Concordia, uses a grinder to remove burrs from rivets Wednesday at G.L. Huyett Co.



Justin Lundberg, Bennington, gathers clevis pins for a customer's parts order Wednesday at G.L. Huyett Co. in Minneapolis.

O'Keeffe returns to his roots

During his early years at Huyett's helm, O'Keeffe ran the business from Kansas City. Two years ago, he moved back to his hometown of Hastings, Neb., from where he commutes, spending three days a week in Minneapolis. He embraces capitalism, but admits there is a "beauty and beast" in the cherished model. "The beauty is, yes, we've grown. The beast side is we've outgrown people. We've left a few people in our wake."

He said the company has high expectations of its employees. They in turn are rewarded with hourly wages that range from \$8 to \$14. They also have benefits that include health insurance, a retirement plan, vacation and an activity center

on Main Street, where O'Keeffe bunks when he's in town.

Because much of what Huyett does has become so specialized, O'Keeffe said, finding skilled labor is difficult. "It's a huge, significant problem," he said. So much so that the company launched a nationwide recruiting campaign to fill gaps, particularly in machining.

The search for 'violinists'

But not any skilled machinist will do, he said. He wants only the virtuosos, the violinists among the violin players. The response was overwhelming. The company received enough resumé's from all over the country to fill several string sections.

"We have to sort through them to find the violinists," he said. The company will use the players it has and ones it hopes to hire to compete against foreign jobs. He said American companies can win with technology and smarts and by out-thinking the competition. "Manufacturing in this country is at risk," O'Keeffe said. "Management has to be creative so we can compete against low-cost labor."

How to do that? Give 'em what they want. Smile at them. Talk to them. Solve their problems, he said. "Just listen to the customer," he said. "Treat people the way they want to be treated."



Salinan Darrin Verhoeff, an apprentice machinist for G.L. Huyett Co., checks a newly made key for accuracy Wednesday at the industrial supply distributor's plant in Minneapolis.