

PROFILE

Fifth-generation leader guides firm's track

President Christopher Jacobs owns Star Headlight & Lantern

By ANDREA DECKERT

The framed pictures of the various leaders of Star Headlight & Lantern Co. Inc. are displayed prominently on a wall of the building's lobby.

While it is not unusual for local businesses to honor their leaders in such a way, what sets Star Headlight apart is that the firm is more than a century old and all the leaders are from one family.

The business leaders date back to George Jacobs, who bought the firm, formerly Star Headlight Co., from its five founders shortly after it opened in 1889. Albert, Berwin and David Jacobs followed George.

Rounding out the list is Christopher Jacobs, who was named Star Headlight's president last year. Jacobs, the 41-year-old great-great-grandson of George Jacobs, also became the sole owner, purchasing Star Headlight from his father and predecessor, David Jacobs.

Star Headlight makes safety and warning systems and lights for police and fire departments, utilities and railroads. It also makes headlights for trains, which was the main work when the firm was created. The firm also sells some lights under a private label in the industrial market. Its private label business started some 20 years ago.

Last year, Star Headlight reached a milestone, celebrating its 120th year in business. It has roughly 200 workers.

Jacobs declined to disclose annual sales for the privately held firm, but he said revenue in 2009 was roughly 15 percent below 2008 sales, largely because of the recession. This year is starting out better, and he expects to meet or exceed the 2008 revenue number.

The company started in downtown Rochester, and Christopher Jacobs' grandparents moved the firm to Honeoye Falls in 1952. In 1998, the company moved to its current site in Avon because of a need for more space.

Jacobs says that since the move there have been three additions, and the building now totals 100,000 square feet. The firm is among Livingston County's largest private-sector employers but generally has kept a low profile.

The youngest Jacobs leader says heading the family business was his calling.

"I love coming to work because I truly enjoy what I'm doing," he says.

He always wanted to be part of the family business and grew up doing odd jobs at the company during the summer, he says. He also accompanied his father on sales calls. A childhood interest in railroads that contin-



Photo by Kimberly McKinzie

ued as he got older also attracted Jacobs to the business.

Early training

After graduating from Old Dominion University in Virginia in 1993 with a bachelor's degree in business administration and marketing, Jacobs returned to Star Headlight full time. His jobs before taking over the company ranged from sales to running the railroad division.

Doug Richardson, Star Headlight's vice president of sales, has seen Jacobs grow with the company. A 21-year employee, Richardson first worked with Jacobs in the early 1990s when Jacobs was fresh out of college.

Jacobs' early experience on the sales side of Star Headlight has helped him excel as its leader, Richardson says, because Jacobs has a good feel for Star Headlight's customers and what products they want.

"He has great character and is a good, honest person who really knows the business," Richardson says.

Friendly and approachable, Jacobs calls out to employees during a tour of the building, saying hello and asking how the day is going. They ask about his recent family vacation and joke about getting back to business.

Jacobs' commitment to his employees was reinforced by his father, who told him that keeping employees happy was one of the keys of the company's success.

"My job is to keep this business going by growing the company and keeping the employees happy," Jacobs says.

Keeping a family tradition alive at Star Headlight is important, and he adds that turnover among employees is not common. Last year, three employees were honored for being with the company at least 20 years.

Jacobs says his father is a role model,

noting that Star Headlight had only eight employees when his dad took the helm. The two speak almost daily, even when David Jacobs is spending the winter in Florida.

Jacobs says one day he may be talking to his own children about the business.

"It is always a hope in a family generational company to be able to pass it on to the next generation, especially to a sixth generation," Jacobs says. "I hope at least one of them shows interest in running the company someday, but who knows what the future holds?"

Today, the biggest market for Star Headlight is in the amber warning light systems normally seen on machinery, including telephone trucks and utility vehicles. That is followed by the police and fire emergency markets, and then by railroads.

Star Headlight sells its products across the United States and has some customers in Canada and Mexico. While the firm generally sells to distributors that then sell to end users, local entities that have Star Headlight equipment include the Rochester and Avon police departments and the Livingston County Sheriff's Department.

Star Headlight's vertically integrated system has kept costs in check and helped the company to weather the recession. The firm's products are made in-house, from the molded parts to the circuit boards. Star Headlight does electronic and finished product assembly, along with plastic injection molding, metal fabrication, product engineering, warehousing, shipping, customer service, sales and technical support.

His job

On the job, Jacobs typically travels once a month, attending trade shows and meeting with the company's key customers. When he is at the office, Jacobs starts his days with management meetings.

Then he likes to go out and walk through the building, traveling through the management offices—where the hallway is decorated with Star Headlight and star memorabilia and star-shaped lights hang from the ceiling—and onto the production floor.

"You really get a feel for how things are going by talking to people on the line," Jacobs says.

His office is full of family pictures and car-related memorabilia, some from his days of car racing, a hobby he shared with his father.

There also are company items, including one of the first catalogs the company released, filled with headlights for locomotives and lanterns that railroad workers

would carry through the trains.

Jacobs does not like to micromanage. He prefers to offer suggestions and let people run with them.

Being able to give people jobs is what Jacobs likes best about his own, he says. In contrast, having to let people go is the toughest part. The firm was not immune to the recent global recession and shrank its work force by some 30 people.

The company will continue to invest in research and development, Jacobs says, offering new products to existing customers and expanding markets. It normally introduces a couple of new products annually, but this year Star Headlight will have more product launches, Jacobs says.

A focus will be on products that use light-emitting diode technology, an area that has grown fast over the past two to three years. Jacobs also expects a bigger market for police and amber lights because of increased federal funding.

Vincent Leo, a partner at Insero & Co. CPAs P.C., has known Jacobs for roughly a decade. The two met because of a shared interest in high-performance driving.

Although both men have backed away from the racing as their families have grown, Jacobs and Leo remain friends and have gone on family vacations together.

Leo describes Jacobs as a caring person who takes all sides into account when addressing an issue.

"It's not all about the business with Chris," Leo says. "He really cares about his employees."

There is a family atmosphere at Star Headlight, he adds.

"Chris is a warm person who cares about the people who work there," Leo says. "That is evident when you look at the business and the loyalty of the people there."

When not working, Jacobs spends most of his free time with his family. He and his wife, Melissa, live in Honeoye Falls with their three children, Bradford, 9, Abigail, 7, and Olivia, 3.

A fan of the outdoors, he enjoys biking, golfing, waterskiing and boating. A favorite spot for summer activities is his dad's home on Canandaigua Lake. The family also travels frequently to a vacation condo in Naples, Fla.

At work, Jacobs says Star will continue to grow, while focusing on the things that have kept the firm running for more than 120 years.

"We build a great product and provide good customer service," Jacobs says. "We'll run with that."

adeckert@rbj.net / 585-546-830

Christopher Jacobs

Position: President, Star Headlight & Lantern Co. Inc.

Age: 41

Education: B.S. in business administration/marketing from Old Dominion University, Virginia, 1993

Family: Wife, Melissa; son, Bradford, 9; and daughters Abigail, 7, and Olivia, 3

Residence: Honeoye Falls

Activities: Family, biking, golfing, waterskiing, boating

Quote: "My job is to keep this business going by growing the company and keeping the employees happy."