

B.F. PLASTICS

Celebrating 50 Years of Putting Customers First

By Connie Mulqueen

If you serve them, they will come. At least that's what B.F. Plastics CEO Jim Fichter believes, and the philosophy appears to be working.

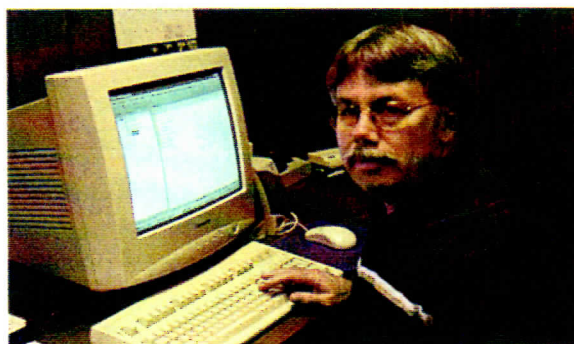
Customers have been streaming in since 1953, when Jim's late father, Bob, first founded the distributor of materials and supplies for engravers and sign makers. B.F. Plastics also operated an engraving business during its first 30 years.

The renowned company, with a reputation for having a huge inventory and fast service, is celebrating its 50th anniversary this year. And Jim gives the credit for the longevity to his father's legacy of always doing right by the customer, even at the expense of the business.

"As a child growing up, I watched my father go way above the call of duty," recalls Jim, who bought the business from his father in 1973. "He put so much care and effort into each order, even for the orders that didn't make a lot of money. And that's how we do business today. Our motto is that if you take care of the customer, everything else will fall into place."



B.F. Plastics has been located in North Lawrence, Ohio, for 27 years.



CEO Jim Fichter has owned the company since 1973.

That motto has definitely come true for the North Lawrence, Ohio-based company, which for the past 27 years has been based in its present rural location with an open view of a golf course. While the company started as a one-man, home-based shop, today it is run by ten employees, all key players in processing the hundreds of daily purchase orders from the company's 2,000 customers.

The business has grown tremendously since it began advertising in **The Engravers Journal** in 1977 and since Jim attended the company's first trade show in 1982. One of the major turning points came in 1983

About the author:



Connie Mulqueen is a freelance writer based out of Atlanta, Georgia.

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when the company became a Rowmark distributor and Jim dropped the engraving business. As B.F. Plastics grew in the 80s, the company had to expand the facility two times and added another building in 1995. A third addition was completed in 2002.

Off To A Fast Start

After serving in the U.S. Navy during World War II, Bob started the business part-time in Jim's childhood home in the small town of Massillon, Ohio, where Jim still lives today with his wife, Ann, and their three children. Bob supported his family with a well-paying engineering position with a steel company, which he maintained even when his plastics business became a full-time job.

While in the Navy, Bob developed a fascination with the plastics used in Navy equipment. After the war ended, he took classes to learn how to develop his own plastic products. By 1953, he obtained a vendor's license

and went into the business part-time as one of the first engravers, also making and selling plastic products such as cigarette lighters, jewelry boxes, decorative and gift items and mailbox signs.

Because Bob always bought his supplies in bulk to save money, he earned a reputation for having the largest inventory of plastics supplies around, even before he started selling wholesale. B.F. Plastics' first engraving supply customer, Toledo Nameplate Engraving, remains a faithful customer to this day, even though it has changed owners since the 50s.

"They found out about us because they needed phenolic engraving material in a hurry," Jim says. "They went to their regular supplier, Formica, who did not have the material in stock. Formica told them to visit my dad if they were in too much of a hurry to wait for an incoming shipment. That was how the supply side of the business actually got started."

By the time Jim was 20, B.F. Plastics had blossomed into a thriving

full-time job for his father, partly as a result of a boom in the sign-engraving industry. Bob was getting older and beginning to feel worn out working two full-time jobs. Wanting to hold onto his pension from the steel company, he asked Jim to take over the plastics business and buy it from him by making installment payments. Jim agreed, and Bob ended up working for his son after he retired and until his death in 2001.

When Jim took over, the signage business was quickly replacing the gift items while the wholesale supply side of the business was growing much faster than the engraving side. Ten years after taking over the company, Jim decided to let go of the engraving business so he could concentrate on the rapidly growing supply side.

"It was a hard decision," Jim says. "I knew I was taking a serious risk. The main reason I decided to get out of engraving, really, was because of the con-

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flict-of-interest with my supply customers. Many of those customers were competing indirectly against my engraving business. When it came to bidding for work, I had an unfair advantage, being a supplier."

Meanwhile, more people were getting into the engraving business because of the new computer engraving technology, he adds. The demand for supplies was exploding, and not many

people were in the supply end of the business. In the end, it was an easy choice to make, he says.

Jim then had to make a second significant decision that would have a long-term effect on his business. Was he going to sell his engraving business or give his engraving customers to his wholesale customers? It was an easy choice for Jim, whose father's customer service philosophy taught him the value of making sacrifices for the short-term to get positive long-term results.

"I saw the long-term potential in helping my customers out," he says. "My main concern, though, was finding the right companies for each of my engraving customers. I made sure I referred them to the kind of companies that would take good care of them. Many of my former engraving customers are still with the engraving companies I referred them to years ago, and I have a lot of loyal customers who have stayed with me since that time."

"We definitely struggled the first year without the engraving business. But we got through it and by the second year, the business started taking off. Today, we have long-term customers who are very loyal to our company."

"You Name It, We Have It!"

B.F. Plastics' products run the gamut.

"Whatever anybody needs, we usually have it in stock," Jim says. "All of our plastics come in a full line of colors and thicknesses, which is one of the things we pride ourselves on, because a typical distributor usually only carries a basic line of colors and one thickness."

Among the company's major products are complete lines for both computer rotary and laser engravable plastic signs, a wide variety of other engravable materials and holders and frames, mostly from Rowmark and JRS.

Other important categories include all major badge findings, from the more traditional clips and pin backs to magnetic attachments, and sign mounting materials, mostly for interior signs.

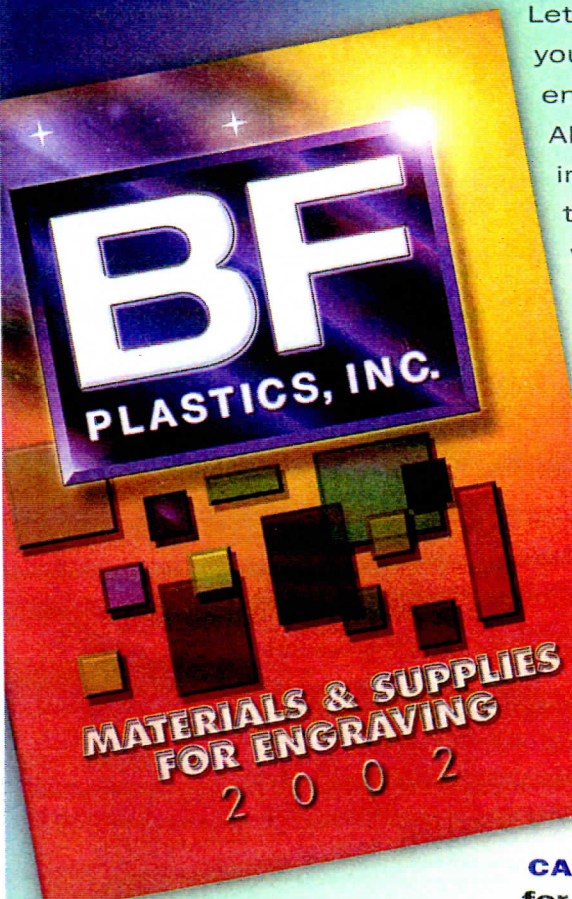
More recently, Jim has added sublimation materials to his stock for full-color sign-making products.

"We have always kept current with the latest technologies," Jim says. "For instance, when the computer engraver first came out in the 70s, we immediately began stocking up and supplying support materials for that. We did the same thing in the 90s with the laser engraver."

A typical day at B.F. Plastics is pretty hectic. The majority of the purchase orders are split fairly evenly between the phone and fax machine, with some emails and a few walk-ins. "Our biggest challenge is processing the large volume of orders correctly

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while keeping our inventory well stocked so people don't have to wait," Jim says.

According to regular customer Rod Phillips, the company has no problems keeping up with their inventory. As the owner of Raleigh, N.C.-based Accusign Inc., Rod has been buying materials from B.F. Plastics for 17 years. "I am not exaggerating," he says, "when I tell you that Jim has got the greatest inventory of anyone I have ever dealt with. He has what I need 99 percent of the time or better. It is very rare that B.F. ever back orders anything."

Building The Business

Jim credits several factors for helping make B.F. Plastics a major player in the engraving supply business. One is the ads he has placed over the years in **The Engravers Journal**. And, of course, the other is the company's growing list of satisfied customers.

"Customers just came to us from the beginning," he says. "It was all word of mouth. We became well known because people were saying great things about us."

Over the years, Jim has shown his products at a few trade shows. But he gave up on the trade show route when he realized how expensive they were and that he did not need the shows to bring in customers. Around that time, he discovered that doing smaller open houses with a partner was far more effective in getting new customers for his business.

He has occasionally partnered with Rowmark and Midwest Laser, a

distributor for Universal Laser, to provide open houses at B.F. Plastics or other locations in Ohio, Michigan and Indiana, using hotel conference rooms. They do not make presentations but simply display their products and answer questions. They send invitations to companies from mailing lists and to their own customers.

"The shows are very casual and informal," he says. "People just stop by to view our products or to learn more about our new products. It gives us a chance to not only meet potential new customers but to solidify relationships with existing customers by spending time with them face-to-face."

The Art Of Customer Service

Rod says he met Jim and his wife, Ann, at a trade show and immediately started buying from them. "I learned pretty quickly that Jim was a good guy to deal with, and I have been buying almost exclusively from him ever since," Rod says. "From the beginning, I always checked the prices but after a while, I didn't bother because I discovered that I always got the best price at B.F. Plastics. I have never had to confirm that again."

But the good prices and well-stocked inventory are not the only reasons Rod became a loyal customer. The customer service is unbeatable, he claims. "It is the best I have ever dealt with," he declares. "If I run into any kind of problem, if I need something special extra fast or I need to talk about a job that I'm doing, there is almost always someone available

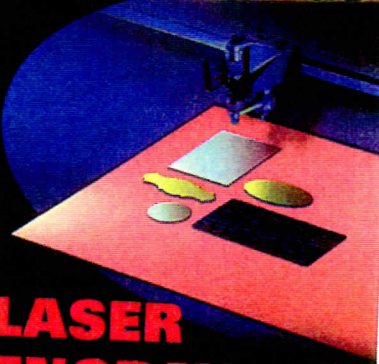


The B.F. Plastics team: In the back row, from the left, are Andy, Ben, Jim and Ron Fichter, and Dave Popovich. The front row (from the left) includes customer service representatives Cindi Peterson, Karla Diglaw, Ann Fichter, Kelly Adams and Jan Miller.

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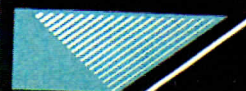
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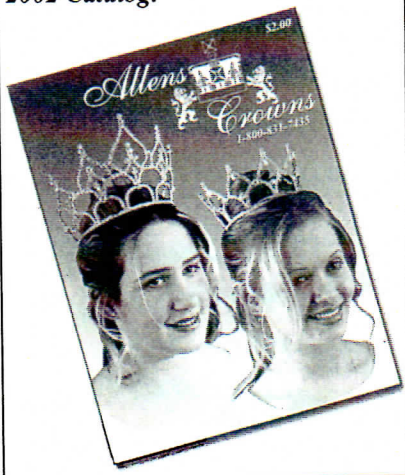
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to help me. If not, someone calls me back quickly. Any time I have a problem, I get it resolved through them."

That sentiment is exactly what the company seeks to convey to its customers, Jim says. Customer service representative Jan Miller says the goal is to establish friendships by getting to know the callers as people rather than an anonymous voice on the other end of the phone.

"Our main goal is to satisfy each customer the best we can," she says. "Many times we go above and be-



Andy Fichter helps to keep the warehouse fully stocked with thousands of products.

yond. For example, on those rare occasions when we might be out of something, instead of saying sorry and hanging up, we will take the time to find a company with the item in stock. We contact the company and ask them to ship the item to our customer. Our goal is to ensure that our customers do not have to wait for something they need."

Jim echoes: "We prioritize being nice over being knowledgeable. By that, I mean it's not much good sharing information with a customer in a way that is not going to help them. Rather than provide 'stock' information, which might not pertain to their situation, we are honest and admit when we don't have more relevant information. Then we insist on finding that information and calling them back later."

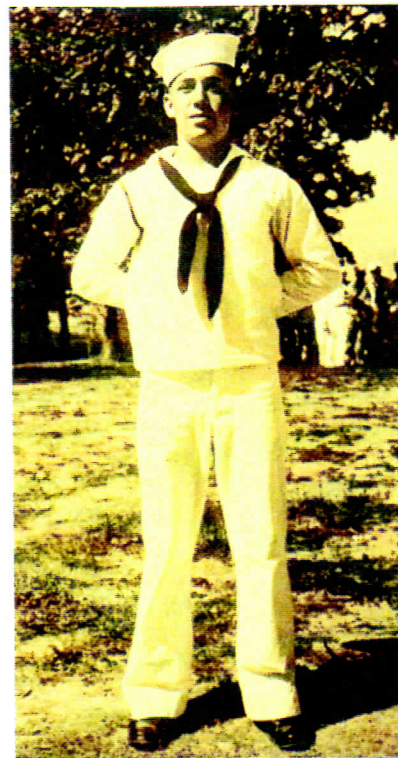
Jim says he is very lucky to have a high quality team of service reps in place. "My team of five salespeople are all wonderful. They hear the same questions over and over and always treat each customer as if it's the first time they've heard the questions."

Jim insists he has no special training method, but he does look for people with a positive, friendly personality. "It's hard work to keep smiling and helping people with the same kinds of problems," he says. "You cannot fake that."

Jan says part of the reason the team does so well is because of the wonderful atmosphere at B.F. Plastics. "This is the best place I've ever worked," she says. "And the main reason is the boss, and he didn't tell me to say that! He's the greatest guy to work for. He's a hands-on boss. He's part of the team. He's right there with us. If we ever have questions or problems, he's right there. He doesn't sit behind a desk giving orders."

The fact that Jim understands that everybody has a family also makes it special, she adds. "Working in this kind of environment makes people feel valued. I believe that when people are treated well on the job, it trickles down to the customers. It certainly does here!"

Jim insists he could not manage the company this successfully without all of his nine employees. He says each of them is a key player in the company's success, playing crucial



When Bob Fichter started the company, he would always go above and beyond for a customer.

roles in maintaining stock, shipping the daily flood of orders on time and delivering the kind of first-class service that keeps people coming back.

Jim's wife, Ann, a customer service representative, has been with him for 27 years and helped him through the early struggles of building the business. His brother, Ron, has been with the company for 16 years and handles the fabricating. Two of his three sons, Andy, 23, and Ben, 18, work in the warehouse with Dave Popovich. And his "remarkable" customer service team includes Ann, Jan, Cindi Peterson, Kelly Adams and Karla Diglaw.

Jim plans to continue expanding his business, doing all the same things, including staying on top of new trends in the industry.

"We will continue to care for our customers by being extra concerned that they are treated properly," he says. "We will continue to go with our guiding philosophy of always letting the long-term benefits outweigh the short-term benefits when making decisions. Just as my father taught me, when all is said and done, if you take care of the customer, everything else will fall into place." **EJ**