

# Marking Industry

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MAGAZINE

GOLD MANUFACTURER OF THE YEAR



*Making Impressions  
Around the World!*

# GOLD MANUFACTURER OF THE YEAR

## Stamp-Connection, Gresham, Oregon

by David Hachmeister

For the second year in a row, Stamp-Connection has captured *Marking Industry Magazine's* Gold Manufacturer of the Year award. John Clark, president of Stamp-Connection, asked office manager Serene Brown and sales manager Derek Persons to talk with our publisher about their experiences with the company. Congratulations to everyone at Stamp-Connection!



John Clark, president of Stamp-Connection, with Serene Brown, office manager, and Derek Persons, sales manager.

**David Hachmeister:** It's unusual that someone would win two years in a row, especially in this kind of economy. You guys did a wonderful job. There's a little bit of a story behind why I'm interviewing you and not John. Do either of you want to share that?

**Derek Persons:** Well, John did the interview last year, so as part owners of Stamp-Connection he wanted us to get involved and to be able to give a little different perspective on the company—not to mention, his attention is currently focused on other parts of the business. He is overseeing our financials, vendor relations, Web and product development, among other things. In Fort Worth we test-drove United Marking's new Multi-Surface stamp; as soon as we were back in Oregon, John started to mold the distribution. It was on our website within a week.

**DH:** Definitely a busy man. May I ask how you got started with the company, Derek?

**DP:** I've known John since he was 14 years old. In 2002 I was laid off from a purchasing position at another company. At that time John and I got together at my house, just talking and socializing, and he was telling me about his stamp company, how he was going to make it grow, and how he needed help. It was going to be this huge thing that

he would like me to be involved with.

After some consideration and looking at John's basic plan for the company, I decided to get on board. I ended up starting in March 2003. That was my first introduction to the stamping world, so I'm still, by stamping industry standards, a newbie. I'm only a little over six years into doing it, but I've learned a lot in those six years and dealt with a lot of different companies and people. I definitely made the right move, joining the Stamp-Connection team.

**DH:** Your background was in purchasing, you said—what are you doing now with Stamp-Connection?

**DP:** I'm the sales manager, and I also do the purchasing—I've got skills there. I make sure the daily sales operations run smoothly, and that everyone is doing it the way that John would have done it, then the way I would have done it, and it just gets passed down the system to actually selling the product, to taking care of the customer, to doing all the things that make us successful daily.

**DH:** And Serene, what about you?

**Serene Brown:** I myself have nearly 20 years in the stamping industry. John and I met about 15 years ago on the job at Rose City Stamp and have been friends ever since. John left to pursue a job at another stamp shop as head of operations, and I continued on with Rose City Stamp. About four years ago I had a unique opportunity to leave my position there

and come to work for John in the new company he started a few years earlier. The incentive was great—to become part owner and vested in the company within five years. As the office manager, I oversee front-end operations to the highest level. Derek and I have the highest accountability; we are held to a much higher standard than others. We do our best and we take care of the company. Our main concern is to make sure the systems are in place and running smoothly.

**DH:** You mentioned to me that there are three basic things that any company should have. What are those three things?

**SB:** An operations manual, an employee manual or handbook, and a business/marketing plan.

**DH:** Most people would have a clue about what a business plan would be and might have an idea about an employee manual, but they're probably less likely to have an operations manual. What does that mean?

**DP:** An operations manual is detailed clarification of the way you do business daily. The manual dictates every single position within the company—if for some reason a person is not here, anyone else in the company can look at that manual to perform their duties. Of course everyone is cross-trained ahead of time, but the manual is an essential component to creating a turnkey operation.

**SB:** We implement systems, dictate policy and reward employees for abiding by them. When you have performed your duties by the guidelines given, you are then allowed to suggest potential alterations to the systems that yield significant improvement. Our employees are our top-ranking concern. When you work for us you are expected to perform at a higher level, and you are compensated for it. Rewards such as 100-percent paid health-care, life insurance, insane 401K contri-



"Attention to detail is what makes OUR company stand apart!"



All the stamp ladies (left to right): Theresa, Serene, Felicia and Olga.



CONTINUED ON THE NEXT PAGE The Stamp-Connection storefront on the Fourth of July.

# GOLD MANUFACTURER OF THE YEAR

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Jon Morse working his magic on artwork in the graphics department.



Kae Saechao giving the Xstamper laser a little TLC.



Serene Brown and Theresa Larson cozy up for the camera.

butions (if you contribute 5 percent of your earnings you receive an additional 7 percent from S-C) and even free in-home water coolers and water. In 2009, *Oregon Business Magazine* ranked us seventeenth in the “Top 100 Companies to Work for in Oregon.”

**DP:** Example system: how to make french fries at McDonald’s. There is a system. A pre-measured amount goes in for exactly three minutes, etc. It is the same with every position in our company.

**SB:** It’s the same french fry every time; you will get the same stamp every time.

**DP:** No matter who is doing the job.

**DH:** That’s so crucial in any business—to have consistency of product. I also understand that you folks are involved in getting some outside help and outside education. How does that work?

**SB:** The Small Business Development Centers—most people have one near them—offer a range of courses. They offer highly valued, low dollar assistance. John, Derek and I have all taken the two-year small business management course at our local SBDC, and the range of value is just phenomenal. Consider our financial and marketing tracking as a prime example. We can analyze and forecast anything in our business, enabling us to make better decisions in the future.

**DH:** That is why you do that sort of thing—to get better breadth in your business, I guess you would say. You’re able to better understand what it is you are really doing.

**SB:** To the highest degree. It provides guidance—it is not a lot of class time and homework, instead it is somebody to put you on a different path, to put the ideas in your head so you can implement them. You determine which ideas are best and how to use them to your advantage.

**DP:** It is important that more than one person in the company has this information. All the upper management have taken the course. Therefore, when we get together to brainstorm we are all on the same page, and we have all bought into the same ideas and know how they work.

**SB:** Our IT person goes to class with Derek. We pay for Derek to go to class, but Kelly goes with him for free for the entire course for two years.

**DH:** One of the things that some employers are afraid to do is educate their employees, because they’re afraid they’ll disappear somewhere else. I think that’s very shortsighted.

**SB:** With that perspective you are actually choosing to keep

your business behind the times, and that can happen faster than you think.

**DH:** It keeps pushing your company further and further back with less awareness of present technology. Yes, you could lose some people, but instead you are current, because you are keeping your upper management up to date. Plus, you get the best out of employees in the time they are with you.

**SB:** A majority of these ideas are timeless. There is always something you can refer back to and potentially implement. I have two binders that are literally three inches thick with concepts.

**DH:** We talked a little bit about the marketing end of it—that is the first part of everybody’s budget that they cut in tough times. You guys, obviously, have a different way of looking at it.

**SB:** The thank-you card is the number one marketing tool of all time. It applies to anything and everything.

**DH:** It does not have to involve a lot of money, it just has to involve something that people will notice and pay attention to. They think it is cool and we end up standing out. It makes them want to work with us and learn more about what we do.

**SB:** We personalize it and touch down on things we spoke about—something very personal to the person we are sending it to. It is usually handwritten, and during the downtime the easiest thing you can do is make something personal and show someone you care. Something that arrives in the mail—not an e-mail, not a phone call, but a tangible object that arrives with a personal feel.

**DP:** Not only that, but in these times, as you said, people are doing less marketing. So really, the more marketing you do at this point, the more it is going to stand out to the customers who receive the items, because they are probably not getting a whole lot. Now is really the time to jump in and market.

**SB:** A stamp is an affordable, easily obtained object. It is something you can take pleasure in for a small price. A stamp really makes people happy, and the reason it makes people happy is because it makes their life easier. It provides a solution. That is what we do—we do not sell stamps, we sell solutions, and solutions make people happy, therefore stamps make people happy.

**DP:** Not only happy, but more productive. We get it all the time, “I’m writing this every day. What can I get that is going to make it easier to do my job?” It saves their company money in the long run because their employees are not putting out all this time-consuming writing. A stamp makes people more productive, saves them time and makes them happy. It really does. A



Matt Fleming producing polymer molds with ease.



Chad Clark manufacturing iStamps at the speed of light.



Chris Emeric and Ryan Beaudoin working in the engraving department.

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Derek Persons, Tony Pezze, Serene Brown and John Clark enjoy breakfast in Fort Worth.



Kae Saechao doing some quality control in the Xstamper sector.



Stamp-Connection, Grays Harbor Stamp Works and Tony Pezze from United Marking at the Fort Worth Stockyards for the IMIA trade show.

little \$12 stamp can just make someone's day.

**SB:** And then they want to buy more.

**DH:** Right, because they are happy about it...

**DP:** ...and that gets them thinking about what else they could use stamps for. We have a few niche markets; our largest is probably WheresGeorge.com. Basically, it is a free bill-tracking site. It only works if people see the website URL on the bill and enter it into the system. A good majority of users prefer to stamp the bills they enter into the website with the URL. We were able to find a solution from United Marking to create a special band stamp that contains the 10 most popular phrases that people entering bills on WheresGeorge.com use—one of the many advantages we have had from our relationship with United Marking.

**DH:** Your customers may be your best source for new business ideas. Speaking of that type of thing, which gets me into the "growth" area, last year your growth came from existing customers, new products and new customers. What was the thing that really moved it for you?

**SB:** Growth is down considerably, but still optimistic in these times. It is still a huge accomplishment to say our growth was 14 percent. We have forecasted a realistic percentage for this year's growth. Of course, we won't yet discuss what realistic may be. We certainly do not expect to see the same 49 percent growth we saw in 2007. That was like winning the lottery.

**DP:** We are working toward that, we just have to use our knowledge to be creative in reaching new and existing customers with qualified ideas and products.

**SB:** We anticipate selling more to our existing clients because people are doing more with less—their cars, their shoes, their stamps. The nation is refurbishing everything, so the sales of inks and pads are higher than ever. Our sticker is on every retail stamp we manufacture; the customer picks up the stamp that needs ink and calls Stamp-Connection, we take their order and send the ink or pad out the same day. You would be surprised what a phone call about a refill pad can lead to. A majority of the time the customer places an order for additional products they did not intend to buy—like another stamp. They end up asking questions since they have us on the phone and add to that order right then and there.

**DP:** If you take care of customers and make them feel good from the moment you talk to them, everything else works itself out in the end. The customers are the ones who need to be happy, need to feel like they are talking to a friend. We are not robots. We are friendly and joke around with our customers while still remaining professional. It really helps our company a

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lot. People feel comfortable calling us, and also being able to get hold of us. If we are open, that phone gets answered. A lot of companies do not even advertise that they have a phone number.

**DH:** In this day and age, getting a human being on the phone after two or three rings is just like a miracle. If you've ever had to deal with an airline or a hotel reservation or anything else, it's just unbelievable. People really appreciate that.

**DP:** They really do.

**SB:** In the hierarchy of all things, it would seem to be a given that customers are first. Technically, our employees come first; our preferred vendors come second and our customers come third. If we don't take care of our employees and we don't take care of our vendors, we are not able to service our customers.

**DP:** Key suppliers are the most important element in our business next to our employees. Our relationship with United Marking eliminates the headache of dealing with multiple (or other) suppliers. We employ purchasing and inventory control systems through QuickBooks Enterprise Solutions. Along with the benefits of these systems there are a few challenges. UM meets, exceeds and tries to *anticipate* our needs. In turn we do not demand the lowest price we could get from them. Instead we negotiate a fair price for both companies and pass on any volume discounts that the rest of the industry demands. It is a relationship built on trust and an earnest desire for both companies to succeed.

**DH:** So you folks are successful in focusing on quality and service. As they say, you can get two out of the three, and obviously you're not the cheapest stamp on the block, yet you've managed to grow, which would dumbfound some people. There really is a value in adding value for your customer.

**DP:** Customers notice and appreciate it, too, more than other people think. If they find someone they are happy with, they pass it along, and then that person is happy and passes it and so on.

**SB:** We provide ease of use, quality of product, speed of service, always with the highest level of support and with a 100-percent guarantee.

**DP:** We will jump through hoops. A lot of companies are surprised. If someone has a problem we will send them another stamp, no charge; we will even pay the shipping. We also make it easy to do business with us. If we send them a proof, we do not need them to sign off on it. We say if they like the proof to give us a call, send us an e-mail, whatever the case may be, and we

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## SERENE BROWN ON THE 2009 IMIA TRADE SHOW

This was the first trade show ever for Derek and me. Honestly, it was very much what we thought it would be... but then there was so much more. We knew the agenda ahead of time, but experiencing it firsthand was the cherry on top. The camaraderie was second to none; there is just no substitution for enjoying spending time with your peers.

We spent some real quality time with many people. You know, it is just amazing how much we can talk about the industry and never lose enthusiasm. A lot of events happened over a short time; to be honest, it was exhausting, but way too exhilarating to worry about being tired. John recently coined the phrase "conventioning": you are not working, but you are not vacationing. It is definitely an experience that mixes business with pleasure.

After "conventioning" Thursday and Friday and no less than amazing dinner functions from Xstamper and United Marking, we managed to do some touring on Saturday with Grays Harbor Stamp Works and Tony Pezze from UM. On top of three key employees attending a specialized event for our industry, which we would not have been able to do without our competent and able staff, we were also able to experience a great city in our United States.

John has high hopes that vendors will examine regional events. These events would be geared toward employees and families in stamp shops, not just upper management. Kind of like a regional company picnic... a bouncy house and sugar for the kids, dunk tanks and beer for the adults.

## SERENE BROWN ON SHACHIHATA & XSTAMPER

It is an honor for us to be an Xstamper fulfillment partner. The Shachihata brand is highly regarded on a global level, and it is a great honor to have this opportunity. The degree of excellence expected in this department goes beyond our normal high standards. Our mechanical maintenance systems alone would be the equivalent of changing the oil in your car *every day*. We are not representing S-C when we do fulfillment, we are representing Xstamper. If we were to make a mistake on their reputation it would be disgraceful. We were also awarded the 2008 Innovation Award from Shachihata.

will take care of the rest and ship it out. If for some reason, which happens, they get it on the other end and say, "Oh, I made a mistake," we say, "Let us fix it for you." Either they send them back and we repair them and ship them back at no charge, or in some cases we ship them the order again with the corrections they needed ahead of time. The customers we have know that. They do look over the quote, they do look over the product, but they also know that if their boss comes to them later and says, "You were supposed to put the suite number on this stamp," we just take care of that problem for them. They never have to worry about being stuck with a stamp they can't use.

**DH:** Well, it's obviously served your company very well. Congratulations to your entire company. You're having another wonderful year. This is obviously the same week I was out here last year, because you have pictures in your windows again. What is all this about?

**SB:** It's the community "My Mom's a Winner" contest. First-through third-grade kids at the local schools draw a picture of their mom, and then the local businesses put the pictures up in their windows. The idea is that the kids all bring their moms down to the Gresham downtown area to show them their picture. With about 500 pictures in this area, a lot of those children bring their parents to this core area. It does more than that though; it is fun for the kids to have their pictures displayed, and there are winners—how they pick them I don't know, because they're all so cute.

**DH:** It builds a spirit within the community, too, which is obviously what they're after. Success comes from that.

**SB:** We support the theory that "better communities happen when *you* get involved." Last year we committed \$27,127.52 to local events and associations. The Try Local First organization is our latest area of involvement. The goal is to bring together not only our core area, but other areas around us. It's very interesting how you can go from Troutdale to Fairview to Wood Village to Gresham—in two miles you could be in four different towns. They all have their quaint downtown areas. Try Local First brings all those people together to focus on how we can encourage and reward people for shopping locally and in turn helping our communities to thrive.

**DH:** That's great! Well, congratulations again, and we'll be talking to you again soon, I'm sure.

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