



Grand Award – Large Company

Empire Screen Printing, Onalaska

Beginning his business in 1960 as a one-man operation, and operating out of a one-car garage, Jim Brush learned to rely on his own strengths and talents to succeed. He asked himself three questions: How can I do it myself? What obstacles must I overcome? And how can I make it better? Guided by his values of self-reliance, determination and innovation, Jim began to build his screen printing business, bringing his brother Billy into the operation as his first employee. Now, almost sixty years later and with nearly three hundred employees, Empire Screen Printing still asks those questions and answers them on a daily basis.

Two years into the business, Jim moved his fledgling company to a two-car garage, continuing to create art, screens and print decals and growing his customer base. By 1967, the company was ready to expand again, but this time moved into 150,000 square feet of production space. Jim earned his first million in 1975 and Empire has kept growing ever since.

The company's direction is guided by the Empire Board of Directors, composed of CEO Jim Brush, Jim's wife Cindy Brush, daughter and HR Manager Autum Jacobs, stepson and President John Friesmuth, and Vice President Jim Schweinfus. Many other family members, including siblings, children, stepchildren, grandchildren, and in-laws have contributed to Empire's success by working in production, engineering and sales during college breaks.

In the 1970s and 80s, Empire was one of the first screen printers to replace solvent inks with UV inks. In 1990, the company added a computer graphics department. Soon after, they added an in-house machine shop. They determined that if they couldn't buy equipment to do what was needed, they would build it themselves. In their machine shop, Empire continues to develop, modify and build their own production equipment.

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In 2007, after three years of company-sponsored research, Empire dramatically changed how screen printing is done by being the first company in the world to successfully implement UV-L.E.D. ink curing technology into the process. This new method allowed them to abandon graphic art film and the harsh development chemicals that are harmful to the environment. But Empire went even further: they openly shared the game-changing UV-L.E.D. technology with their peers in the industry, and in doing so have been nationally recognized for their commitment to social responsibility and as leaders in environmentally sustainable printing practices.

The judges were impressed with this company’s can-do attitude, their industry leadership, and their dedication to continual innovation. Company President John Friesmuth started at the bottom rung of Empire’s ladder and learned every job in the company on his way to the top.

The Grand Award in the Large Company category goes to Empire Screen Printing, LLC, of Onalaska.

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