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Brown & Saenger: Nineteenth Century Roots With a Twenty-First Century Vision

*Brown & Saenger,
President and CEO,
Lyle Dabbert*

You're a dealer who runs a one-stop shop, with a product mix that includes ad specialty items and printing in addition to traditional office supplies and furniture. You've got locations in four different cities and cover a five-state territory that spans over 1,000 miles. And you've got a growing online business, with ambitious plans to make it an even more important part of your overall volume going forward.

Put all that together and you've also got a multi-level set of challenges that would be daunting for just about any dealer. Fortunately for the team at Brown and Saenger in Sioux Falls, SD, says president and CEO Lyle Dabbert, they've got a powerful resource in the shape of their ECi business system that can help them manage all that complexity and then some!

"We were one of the first dealers to use DDMS over 20 years ago," Dabbert recalls, "and it's played a key role in supporting our growth ever since."

Brown & Saenger is one of the oldest

dealers in the country, with an outstanding tradition of service and value that goes all the way back to 1889.

Dabbert, the dealership's fifth owner since then, joined the company 35 years ago straight out of high school. His first job was in the warehouse, where he served as a clerk and made deliveries on his bike because in those days, he was still too young for a driver's license!

After rising through the ranks and working in virtually every aspect of the business, Dabbert became president and CEO in 1989. Today, he heads up a thriving dealership with operations in Bismarck, Fargo and Minot, ND, in addition to its Sioux Falls headquarters.

Business has been good for Dabbert and his dealership in recent years. "We have an outstanding team who have taken an aggressive one-stop strategy to the market and made it work," he says happily.

The result: Sales overall are up some 15%

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over the past three years and all four of the dealership's profit centers—business products, office furniture, printing and ad specialties—are performing well.

While Dabbert gives the lion's share of the credit to his own people—the dealership currently has 113 people on the payroll, including a 26-person sales force—he's also quick to recognize the contributions made by its key business partners.

Brown & Saenger is a long-time TriMega member—Dabbert himself is a former TriMega chairman—and first call with United Stationers. And, he says, manufacturers Herman Miller, The HON Company and Virco have all played a major role in growing the furniture side of the business.

Effectively managing such a diverse mix of products and services that's spread out across multiple locations is no easy task and, says Brown & Saenger general manager Deb Gunderson, that's where the resources of technology partner ECi really make a difference.

A 22-year veteran of the company, Gunderson says ECi's role at the dealership has been central to its success. "We consider ECi as an extension of our own business," she says. "They're always there to help us and their in-depth knowledge of dealers, dealer groups and the industry in general represents an important resource for us on many levels."

When it comes to managing such a complex operation, Gunderson says ECi offers all she needs to meet the challenge. "We're able to run our different locations on our DDMS platform and it gives us all the reports we need to track our various profit centers," she says. "And because they know so much about our

business, they've become a terrific source of ideas and suggestions to improve profits and strengthen our overall position in the marketplace."

In recent months, Dabbert and Gunderson have been serving as beta testers of the new SmartSearch component of the ECinteractive web storefront and, reports Dabbert, ECi and United have combined to produce a genuine home run for independents.

"We're really excited about what we've been seeing from ECinteractive," he says. "It's not just the improved speed and ease of use on searches. The new site is so much more consumer-oriented and it's going to make a big difference in our ability to compete with the big box sites."

Dabbert looks at the new web storefront and sees a powerful new resource that will allow Brown & Saenger to take the values that have driven the dealership for more than a century and move them online.

"Our strength as a dealership has always been our ability to build relationships and keep them strong and growing," he says proudly. "ECinteractive will make it easier for our customers to locate the products they need, get more information about products and make comparisons among similar products," he points out.

"Buyers today are younger and more computer-savvy and they expect to be able to order their office supplies online on a platform that's just as good as anything else out there on the Web," he contends. "That's what we're getting with ECinteractive and SmartSearch and it's a big step forward."

Dabbert also sees plenty of benefits internally. "The new system will lead to fewer errors and returns and make it possible for our own people to play a far more proactive role as consultants and problem-solvers, instead of just taking orders," he predicts.

Right now, the Brown & Saenger sales team is in the middle of a major push to introduce the new system to customers and prospects and move them online as soon as possible.

"We've got incentive plans in place to motivate our team and online demos and webinars to educate customers on all the new features," Dabbert reports.

"Technology has always been a priority for Brown & Saenger and with new resources like SmartSearch and ECinteractive, we will continue to use it to find new ways to grow and differentiate ourselves in the marketplace."