



PRESIDENT/OWNERS
NANCY KOR AND BRIAN KOR, CRS

FOCUSED ON THE **BIG** PICTURE AWARDS PLUS MARSHALL, MN

BY K. SCHIPPER

When Brian Kor bought his business in 1998, he describes it as a downtown retail awards business that had pretty much run its course. Thirteen years later, Kor has truly added the plus to Awards Plus. Starting with an expansion into advertising specialties shortly after the purchase, Kor has kept on integrating new products into his line, including embroidery, screen printing, and most recently signs.

What makes his business even more diverse is Kor's move into areas that may seem a little exotic in this community of 13,000 in Minnesota's southwest corner, including corporate incentive programs and fulfillment.

Thanks in part to his own corporate background, Kor remains focused on the big picture. This Spring, the company will expand into an additional 4,000 sq. ft. of space, and his 5-year goal is simple, although hardly modest: to double his sales in that time.

BUSINESS NAME

Awards Plus, Marshall, MN

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SPECIALTY

We're in touch with our clients and, as far as customer service goes, we can outperform our competition.

FIVE-YEAR BUSINESS GOAL

We want to double our business in 5 years.

PHILOSOPHY

What we want to see out of our business are satisfied customers.

WHAT ARA HAS DONE FOR ME

I've been working on achieving my CRS designation for a long time, but I think in order for people to perceive you as an expert you have to be an expert. ARA has given me the tools to be that.

GREATEST SUCCESS

The purchase of Awards Plus.

BUSINESS TIP TO SHARE

If you treat your customers with respect, they'll return that respect and they'll continue to do business with you.

WWW.AWARDSPLUS.NET

DESTINY

Brian Kor is a man who appreciates being his own boss. However, before buying Awards Plus, he spent almost 15 years as a cog in a pretty big wheel: he managed the local Coca-Cola® plant. "I burned out, I guess," he explains. "I heard Awards Plus was for sale and decided at that point I would rather have control of my own destiny."

Kor says he first learned the business was on the market in March 1997, and by the following January, he and his wife, Nancy, had purchased it, although Nancy Kor retained her own job with another of Marshall's large employers until 2005.

"People asked me all the time, especially at first, if I had made the right move," he says. "I can unequivocally say yes. It was a big change going from a corporate setting to a small business setting, but there's no comparison. This is much better."

The business that the couple purchased had actually been incorporated 9 years earlier. Brian Kor says Awards Plus began in the back of a jewelry store, although by the time he took it over, it had moved to its own 1,300 sq. ft. location in downtown Marshall. "Originally, we were just a plain old trophies-and-plaques store," Kor says. "We added promotional products in the middle of 1998, and that's when thing really started happening."

However, it wasn't until 2005 that Kor made his next

acquisition. He purchased an embroidery company, adding both embroidery and apparel to his business mix. At that point Nancy Kor joined the operation full time to run the embroidery department.

The following year, the couple built a new 10,000 sq. ft. stand-alone building near some of the community's big box stores, a location that Brian Kor says gives the business "high visibility" and plenty of off-street parking.

"We've been leasing out 4,000 sq. ft. of it, but March 1 the lease runs out with our tenant, and we're going to expand to the other side of the building because we've run out of room," he says, adding, "We also own the lot next to us, in case there's a future need to add on to the building."

What helped push the business to fill up 10,000 sq. ft. are some additional moves Kor has made in 2010 and 2011. Last year, the couple purchased another ad specialty company in Marshall and also added screen printing. "We had always thought of going into screen printing, but we were working with one of the original screen printers here in town," he says. "When their place came up for sale, we knew the quality work they did so it was pretty simple for us to go in and purchase the company."

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CHANGING INCENTIVES

With such a diverse business mix, it's easy to believe Kor is overwhelmed when the Yellow Pages people come to call. However, he says the company's emphasis remains on awards. “We're struggling to find an identity that puts us all together,” he admits. “Our main focus is on awards, but we get out there and push the other departments as much as we can.”

One area that's particularly surprised him is apparel, which Kor says these days is coming close to equaling awards in popularity. The main reason: business goes to many different clients, from teams and fans to corporate clients.

For a community the size of Marshall, the economy is incredibly diverse. Although it's the county seat, Marshall's real economic strength comes from the presence of Southwest Minnesota State University and some major companies. It's the home of one of the largest (privately held) frozen food manufacturers in the U.S., as well as facilities for U.S. Bank Corp., Archer Daniels Midland Co., and others.

“We live in a market that doesn't have the highs and lows of some of the larger markets,” Kor says. “We have a lot of agriculture in the area, and even in this economy agriculture hasn't seen a downturn. We may have had a quarter where we were down, but business has been pretty steady.”

Probably not surprising is the fact that Awards Plus has gotten heavily involved in “Incentive Solutions” and “Fulfillment Solutions.” Not only does Kor provide service award programs for a number of large clients, but he says they've changed since he bought his business.

“It used to be a lot of plaques, but as the incentive market grew and companies changed, plaques aren't what an employer is looking to give an employee,” he explains. “Generally, they want something newer and more innovative, so we use a number of vendors that allow the employee to choose a gift. The employer decides what the monetary value should be, and a packet goes out to that individual with gifts in that range.”

Along with sending out customized packets for employees at each level, the company offers four different ways to order the gifts and ships them to the address the recipient chooses. “Our customer gets to wash their hands of it,” Kor says. “They just pay us when we send the invoice.”



Awards Plus staff (from left) Tim Quist, Matt Myrvik, Brian Kor, Mike Warren, Tom Cattoor, Mark Sletten, Nancy Kor, and Dulcy Stewart.



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He says one customer had previously set aside a very large room in which to store awards because they would buy in bulk, then wait for people to reach a particular anniversary. “They fell in love with us when they realized they didn’t have to carry the entire inventory,” he says.

For another large company, Awards Plus serves as the uniform supplier. “We have a website dedicated to their human resources department,” Kor explains. “Whoever does the order-taking goes online and orders the uniforms for an individual. It’s really a company store because they own all the products but we store them in our facility.”

A fairly new addition to the company’s list of services for large clients is providing food gifts as part of its promotional products mix. “We had a number of companies around the holidays who were looking for unique gifts,” Kor says. “Last Christmas was when we really got the food gifts going. Most companies—during the holidays—are giving away something, but food gifts are a real niche product. Some of our larger clients said that they’d never thought of giving away something like a box of chocolates, so that worked out really well.”

OUT-SERVICING THE COMPETITION

That’s not to say that Kor is only interested in his corporate clients. One of his real favorites is working with athletic groups and booster clubs. “They come to us and say, ‘We need to do a fundraiser,’” he explains. “They want to create a sweatshirt or a bumper sticker, and we set up those programs for them.”

Setup can include the item itself, as well as making an e-flyer to let club members order online, creating paper order forms, and providing whatever else it may take to make the program a success for the organization. One of the keys to his business’ success, he believes, is that he out-services his competitors, and despite his acquisitions, he does still have some.

“Some of our competitors, I believe, will offer a cookie-cutter approach when someone wants a fundraising program,” he says. “They don’t form the program to their client. We take our programs and form them to what that client needs, and that’s where we have an advantage.”

Not surprisingly, Kor is an active member of his community, and while the shop has a 1,500 sq. ft. showroom (that

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RETAILER PROFILE

JANUARY 2012



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won't be growing with the additional space), he says, “A small percentage of our business is done on the retail side. A majority of our business is done knocking door to door, business to business, and organization to organization.” His favorite form of advertising: referrals from satisfied clients.

Of course, Kor isn't carrying the entire sales burden himself. While he confesses to preferring meeting with clients to being in the shop, Awards Plus has both an inside and an outside salesperson among its current staff of eight, including both Kors.

While it is in multiple places in the Yellow Pages, the company is also on radio and in the local newspaper and is even a community booster with its ads. “We do some simple things like a ‘player of the game’ for our high school sports teams,” Kor says. “We call it ‘The Awards Plus Player of the Game,’ and we market that on our website. We also have a Facebook page, and I try to do as much social media marketing as I can with Facebook and Twitter.”

Kor admits that finding the best marketing mix for the company is an ongoing process.

For the immediate future, his emphasis will be on telling customers about the shop's new ability to do signage and getting that information on the website. And, regardless of how they find Awards Plus, Kor wants all his customers leaving the same way: satisfied.

“We want to make sure when they walk out they'll tell a friend or associate, ‘I went to Awards Plus; you ought to try these guys,’” he says. “Satisfied customers are the ones who make your company.”

Kor claims the help of ARA in making his business work. He earned his CRS designation at this year's Las Vegas show, and he says it was an important goal for him because it shows his customers he understands the industry.

But, then, Kor has an even bigger goal in his sights: doubling his business in 5 years. “During the 1980s and '90s, doubling your business in five years wasn't that difficult,” he observes. “It's probably a little more difficult now but with the acquisitions we've brought on, I think we can do it.” ■■■