

Celebrating a Century of Tags and Labels

With 100 years of success behind it, PSDA member Allen-Bailey Tag & Label has been able to hold its ground and provide superlative customer service in an ever-changing industry.

BY FRANCES MOFFETT

It's not every day that a company gets to celebrate its 100th anniversary. Allen-Bailey Tag & Label recently reached 100 years in operation, and according to Richard Phelps, partner and director of marketing, it has come a long way.

Founded in 1911 by Samuel Allen and James Bailey in Danville, N.Y., the PSDA member company started business after creating a machine to manufacture wooden nursery stakes. The tags were written on with a wax crayon to identify the particular plant and then attached with a galvanized hand-twisted wire to the shrub or tree.

After a move to Caledonia, N.Y., many product innovations and a few changes in ownership, Phelps' grandfather, George Phelps, acquired the company. And it's been in the family ever since.

Phelps said that it has always been "in his blood" to join the family business. "I can remember as a kid sitting around at a typical family gathering for Thanksgiving, Christmas and other occasions listening to my father and grandfather speak about their interactions with customers, the projects they were working on at the time, the competitors, etc.," he shared. "I didn't understand half of it back then, but I do the same thing now when I get together with industry people and even my friends when we are out for dinner."

Having been in the industry for more than 36 years, Phelps said that there is still much for him to look forward to every day at work.

"What I get excited about to this day within this industry is the opportunity to solve a problem with a product or process



Headquartered in Caledonia, N.Y., Allen-Bailey Tag & Label is a nationally recognized source for custom printed tags and labels that has been in continuous business for 100 years. Richard Phelps (pictured) is a company partner and its director of marketing.

identification method for our customers," he explained. "Working on a project from the beginning and utilizing Allen-Bailey's abilities to custom manufacture the end product is a fulfilling exercise."

Surely this excitement and the drive to keep the customers satisfied have led to the sustainability of Allen-Bailey Tag &

Label. Phelps said that the company's focus on the customer is what has allowed it to thrive for such a long time.

"If it wasn't for the customers, some of whom have been with us for more than 30 years, we wouldn't exist," he said. "Do what is right for the customer and the rest will take care of itself. Also, treat the employees fairly and like family. Put the company first, then yourself. I was raised with the credo of 'first you work, then you play.'"

"[Now], our 100-year history helps us by almost giving us instant credibility. However, most of what I call 'honest-to-goodness tag companies' have been around almost as long as Allen-Bailey has. Nevertheless, our depth of experience gives us a great foundation on which to assess how to create a product solution for our customers. And our attention to detail and focus on delighting the customer enables us to earn [their] business over the long term."

With being in the business for 100 years, staying relevant also means developing new and innovative products — and Allen-Bailey has come a long way from making wooden stakes.

"Some of our unique products are old, [like the] long, narrow manifold tag utilized within the wire market, and some are new. A new product example is what appears to be a simple, blank label. There's a whole lot more to it than meets the eye, and it enables us to well serve a customer utilizing attractive volumes of the label. [We develop these ideas] through the ingenuity of the salesperson and customer's need to address the various functions of the tag. ... It must be durable, and the information it conveys must be concise and clear."



PSDA member Allen-Bailey Tag & Label specializes in custom labels and tags. Shown here: rewinding a finished roll of gummed labels (top) and size 1 manila tags with a 26 gauge, 12" wire attachment.

But even with products that are unique and meet customers' needs, there remain some challenges. Phelps said that one of the biggest tasks is finding good operational employees.

"We have wonderful, dedicated employees, but are always seeking more who can help us. It has become quite difficult, even with unemployment running as high as it is. Allen-Bailey and our competitors' manufacturing processes

still require a thorough understanding of mechanical operations," he said. "People coming out of colleges are not interested in getting in the trenches to operate a press. Young men and women — even coming out of high school — are rarely taught that the printing trade continues to offer good, long-term jobs.

"As for other challenges to the industry, we tag makers are competing for an ever larger slice of a shrinking pie. And we are all faced

with shorter lead times from our customers, continued price pressure — oftentimes in the face of increased costs — and opportunities to utilize new technologies to improve the efficiencies with which we operate. It drives you crazy at times, but I believe it's also what makes the industry and our jobs actually fun."

Phelps said that Allen-Bailey Tag & Label addresses these challenges with in-house training and by reaching out to its vendors for continued guidance with its inks, substrates and equipment. The company also occasionally uses the services of third parties to lean practices and opportunities for improvement.

"It's a never-ending task, but we find it always best to stay on top of a situation than try to catch up later on," Phelps said.

In a constantly changing economy and an industry that moves with the trends, Phelps has a realistic, yet optimistic outlook for the future.

"I anticipate orders from our customers will continue to get smaller. They won't be any less important; the customers will be buying fewer to control their expenditures and reduce their inventory," Phelps said. "This will require ever-improving lead times. We've got to be able to respond to the customers' needs.

"I also see digital print continuing to make strong inroads into all facets of print, and I anticipate we will hear about and see more requirements for linerless labels. Finally, I believe we all recognize tags have been around a long time, will likely remain a good while longer and offer a nice, repeating order scenario for the astute sales individual."

Learn more about Phelps and Allen-Bailey Tag & Label at www.abtl.com. **Ps**

Frances Moffett is assistant editor of Print Solutions. Know of a PSDA member company that should be featured in an upcoming PSDA profile? Contact Moffett at fmoffett@psda.org.