

Featured family business: O’Leary Paint

O’Leary Paint is a Michigan-based fourth generation family business. Headed up by two brothers, John and David O’Leary, the company is this year turning 127 years old. In 2016 they celebrated their 125 anniversary with 125 random acts of kindness in the surrounding communities, and their commitment to quality was recognised in 2012 when their products received national recognition from an independent accredited laboratory, taking gold, silver, and bronze accolades.



During his trip to Ireland to attend a conference with a consortium of industry members, we took the opportunity to meet David and interview him about the family, the business, and how those two mix.

Sitting down with us David spoke about, among other things, the company’s identity and the thought process which led to him and his brother joining the company as co-directors.

You’ve travelled a long way to be here, would you mind telling me one or two things about the conference you’re attending?

This is a group of raw material suppliers who come together, and we as a consortium band together to try and lower our pricing. So it’s a buying group for raw materials; we’re stronger together than we would be individually, and it has a pretty significant impact on our business. This group is probably 50 years old.

So this year O’Leary Paint is 127. When you think back to the very beginnings of the company, were there any values that guided it, like a core value? And has it changed?

I couldn’t speak to that, I really couldn’t. I believe in my father’s time, absolutely. He moulded what my opinion is about my personality. I see how he treats people and I think that’s how you’re supposed to do it, I don’t know any better and I think it’s a nice way to treat people. It’s the culture we have now, I have inherited it and I’ve been given a gift. But I really don’t think the guy that started the business was of that mind.

There were stories of him going to the local country club and a fair amount of time playing cards, and the truck would come in and all the labourers would be putting things away and helping to unload the truck. He would show up later on and grab one thing and act like he was part of the team, and say “that wasn’t so bad was it?”. And you’re thinking “where were you for the last 3 hours?”. So I’ve heard little stories. I think we changed somewhere along the way. It wasn’t me that did the changing; I inherited a good mentor. It’s nice to have a mentor, period. It’s really nice to have a good one. Because you can have bad mentors, you

know there's plenty of examples of somebody that you're learning from that's really not someone you want to aspire to be, but you don't know any better. You're in business, you're young, you learn a lot and maybe that's how the game is played.

Tell me about the family side of the business. Would you be the primary figurehead there?

We're really, really strange this way. There's seven children in our family. My dad was the only one that was involved through his family. And of those seven children only two of us are

involved in the business and we own it 50/50. We've owned it since our twenties. My dad's thought was, if something is going to happen to this company it's going to be your doing. So you shouldn't get stock 30 years from now when I pass away, you should get it now. And if you run it into the ground that's what you did with it. But if you make it much more valuable, it's really you who've created that value - not me and it shouldn't be part of my stake, so we're going to separate that now. So he got rid of all stock. We took it over, but he was still the head of the company. We all did the jobs we did before. I really

appreciated his opinion and he was still the point man, he just got rid of all the stock. It didn't have any impact.

I'm the younger brother - number three – and my eldest brother John is number one and he was involved in the company a few years before I was. So although I didn't have any ego about saying 'I want to put my mark on this', I did have an ego coming out of college.

I was driven to the company and I wanted to be part of it, but I would not work for my brother. It's nothing to do with him – I'm worthy of more than that, I'm not going to lie, and he's worthy of more than that too, he shouldn't be working for me for the exact same reasons. I was upfront about that and as I remember, I was in college and said to my dad, "I don't know that this is going to work", and he said "no, I think there's room for more than one person in the company... I don't think it has to be that



way – I would hope that you could work together”. So he convinced me that there’s room - give it a chance, see what happens. And John was very accepting of that, so we became co-presidents. And we’ve been co-presidents for 20 years. It’s strange, it’s very odd.

John and I were relatively certain that we were going to drive the company into the ground, not positive but pretty sure. We said, if you look in Europe, some of the problems and frictions in companies, where does it happen? And often times it’s when children get involved and children of brother or sisters - it’s especially that. That’s what’s going to separate John and I, when kids get involved. So we said no wives in the business, and at this stage we can’t have children in the business because it would be the beginning of the end. It’s being really nervous about keeping this thing going, and we wanted to do anything we could to ensure that.

“You think with family business it’s going to be easier, there are pluses that come with that, but in sum total it’s much more difficult. Running a business is really hard. Running a family business doesn’t get any easier... there’s all these little goofy things that don’t have anything to do with the running of the business. Running the business is hard enough on its own. You don’t need these petty situations, distractions. So it’s not easy.”

Coming back to the positive side of it, when you celebrated 125 years you celebrated big style with that, with acts of kindness in the community.

Some people do these corny sales, you know they try to make a sale out of it. And we were thinking, what can we do? It’s this community that’s given us this life and it’s these people.



So what can we do? We started off thinking, we could paint 125 classrooms, and then we said let’s just do 125 acts of kindness. It allows us to get into a lot of other communities, not just the headquartered one. We solicited from our employees, tell me what should we be doing? Some of them got it and were so great, and some of them didn’t. I’m not sure that my brother got it. He was at the grocery store and he bought the groceries for the person behind him. And

I said, “but John we’re trying to do the company, not just nice guy stuff”.

Unless he gave him a business card as he walked away?

We did have business cards made up because a lot of the stuff was kind of odd, and we’re saying ‘well here’s what’s happening’, and it also gave them a chance to like us on Facebook. But that was our way to give back. Let’s get creative and pull from our people. Some of them really simple, somebody’s picked up someone and gave them a ride in one of our vehicles.

And then there's some that cost money. One of the people that really got it was our secretary. She said, "it's scheduled to be the hottest day of the year, so let's give water away". So she went to the bus station, set up a table and gave out water there.

The first two thirds were really fun and the last third was a chore. It was like the clock was ticking and here you are in October - we started running out of steam. Then we had to double down.

Some of the fun ones were schools, Schools were great because you left it differently than when you found it. There's a woman that started this art class because art was being cancelled in most of the schools. She thought they should have access to it so she started an after school programme out of her garage, and it grew and grew and grew. She's got 140 volunteers now. We did a project with them; the kids took paint can lids and they painted them like a flag. There's 120, they're hand painted and each lid is different. We had red white and blue colours, and we put them on this waving screen with bevelled paint cans. It was an art piece and they got to do one and auction it off, that was part of our deal. They also gave us one that we have in our plant. So that was one of the acts that gave back, we have something to show for it.



Would you feel that community is part of the identity of the company?

Absolutely.

You spoke about the culture that your father had, the community as well. Is there anything else about the identity of the company that would come to mind? Or do you think about it that way?

No, we don't. We have unusual longevity in our company. It begs... why? We're not over paying them, I promise. But we have people that stay a long time. But it's unusual, it's almost strange. I think we're fair. I just think there's a lot of empathy. I think all of us have got the ability to put ourselves in other people's shoes, it comes absolutely naturally. I'm really blessed with that.

And your product as well. You won awards – first, second and third – in 2012. That was an unusual thing as well to get the top three places in a national award context.

Especially in such a small, small company. We do care about quality. In my dad's time we didn't start manufacturing, we were just a retail store for those first 80 years. We started manufacturing when I got out of college. So it's a relatively newer thing for us. And there aren't a lot of new paint manufacturers - nobody opens a paint manufacturing plant, that doesn't happen. They close them, they sell, they don't start new ones. So we started from scratch.

“My dad said, “If Sherwin-Williams makes a bad batch of paint and it gets out in the market, people say they made a bad batch of paint... If O’Leary Paint makes a bad batch of paint, the word’s going to be, they don’t know how to make paint... We can’t afford to make a bad batch of paint, we need to put more into the can as insurance so that never happens”.

And that thought process has always been there; let’s just put more quality in as an insurance policy. So that’s part of how we got those awards, it’s that thought process. It’s really more like a restaurant and cooking or bakery than it is a chemical business. Because a small company like ours shouldn’t be able to be leaders in technology. But if you think of it like a restaurant, it’s the boutique place, and the boutique places cares about the raw materials, the ingredients coming in, and they care about the formula or the recipe. And that’s why a small restaurant can have the best food, not the biggest. So it’s a great analogy for us. Winning those awards helps bring that story home. We can be small and still have a trend setting product.

If you would like to know more about O’Leary Paint, you can [visit their website](#) or [their Facebook page](#).

