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# Lead, Don't Follow

Jim Hammer (left), president and CEO of Hammer Packaging, uses smart investments in technology to lead his company toward continued growth. *p.16*

# to Boldly Go...

Hammer Packaging  
uses a culture of  
technology evolution  
and exploration  
to expand its market reach.

**W**hat do Star Trek and Hammer Packaging have in common? Several things, actually. They both use state-of-the-art technology to seek out and explore new territory; Star Trek is on its fifth TV generation, while Hammer Packaging is led by fourth-generation family owner Jim Hammer, president and CEO, with his son Jason part of the management team and representing the fifth generation; and probably most important—they are both very successful enterprises (pun intended) in their respective worlds.

Hammer Packaging got its start in 1912 as Genesee Valley Litho, a regional supplier of labels to the growing agricultural industry in Western New York. “The company developed its reputation early on for outstanding quality and customer service,” says Lou Iovoli, director of sales and marketing.

Agriculture was the start, and from there, packaging became the primary focus. The company has steadily branched out into other markets beyond food. Today, Hammer services beverage, wine and spirits, household chemicals, horticultural, and health and beauty markets. And its quest for new markets won’t stop there. “As we innovate and adopt new technologies, we continue to look at new markets where we can apply our considerable strengths,” says Iovoli.

Today, Hammer Packaging has more than 400 employees in five manufacturing facilities located in the Rochester, N.Y. area. These facilities encompass 375,000 square feet, with ten presses, a digital prepress department, and several finishing operations.

The company specializes in film and paper labels including cut-and-stack, pressure sensitive, shrink, roll-on/shrink-on (ROSO), and roll-fed. While Iovoli says that converting lightweight wet-strength papers is an area of partic-

ular strength, “We aggressively explore how best to convert films, because it offers the widest range of solutions for our customers’ packaging needs.”

In addition to film and paper substrates, Hammer offers aqueous, UV, and EB ink and coating systems, along with in-line laminations for both its web offset and flexo operations.

### **Warp speed**

The company’s growth under the leadership of Jim Hammer has been impressive, to say the least. He took charge of the company when it was a \$1 million business and, this year, it is on track to be a \$100 million company, says Iovoli.

The company’s operating philosophy is “Listen, Learn, and Lead.” “We take listening to our customers very seriously,” notes Iovoli. “We conduct rigorous customer surveys each year to obtain clear feedback on what we do well and what we need to improve.”

This feedback is used to fuel the company’s ISO 9001:2000-certified quality systems “to drive continuous improvements back into our business,” he says. “All of this is prerequisite to accomplishing Jim’s vision of market leadership—as Jim reminds us often, ‘We lead. We don’t follow.’”

Hammer’s continuous improvement philosophy has driven success that is recognized well beyond its bottom line. The company was selected by the Graphic Arts Technical Foundation as one of the “Best Workplaces in America.” The recognition is a peer-based benchmark that evaluates work environment, training and development, recognition, health and well-being, and financials, says Iovoli. “We view this as an indication that Hammer takes its employees as seriously as it does its customers.”

Hammer’s headquarters is located in the backyard of the Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT) School of Print Media, and it has taken advantage of this location to develop a close partnership

with the school. “This collaboration allows Hammer access to the most current and advanced thinking on printing and converting concepts,” observes Iovoli. “We benefit by rotating groups of co-op students and graduates through Hammer with the expressed purpose of pushing the boundaries of the graphic arts and sciences. Consequently, we have a very high number of RIT graduates as full-time employees.”

Hammer Packaging’s involvement in the community extends beyond its graphic arts roots. “Jim feels strongly that Hammer Packaging should give back to the community based on the company’s good fortune,” says Iovoli. To take the lead, Jim Hammer is a board member at the James P. Wilmot Cancer Center at Strong Hospital, and the Mary Cariola Children’s Center. “He and the management team have developed a culture that encourages giving back to the community and, in turn, attracts great people who want to work for Hammer that share those values,” he notes.

### **Beam me up**

“Technology and innovation are key parts of [Jim] Hammer’s vision of industry leadership,” reports Iovoli. “Jim’s vision to achieve market leadership relies on Hammer to continuously evolve the company’s asset base to profitably grow the business. It is a simple philosophy—investments are made that either lower our cost of production or expand our range of products and services.”

A recent example of this philosophy in action is the company’s investment in a Drent Goebel Variable Sleeve Offset Press (VSOP). This investment was made on the belief that Hammer’s customers would benefit from a lower cost alternative to gravure printing of shrink labels, while offering a higher quality option for flexo shrink applications.

Hammer Packaging is very excited about what the VSOP can do for it. Says



Iovoli, “The technology this press offers is nothing short of spectacular.” He believes it fits well with the company’s strength in offset printing and can be counted on to expand Hammer’s range of products and services—one of the company’s key investment criteria.

“Our best opportunity to enter new markets that are traditionally serviced by rotogravure and central impression flexo is to offer a unique value-added alternative for which we have an affinity,” he says. With the VSOP, “We are now offering offset-printed shrink sleeves, ROSO labeling, and high-end roll-fed labeling. Ultimately, we see ourselves expanding into form, fill, and seal packaging as substrate technology grows to require fewer extrusions and more use of lamination.”

The VSOP augments an impressive alignment of assets that includes Heidelberg, KBA, Mitsubishi, and Mark Andy/

with injection-molded labels. It uses its flexo printing for pressure-sensitive labels (with or without rotary screen), hang tags, and cut-and-stack labels.

With Hammer Packaging, there is nothing set in stone. For any given application, the equipment and process used is the combination that provides the highest quality, in the most consistent, cost-effective manner, says Iovoli. “We view our press capability as leading-edge, varied, flexible, and evolving.”

Although Hammer Packaging seeks out and exploits technology to offer value-added benefits, technology evolution provides an ongoing challenge, particularly at the current time. “The industry is in a technology renaissance at the moment requiring us to be on the leading edge with respect to capital investment in technology,” observes Iovoli. “Keeping up without becoming obsolete is a challenge in today’s packaging industry.”

Comco presses. With these capabilities, Hammer can provide roll-to-sheetfed offset printing for cut-and-stack film and paper labels, along

### **Listen, Learn, and Lead, a.k.a., Live long and prosper**

With a mantra of “Listen, Learn, and Lead” and a dynamic culture of exploration, it is not in Hammer Packaging’s gene pool to stagnate anytime in the near future. “We are always looking for the next process that can separate us from the rest of the market,” says Iovoli. “Our company is in a very competitive market segment. If we sit still for too long, we risk our future success. Jim Hammer reinforces a healthy sense of urgency. Hence, we are never complacent. Let’s just say the evolution will continue.” ■



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