

THE MORE THINGS CHANGE...

For the man behind the curtain at Office Interiors, it's all about core values—past, present and future

BY ALEC BRUCE

HAS MORE THAN A DECADE really passed since Jim Mills climbed on to a stage in a downtown Halifax banquet hall to receive a well-deserved *Atlantic Business Magazine* Top 50 CEO Hall of Fame award?

True, much has changed over the years. On the other hand, an indisputable continuity does connect the dots of this business owner's life on the spectrum of "then" and "now".

Then, in 2006, Jim was the voluble, hard-working president and CEO of Dartmouth-based MMP Office Interiors Incorporated (Office Interiors, for short). He boasted an enviable track record of commercial success, selling workplace furnishings and equipment (e.g. printers, copiers, computers, and software) and community involvement. Now, in the breaking months of 2019, he's still pretty much the same guy—only, perhaps, more so.

Yes, he's always willing to "put it all on the line to chase the dream of business ownership," as he once said. But today, he adds, "It's about how your customers feel about you. That's what really counts."

Does it ever. Consider Office Interiors' foray over the past five years into something called "entrepreneurial operational excellence", a formal management method that tightly measures the relationship between companies and consumers.

The tool replaces traditional satisfaction surveys with a single, trenchant question: How likely is it that you would recommend our company/product/service to a friend or colleague? This simpler, more direct approach is sweeping North America's business landscape.

Jim can appreciate why. "This has changed how we go to market," he says. "We use the method's Net Promoter Score system. Our (ranking) is around 86 or 87 out of 100. On an industry basis, that's unbelievably high."

Other recent moves that are working exceptionally well include acquisitions and expansions at the technology end of the business, which now generates 50 per cent of Office Interiors' annual top-line revenue of about \$28 million. Traditional workspace furnishings account for the balance of yearly sales.

Says Jim: "Ricoh Canada (one of the country's top purveyors of business equipment and services) is our primary partner on the tech side. We now do the service work for its national account business outside of Halifax. That happened five years ago, and it's been very good for us."

All of which can't be bad for a privately-held company that generated sales of \$2 million in 1991, its first full year of operation, and which now employs about 110 professionals in offices and showrooms around the Maritimes.

In the end, though, the relatively recent improvements and progress are vested in the core values Jim has always espoused; commitment, quality, innovation, prudence, and sustainable growth. And, not for nothing, community participation remains never far from his heart.

Currently, he's the chair of the Feed Nova Scotia campaign, which is attempting to raise \$1.4 million to pay for a new facility: "I am also helping Halifax Hospice raise \$6 million for a new space." These are just two of many worthy causes, of course. In fact, he cracks, "I'm sure I'm forgetting something."

What he doesn't forget is the involvement and support of his own family. The second youngest of seven kids, Jim directly employs his two sons, Matthew and Alex. What's more, his three sisters have, at times, worked for him—including Debbie, who was his executive assistant for 20 years before she retired last year.

For Office Interiors, it's hard to see what the next decade will bring. But the company remains as open to new opportunities, in both traditional and emerging market segments, as ever. After all, given the right chance, steady and responsible can also mean ready and raring to go.

Just ask Jim—then and now—who always enjoys connecting the dots between his past and future selves.



Enjoying the sights in Lyon, France
(Photo: Jim Mills)

FIVE FUN FACTS

1 Jim enjoys the great game of golf. He and his brothers (Dave, Jeff and Don) can sometimes be found trodding the fairways together on faraway Irish links.

2 Jim, whose golf handicap is 10, boasts two holes in one. His older brother Don does not. Now retired, the elder Mills plans to learn how to play the guitar properly. Jim wishes him well.

3 Jim and his wife Leilany, an artist who was born in Bolivia, are consummate travellers. They delight in visiting exotic locales, where wine tasting is never out of the question.

4 Jim and Leilany have four grown children: the two boys, Matthew and Alex, and the two girls, Mallory and Amanda. Grandchild number three is on the way, thanks to Amanda and her husband, who, it just so happens, also works for Office Interiors. Talk about all in the family.

5 Jim's community involvement in the Halifax area is legendary. Yes, he likes his golf. (He is, after all, president and chair of the Ashburn Golf Club). But he has also held leadership Board roles (Chair) with the Halifax Chamber of Commerce, Neptune Theatre and the IWK Health Centre.