

NEWS

After 135 years in business, family knows how to adapt and grow

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Tim Puet For Business First

In 1870, Civil War veteran Demas Auld started a jewelry shop in Columbus after learning the trade of watchmaking and engraving, eventually turning to automobile nameplates like Ford Motor Co.'s famous blue oval which is still used today.

After 135 years and five generations, his family remains in the business of providing ornamental items - not for individuals, but for many of the products they use, including kitchen sinks, cell phones, golf clubs and automobiles.

From that early beginning, Demas' great-grandson, Dan Auld, 38, is now sole owner of the Auld Co., which has 50 employees and offices, research facilities and two plants on the far east side of Columbus.

It has annual sales of \$5 million to \$10 million and has a growing global clientele. Auld said anywhere from 30 percent to 60 percent of the firm's products have been exported to Asia in each of the past 10 years, and the company plans to open a plant in China later this year.

A leader in the industry

The Auld Co. specializes in the type of decorative ornamentation that people see every day but may not realize.

Those items include the labels found on Kohler sinks, showers and bathtubs, the identifying markers on Titleist golf clubs, the protective covering on Polaroid One Step cameras and various types of cell phones, and the wheel trim on many auto brands.

"What we make is designed to improve the perceived quality of a product through the quality of its ornamental details," Auld said. "Whenever a product looks better and feels like it's a better product, people are more likely to buy it because of the enhanced perception of quality and value and added functionality."

Its patented Domelite urethane process is designed to protect those markings from the fading often associated with acrylic and other types of products. The process screenprints graphics onto a plastic or metal sheet, embosses and die-cuts those graphics in a desired shape, then dispenses a urethane coating of anywhere from 1/1,000 inch to 1/4 inch to create the finished product.

An additional step, known as Domelite D3, allows for the addition of reflective or luminescent material in a second layer, creating the image of a floating graphic that seems to move and change as lighting conditions differ.

"We've been very pleased with our relationship with Auld since we began working with the company five or six years ago," said David Funk, a product development manager for the Kohler Co. of Kohler, Wis., a leading manufacturer of kitchen and bathroom fixtures.

"We had a vision at the time of ways we wanted to improve the markings identifying what we make, but there didn't seem to be anyone who could match what we wanted," Funk said. "Then we found Dan and, within a matter of weeks, he gave us everything we desired in terms of crisp detail of lettering, durability and design."

"He didn't stop there. He's continued to improve his products when it comes to adhesion strength and color matching capability. The color matching makes it appear our logo is clear even when it's not, and this is something that's hard to find. Product identifiers made by Auld can be found on much of what we make, including whirlpools, showers, bathtubs, sinks and vitreous china products."

Hundreds of businesses across the United States, many of them much larger than Auld, make nameplates and labels, but Auld is considered one of the best, even by its leading (and much bigger) competitors.

"When it comes to automotive-grade exterior domed badges, Auld is clearly one of the market leaders," said Yves Nys, eastern regional sales manager for Seattle-based GM Nameplate. "Their competition gives us a good target to aim for and, with changes we are making to our processes, we are solidifying and expanding our market share in the automotive-grade domed badge arena to give Auld more of a run for its money."

GM Nameplate employs about 1,000 people at seven locations in America, Singapore and Canada and had sales of \$83 million in its most recent fiscal year, said spokesman Benjamin Gorenberg.

"Auld is certainly excellent competition. We certainly have a lot of respect for their abilities, and I don't want to go beyond that," said Harold Hoffman, vice president of nameplate sales for Northern Engraving Corp., which is based in Sparta, Wisc. and has seven plants in the Midwest and two in the United Kingdom.

Evolving business

Auld Co.'s heritage goes back to Demas Auld and his jewelry shop, but the company as it exists today is only about 15 years old.

That's because the original Auld family business, the D.L. Auld Co., was sold to 3M Corp. in 1986 by Dan's father, David. At its peak in the late 1970s, that company had about 400 employees at plants in Columbus and Baltimore, Ohio, and another 75 working at a plant in England on products similar to what the company makes today, David Auld said.

At that time, the company was at a crossroads. David Auld was 61, two of his sons had other business interests and Dan Auld was still in school and too young to take over the business. He had turned down 3M offers to buy a couple of times before, but then then changed his mind.

"I turned them down again, but they said they had a new automotive division in which our business would fit well, so I agreed to talk with them," David Auld said. "I had to sign an agreement that I wouldn't compete with 3M in the automotive market.

"However, the deal allowed me to maintain a royalty-free license on 35 patents the Auld Co. had and to continue to use that technology as long as I stayed out of the automotive field," David Auld said.

In 1993, Dan Auld convinced his father that he could revive the business, and together they reopened it.

"My strengths have been in creative sales and marketing, and it seemed logical that you could use the labeling technology we'd developed in quite a number of ways," Dan Auld said. "I did research on some companies, went to them with ideas on how they could increase the perceived value of their products with the help of quality ornamentation, and got enough favorable response to know my ideas would work. That convinced me to get involved with the business."

It was the right decision for them, and Auld Co. now competes with 3M in some parts of the auto graphics market.

Two years ago, Dan Auld bought out his father and became sole owner. David Auld remains with the company as an adviser.

A history of change

"Our expansion into China is likely to lead to additional growth, and we think we have a quality and a technical capability that makes our products superior," Dan Auld said. "We're looking forward to the next few years with great anticipation as we continue our efforts to develop new techniques and improve the look and value of our customers' products."

This flexibility and ability to change and grow is what has kept the business profitable and for more than 100 years.

"My great-great-grandfather's original company became an international business overnight because he invented the tumbler lock for jewelry," Dan Auld said.

Eventually, the firm was the largest national source of college and high school rings and pins, as well as fraternity rings and pins. At the start of the 20th century, Auld's experience in making decorative items attracted the attention of automakers including Henry Ford, Walter Chrysler, Ransom E. Olds and the Dodge brothers.

"Demas and his son, F. Howard Auld, came out in the early 1900s with a way to keep nameplates on autos so they wouldn't come off whenever the cars hit a bump. Probably the most famous of those designs was the blue oval Ford still uses," Dan Auld said.

As the auto business grew, the family stopped making jewelry, sold that portion off to two different companies, which remain in operation today in Indiana. A group of employees took over the trophy portion of the business and formed a company which also remains in business.

In the late 1920s, the company developed a process known as reverse marquetry, which bonds and laminates metal and natural wood veneers. Paneling produced by this process was made exclusively for the W.S. Tyler Co. of Cleveland, which used it in elevator cabs and doors, most notably for the Empire State Building.

During World War II, the company retooled to support the war effort and made the Distinguished Service Medal, fragmentation bombs, aluminum forging for military aircraft and dummy planes that were set on military airfields as decoys.

After the war, the company resumed making vitreous enamel emblems, but by the 1960s, use of the enamel had become too expensive for automakers. Several years of research resulted in the development of Vitrolux, a forerunner of Auld's current urethane doming process. This substance combined the look of enamel with the advantages of durability under extreme conditions.