



Steve Parker, CEO and president of Flexo Products Ltd., was recently recognized by the Niagara Entrepreneur of the Year Awards.

Flexo Products cleans up at awards ceremony

A family-run business that has survived generations, Flexo Products Ltd. has successfully adapted to industry changes while growing in profits and employees.

In 1918 Flexo Cotton Products operated out of a small building on Clark St. near the Skylon Tower.

It manufactured mops and offered a wash rag cleaning service.

Flash forward, 93 years and the company is now a leader in the sanitary supply field.

From a plant on Kent St. and warehouse on Montrose Rd., Flexo manufactures and distributes a myriad of industrial and commercial cleaning chemicals, cleaning equipment, paper products and supplies.

President and CEO Steve Parker grew up in the business.

The Stamford Collegiate graduate worked for a short while in the aerospace industry in Mississauga before returning to Niagara in 1984 to work alongside his father Earl Parker.

He bought the company from his father in 1988.

Since that time, Flexo branched out into chemical manufacturing and expanded operations to Cambridge and Toronto. It also imports products from overseas for the Canadian market.

The company services a wide variety of clients including school boards and hotels.

It was also one of the first chemical manufacturers to adopt a "green" philosophy.

"The key is certification," Parker said. "A lot of people say their stuff is green but there was no certification."

In 2005, the company was recognized as one of the country's top employers by an advocacy association for Canadians over the age of 50.

It has never enforced a retirement policy and employees are welcome to stay as long as they want.

"We've had people with us for 20, 30 years," Parker said.

The family-like atmosphere is evident throughout the company.

The firm's telephone voice mail system lists staffers by their first name.

"I think that's a little unique and I like it that way," Parker said with a smile.

Flexo remains rooted in Niagara. It supports approximately 20 organizations including the United Way, Project SHARE and Community Care in St. Catharines.

The company was recognized Friday with the Family Enterprise Award at the Niagara Falls Entrepreneur of the Year Awards.

"The event was fabulous," Parker said.

"It was the who's who of the Niagara peninsula and, when my name was called, I was shocked."

Held at the Sheraton Fallsview Hotel and Conference Centre, the 17th annual event recognized 35 businesses and individuals from across the region.

"This year's recipients are representative of the innovation, ingenuity and talent that we have in the Niagara Region," said event chairman Doug Frazer.

"It is important that we recognize and applaud their successes in business since their entrepreneurial spirit has significantly contributed to Niagara's economic development".

The awards were established in 1994 to recognize the achievements, excellence and innovation of local entrepreneurs.

The 2010 winners are as follows:

Emerging Entrepreneur Award:

Deriving photo letter art from the creative process of photographing objects and scenery that resemble letters of the English alphabet, Jennifer Blakely is the visionary behind Alphabet Photography. Before selling her unique product to customers, Blakely created frames for family and friends as gifts who later suggested she should venture into business. Since 2006 Jennifer has seen tremendous success and growth in sales. Her photo art has been featured on Breakfast Television, CityLine and Stephen and Chris as well as in Chatelaine Magazine and the Toronto Star. She has also secured partnerships and distributors through major retail outlets including Target, HomeSense, Home Outfitters and Walmart.

Established Enterprise Award:

Shawn Barlow, Photech Environmental Solutions Inc., of St. Catharines.

Innovative Small Business Award:

Anne Lennard-Otto, Distinctive Designs & Cabinetry Inc., of St. Catharines.

International Trade Award:

Grant Koppers, Koppers Fishing and Tackle Corp., of Niagara-on-the-Lake.

Technological Innovation Award:

Geoff Irvine, Chalk & Wire Learning Assessment Inc., of St. Catharines.

Tourism Enterprise Award:

Kelly Daniels, Lyndesfarne Theatre Projects of St. Catharines.

Gene Luczkiw Spirit of Enterprise Awards, which provide financial support to students who demonstrate the spirit of enterprise:

Aaron Bailey, a Grade 12 student at Saint Michael Catholic High School; Cameron Dobbelstyn and Gaelle Groux, both Grade 12 students at Sir Winston Churchill in St. Catharines.

Niagara Original:

Scott Riesebosch, CRS Electronics

Historical Hall of Fame Award: M.K. Rittenhouse (1884-1980), Rittenhouse.

Community Contribution Award:

Sandra Murre of Jordan Engineering.

Lifetime Achievement Hall of Fame Award:

Tom Rankin of Rankin Construction.