


Everybody Wins in Columbus, Montana

Montana Silversmiths has created an inspirational workplace for its employees, and a portal through which its dealers can profit.

By Barb Kastens, Assistant Editor

 Nestled on the peaceful banks of the Yellowstone River, the corporate headquarters of Montana Silversmiths is a workplace like no other.

The idyllic setting in Columbus, Mont., a town of less than 2,000 sans high-rise buildings and traffic jams, is the inspiration for some of the finest silver products created.

Montana Silversmiths began in 1973 as a small awards company that catered to regional events. Frustrated with shipments that were either late or never arrived, the owner purchased a defunct Texas buckle company.

Belt buckles and saddle trim were the primary products. Today, the company offers thousands of products, from leather wallets to bronze sculptures, as well as buckles and trim.

It was acquired in 1994, and has been majority owned by a private equity group since.

“We’ve been very lucky to be located in Montana,” said Dennis Potzman, president and CEO of the company. “It’s a great lifestyle. A lot of people have been

here 20-25 years. If you look out the window, you don’t see any other buildings whatsoever.”

In that same rural style, it is Potzman’s laid-back voice that greets callers on the automated phone system, setting the tone for the company. With more than 300 employees, it is the largest employer in Columbus.

Responding to growth, the company consolidated its distribution center in 2006.

“I don’t know of anyone that’s gone through that without saying it’s the most challenging thing they’ve ever done,” Potzman said. “It takes time. We’ve been very diligent to make sure we’re back on track with our customers. The intent was not just to be status quo, but to move forward dramatically and be better in the future.”

Another positive change in 2006 was hiring Joe Rand, executive vice president of sales and marketing. Rand was brought in to beef up the thinly-stretched management team.

“He was a superstar in the gift industry,” said Potzman. “He’s loving the industry, number one, but also everything that’s going on.”

Marketing director Judy Wagner was instrumental in kicking off one of Montana’s newest programs, Everybody Wins. It connects the company’s Pursuit of Excellence scholarship

fund for equine event competitors with dealers in trophies and awards. Potzman said the idea behind the program was to prevent participating retailers from losing out when event associations contacted the company



Once one of the only products made by the company, trophy buckles still represent a large profit center which is being expanded in 2007 to a higher end, hand-fabricated line.