

STAYING POWER

*Thanks to its employees and forward-thinking leaders,
the Standard Golf Co. has endured 100 years*

BY LARRY AYLWARD, EDITOR IN CHIEF

IT'S SUNDAY AFTERNOON, and Terry Schoppe is already thinking about going to work on Monday morning at the Standard Golf Co. But unlike millions of Americans, Schoppe, the product engineer for the golf course accessory manufacturer, isn't dreading the ring of Monday morning's working bell.

"I look forward to coming to work here," Schoppe says of Standard Golf.

This month, Cedar Falls, Iowa-based Standard Golf celebrates 100 years in business. With enthusiastic employees like Schoppe, it's no wonder the third-generation, family-owned company has been around for a century.

Schoppe is not the only one who enjoys working at Standard Golf. There's also Tom Brown, who has been getting up on Monday mornings and going to work at Standard Golf with a smile on his face for 38 years. And there's Larry "Red" Elliott, who has worked at Standard Golf for 28 years, and Matt Hurley, who has been there for almost 20 years.

"A good reason this company has been around 100 years is because people are happy to be here," says Hurley, Standard Golf's vice president and general manager.

Nobody knows that better than Peter E. Voorhees,



Standard Golf's president and CEO. Around the office, the approachable Voorhees is known as "Pete."

Voorhees is a quiet, unassuming fellow who doesn't get in the way of his employees. Even though his family has guided Standard Golf for 100 years, Voorhees realizes how vital employees have been to the business' success.

"A company's employees are the most important resource it has," Voorhees says.

Interestingly, some business experts say family-owned companies often suffer more than succeed under third-generation owners, who just don't have the same passion and wherewithal to run the companies their kin had before them.

"Pete's the third-generation owner — he's the one who should've spent all the money and driven the company into the ground," Hurley says. "Contrary to that, he has taken excellent care of the company."

Says Brown: "You hear it all the time — by the time the grandkids get the company, they're selling it off. Pete has helped this company grow."

Brown, the company's purchasing agent, says Standard Golf's product catalog has grown to 90 pages from 24 pages when he began at the company in 1972.

"We had record-growth years in the 1970s," Brown says.

"We went home at the end of the day dragging our tails, but it was a good feeling."

Pat Ryan, Standard Golf's traffic and export manager, says Voorhees saw an opportunity for the business to expand internationally about 15 years ago. Standard Golf's products now sell on five other continents in addition to North America.

"Pete has pushed for growth," Ryan says. "He's very forward-looking. The 100-year anniversary is a major milestone. It's a testament to Pete and his family."

Oddly enough, Voorhees almost didn't join the family business. He secured his law degree from the University of Iowa after graduating from Northern Iowa University and took a job in 1974 with the state attorney general's office.

Voorhees hadn't planned on joining the family business because his dad and uncle — Robert Voorhees and Maynard Voorhees — were planning to sell Standard Golf. But Robert and Maynard never received the offer they wanted. As it turned out, Robert bought Maynard's share of the business in 1975.

At the time, Voorhees was considering other professional options, not wanting a career as a government worker. Robert offered his son the job of chief financial officer, not out of Pete's realm, considering he majored in accounting as an undergraduate.

Eight years later, Robert stepped down as president and appointed Pete as his successor. Pete's sister, Sara Gregory, was named vice president.

In the beginning

Walter Voorhees, Pete's grandfather, founded the Standard Manufacturing Co. in 1910 and manufactured steel farm gates, ornamental gates and wagon tongues, which made sense because the company is in America's heartland, where agriculture thrives.

As the years passed, Walter looked for ways to grow the company. He also joined the local park board, and, in 1921, the board announced it was building a nine-hole municipal golf course. That got Walter thinking. The agriculture business was up and down, and Walter thought the expanding golf course industry was an opportunity for business because no company offered a complete line of golf course accessories. Most courses made their own flags, pins and cups.

"There was a golf boom in the 1920s," Pete says. "Although agriculture was still the major part of the business, my grandfather saw golf as a growing segment."

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Pete Voorhees stands next to portraits of his grandfather, Walter, and father, Robert, in his office. (Below) Employees Jim Nygren, Joan Christensen, Tom Brown and "Red" Elliott visit the company's warehouse.



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So Walter Voorhees added golf course equipment to Standard's product line in 1925. The company continued to manufacture agriculture products for farmers and began to manufacture accessories for golf courses. Standard grew steadily and introduced several new golf products.

In 1956, Walter retired and named his sons, Robert and Maynard, as the company's president and vice president. The brothers guided the business into the 1970s, and then made a huge decision that would change the company forever.

Because the agricultural business was shaky and very competitive, the Voorhees brothers began to rethink the company's direction.

"At that point they saw that golf was the more attractive option," Pete says. "So they made a strategic decision to concentrate more on golf."

Robert and Maynard sold the company's agriculture line and changed the company's name to Standard Golf Co.

"It was quite a departure," Pete says. "It was a big risk."

But it was excellent timing. The golf industry was undergoing another boom in the 1970s.

"There was a lot of construction going on and a lot of new interest," Pete says.

Legacy of innovation

Standard Golf has achieved many milestones in the golf accessory circle. For instance, it introduced the first hole cutter in 1938. It was also the first company to make a standard-sized cup. Here's some trivia: The cup's ferrule size is one-and-one-sixteenth of an inch wide and was originally made from the same-sized tube Standard Golf used to manufacture the steel farm gates.

"That became the standard size, which is unique to the United States," Pete says. "The ferrule size is different in Europe."

Golf has slumped the past few years, and the recession has affected Standard Golf's business, but not as bad as one might think. The company's business was off only 10 percent in 2009, and business was brisk in the first quarter of this year. While Pete Voorhees won't divulge Standard Golf's annual sales, he says business could be up 10 percent to 15 percent in 2010.

Voorhees says he's had several inquiries to sell the company, but he has no plans to do so. Like his father, Pete bought his sibling's share of the company several years ago.

Unlike other businesses, Standard Golf doesn't need a slew of new golf courses to keep its business going. It just needs its customer base of about 16,000 golf courses to keep replacing cups and flagsticks, Voorhees says.



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There isn't one product that dominates Standard Golf's business. What keeps the business moving are the products golf courses need to replace most often, such as flags, flagsticks and cups.

But the company doesn't stand pat and rely on the old standbys to pull it through. There's pressure to build better products, such as a new bunker rake with an improved design and handle. There's pressure to come up with new products.

"There's always something new that we're working on," Voorhees says. "Sometimes it's something completely new or a variation on an existing product."

Deeply planted roots

People in the industry often ask Voorhees why his company is based in Cedar Falls. The reason, of course, is because it started as an agriculture company. But Voorhees is not about to move Standard Golf to some golf-centric city in Florida or Arizona.

"We're here because my grandfather started this company here 100 years ago," he says.

Hurley, who grew up in Cedar Falls like many of the company's employees, says Standard Golf is a source of pride in the town. When people from Cedar Falls travel to other parts

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Pete Voorhees (top) credits the employees for his company's success. Matt Hurley says the employees are his passion.

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of the world and play golf, they see the company's products on the course. And they'll tell anybody who'll listen, "The company who made that product is from Cedar Falls, Iowa, and that's where I'm from."

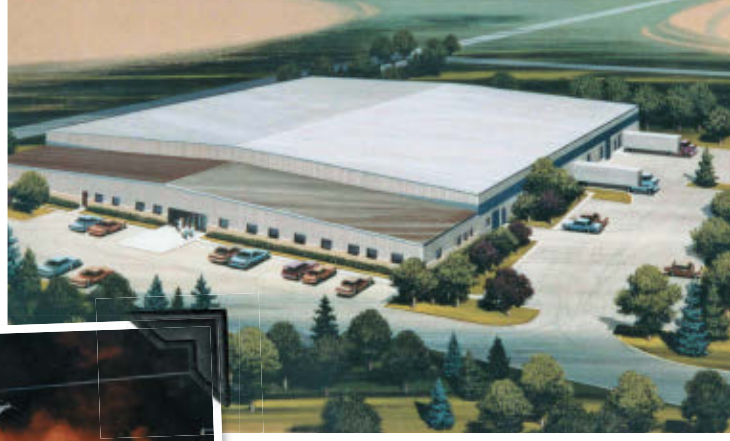
Standard Golf has had its challenges over the years. Some employees figured the company was finished after a fire destroyed one of its buildings in June 1992. The company lost most its inventory, but its manufacturing equipment was salvaged.

Voorhees made a quick decision to rebuild, which sent a message to employees the company wasn't going anywhere. A new 100,000-square-foot building was under construction shortly after the fire and opened less than six months later.

"It took awhile to build the inventory back up," Voorhees says. "But we were able to recover and get the business going quickly."

Another key to Standard Golf's success has been its employees' dedication to provide the best customer service possible.

"Companies don't last 100 years if they don't take care of their customers," Hurley says. "The customer is not always right, but the customer should feel as if he or she is always right."



(Left) A fire destroyed one of the company's buildings in 1992. (Top) But the company rebuilt its headquarters in another location shortly after the blaze.

Standard Golf aims to solve customers' problems, not just sell them product, Voorhees says.

"We listen to what the customer is asking for and try to be as responsive as we can," he says. "That's how small businesses like us continue to be effective."

An example: Standard Golf's customers complained about leaning and sticking flagsticks in cups, and Standard introduced the SMART-FIT Cup and Ferrule System to correct those problems.

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Joan Christensen has bought into the company's customer-first philosophy. The amiable Christensen, who began at Standard Golf in 1996, is administrator of SG Express, a department created to deal with end-users one-on-one. Standard Golf sells its products through distributors, but it does take some orders directly from end-users and then passes those orders on to the customer's distributor of choice.

"We do whatever it takes to satisfy customers," Christensen says. "I can have the worst day in the world, but I'm still courteous and nice when taking care of a customer's problem."

Of course, a company's customer service is only as good as its employees, which brings us back to Standard Golf's workforce. Hurley, whom Voorhees has trusted to run the company's day-to-day operations, says Standard Golf's employees are the reason he comes to work every day.

"I love these people," says Hurley, noting the average employee has worked at the company for 15 years. "They are my passion."

With dedicated employees like "Red" Elliott, it's easy to understand where Hurley's coming from. Elliott is 68 and old enough to retire, but he enjoys working at Standard Golf too much to give up his job. "I've been told I can stick around as long as I'm an asset," Elliott says with a smile.

While people like Elliott have provided veteran leadership, Voorhees and Hurley realize the company needs some young bucks to bring in new ideas. That's one of the reasons they added 29-year-old Jim Nygren, who joined about two years ago as a market analyst. Nygren isn't only the youngest employee in the corporate office, he's the only one with a master's degree in business.

"I offer a little different perspective than people who have been here a long time," Nygren says. "I might challenge the status quo a tad."

Nygren doesn't mean to sound cocky; he just wants to make use of his smarts. Nygren also realizes he has a lot to learn from the company's veterans.

"The knowledge they have isn't something you can just pick up from a text book," he says.

The future

No matter how long they've been there, most all employees wonder about Standard Golf's future. That's because Voorhees is 62 and has no children to take over the company as fourth-generation owners. There's talk of Voorhees selling the company eventually or turning it over to the employees. All of that said, Voorhees vows he's not yet ready to retire.

"I enjoy what I'm doing," he says. "You can only play golf and go fishing so much."

That's the sentiment of most of Standard Golf's employees, who love to come to work every morning, even on Mondays.

Here's to 100 years — and many more. ■