



# This Small-Town Businessman is as Solid as They Come

By Lori Ward Bocher

There's something so solid and reassuring about talking to Grant Mortimer, president and sales manager of Horst Distributing Company. A small businessman who puts employees and customers first; a dedicated family man who wants his kids to have every opportunity; a son who joined his father's business after first learning to stand on his own two feet; a man who appreciates living in a small town — his home town — where heavy traffic is far away and relatives are close by.

The Horst Distributing Company has been Grant's bread and butter for most of his life. Born and raised in Chilton, his father, John Mortimer, worked at Horst for about 55 years and was president of the commercial division of the company for more than 30 of those years. "He retired five or six years ago, but I hired him back right away as a part-timer to do miscellaneous things for the company," Grant points out.

"I don't have a lot of childhood memories of the company," Grant says. "Dad didn't bring his work home. And I never really worked there as a child."

But Grant must have picked up some of his father's knack for business because, when he graduated as class salutatorian from Chilton High School in 1984, Grant knew that he wanted to major in business. "But I had no thoughts whatsoever of ever coming back to Chilton or getting involved with Horst," he recalls. "Having grown up in a town of 3,000 people, I was one of those who said, 'I'm out of here. I'm going on to bigger and better things. There's no way I'll ever want to do anything in Chilton.'"



## Off to the city...

So he moved to the big city and enrolled in the business school at the UW-Milwaukee. He graduated in 1988 with a marketing degree and a minor in finance - and also the top business student in his graduating class. After college he went to work in the market research department at Heritage Insurance (now known as Acuity).

"My job was to research other insurance companies - their rates, their programs, everything that has to do with property casualty insurance," he explains. "I'd compare Heritage's policies with other insurance companies to see how competitive we were. Then I'd put together reports for the management."

"I enjoyed the job for a while, but the company was very structured. Bells would go off to tell you when you could take a break, things like that. It just felt funny," Grant explains. "So after about five years there I started thinking about looking for something new. Out of the blue, my father called me and asked if I had ever consid-

ered taking over for him at Horst when he retired. I told him I hadn't thought about it, but that I would."

It may seem odd that a father and son had never talked about this before, but it's true. "Dad never really encouraged me to be a part of the company," Grant recalls. "It was a small company, and he thought people might get upset if he tried to get his son into the business. So he never thought about it much until the time came closer to when he wanted to retire and he thought, 'Boy, who am I going to get to run this company?' And so he asked me. It didn't take me too long to say 'yes.'" He started at Horst in June of 1993.

## Company is employee owned...

Horst Distributing was, and still is, an employee-owned, profit-sharing company, or ESOP. "Years ago, Art Horst, the founder of the company, set it up this way," Grant explains. "When there was profit to share, he would give shares of the company. There was also an option for all employees to purchase voting shares in the company. Most of the employees here own one or both forms of stock. At the time of his retirement, my father owned a majority of the shares."

"I'm the majority owner now," he continues. "But everybody owns part of the company. That's what's nice about our company - everybody feels a part of the company because they own part of it."

There's another reason that Grant - who once declared that he'd never come back to Chilton - did just that nine years later. He and his wife, Bonnie, became parents in 1992. "Chilton is a great

place to raise a family," he says. "We're close to Grandma and Grandpa so we have built-in babysitters. I can't imagine raising my kids down in Milwaukee where we were. Here we personally know the teachers, we know the families of the other kids in school. It's great."

Following in his father's footsteps was a bit awkward at first, but not for long. "The employees here are long-time employees. They were used to dealing with one person, my father," Grant recalls. "It's always hard for people to change. I brought with me some new ideas and I thought it might be difficult for them to accept me. At first, it felt a little awkward. But, all in all, they accepted me quite well - the salesmen, the shop personnel. It worked out quite well."

The company has changed somewhat since Grant has been in charge - some by choice, some due to the business climate. "Internally, there's been very little change in the company," he points out. "In the late 1990s we expanded a little bit - added some territory and shop personnel, went from three to four salesmen on the road."

The company's territory encompasses 24 counties in Northeast Wisconsin and the entire Upper Peninsula of Michigan. The southern border runs through Sheboygan, Fond du Lac, Green Lake and Marquette Counties; then the border runs north through Wisconsin Rapids, Stevens Point, Wausau, and up to Michigan. Horst now employs 17 people - 14 full-time and three part-time (including his father).

## ***Shift toward schools, municipalities...***

"As far as what we distribute and sell, Jacobsen equipment has always been our bread and butter - half of our business," Grant explains. "Since I've come on board, we've taken on many new lines of equipment. We're always looking at new suppliers as far as getting other niche equipment. Smithco, National, Turfco, TIP Products, B&B sprayers, First Products Aeravator equipment, blowers, Manitowoc lifts - those are some of the new lines that we've taken on since I've been here."

"We also sell soft goods - Jacklin grass seed, Milorganite fertilizers, Lebanon Country Club fertilizer, chemicals of all different sorts, Standard and Par Aid lines - everything a golf course needs except



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for irrigation," he continues.

But golf courses have become a smaller part of the business at Horst. "When I started here in 1993 we were 80 to 85 percent golf," Grant recalls. "The remainder was schools, municipalities, and some landscape business. Now I'd say we're 60 percent golf and 40 percent non-golf. From 1996 to 1999 the golf business in Wisconsin was really expanding. We were riding that wave. But when golf course construction slowed down and then virtually stopped, we had to look for different markets to stay in business. We concentrated a little bit more on schools and municipalities."

It took some good old-fashioned cold calling and mailings to help Horst expand into the school and municipal markets. "And in 1996 we got involved with the Wisconsin

Timber Rattlers (a minor-league baseball team) in Appleton," Grant adds. "All the equipment they use for their field is ours. In turn, we have some season tickets that we give away to customers for appreciation. We also hold an athletic field seminar there every year. We invite many different schools and municipalities and put on an equipment show for them. This show has really helped opened up that market for us."

Working with school and municipal markets is similar to working with the golf course market. "We're here to listen to the customer, to discern their needs and try to solve their problems with the equipment that we sell," Grant points out. "And a lot of equipment can cross over. An athletic field conditioner, if equipped differently, will groom sand traps on a golf course. That

same lawn mower that cuts a municipal park can cut the rough at a golf course. We basically put on our golf hats when we visit a golf course and apply the equipment to the turf needs they have. And when we go to a school we put on a school hat and market that same piece of equipment in a slightly different way."

### No cuts in service...

With many Wisconsin golf courses having three wet springs in a row, and with school districts and municipalities making budget cuts, Horst has felt the effect on its bottom line. "We've had to do some cutting here as well," Grant says. "I think we've adjusted quite well. We want to be able to cut back on certain things without letting our service level go down, and I think we've done a good job with that."

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"Our employees take pride in their work because they own part of the company," he continues. "Our customers really enjoy the fact that people here know them by name. Our employees are very down to earth. They truly care about our customers and want to solve their problems."

"We want to make sure that superintendents are happy with the equipment they purchase from us," Grant adds. "If there's a breakdown, I get very upset about it and want to solve that breakdown as quickly as possible. I always tell the guys in the shop, 'Fix it as if it were your own piece of equipment.'"

Customers who call Horst don't have to worry about one thing. "As long as I'm here, when you call Horst Distributing, you will not get an automated answering device," Grant declares. "I know it would be easier and might save us some money. But I like the fact that, when I call a company, I can talk to a live person. I hate getting lost in the voice mail maze."

Off the job, Grant is a family man through and through. His wife Bonnie works part time as a registered nurse at a clinic in Appleton. They have three children: Sarah, 13; John, 11; and Lauren, 6. The kids attend the Catholic school in town through the 6th grade. "We feel it's very important for them to get a Catholic education," Grant says.

"Our two oldest are in piano and band," he continues. "We go from piano lessons to soccer practice to baseball, basketball, volleyball, swimming. We don't push our kids to be in any sports. But we don't want to hold them back, either. If they want to get involved, we let them."

### ***He drives kids because they drive him...***

For Grant, his kids are the most important driving force in his life right now. "I know we're running from place to place," he says. "My wife and I ask ourselves all the time, 'How can we keep doing this?' But

then the next minute we as ourselves, 'What would we do without kids? Where would we be, what would we be doing tonight besides watching TV?' So the kids are the driving force for my wife and me. We want to see them grow up to be good young adults, go to college, make something of themselves."

When it comes to business, there's a different driving force for Grant. "I don't know if this is good or bad, but I take every sale that we have personally," he admits. "If someone buys a new greens mower or even a bag of seed, I take it personally. I'll think, 'Oh, it's so hot. The grass seed isn't going to grow. I wonder if he's watering it. He should get that fertilizer on before it rains tonight.' I think about things like that all the time."

When he's not at work or chauffeuring the kids from place to place, Grant does find time to golf and hunt. "I golf in a league at Hickory Hills Golf Course here in Chilton every Thursday," he says. "And I also enjoy hunting with my

father - deer, pheasant, goose, duck, and turkey. My son is just getting to the age where he's starting to hunt with us."

"During the winter my wife and I have snowmobiles, so we try to get out as much as we can," he adds. "During the summer months we do a lot of camping with the kids - six times a year to different state and private parks. We vary it every year to keep it fresh."

As he approaches his 40th birthday, Grant knows what he'd like for his future. "I'd like to think that I'll retire here. I plan on growing old with some of the superintendents that I work with who are close to my age. I plan on looking for new and innovative equipment for golf courses, municipalities and schools. I try to constantly come up with different ways to make their jobs easier, to help them out, and to satisfy their equipment needs."

Now isn't that solid and reassuring? ♣

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