



Photo by Kate Melton

## Packaging company leader puts his enthusiasm to work

By VELVET SPICER

Jason Grady isn't afraid to stick his neck out or take on challenges others might scoff at. Eighteen years of his life were spent traveling up and down the East Coast racing motorcycles with his father; he turned professional at the age of 17.

So when he was tapped last summer to take the reins at Premier Packaging Corp., it didn't faze him. He was up for the adventure.

"I'm competitive. I want to win," says the packaging manufacturer's 45-year-old president. "I don't take well to failure. I always feel like I've got something to prove. My father was a very successful businessman and that's in my blood, I guess."

Indeed, since being hired in 2009 as vice president of sales for Premier's parent company, Document Security Systems Inc., Premier's sales have grown from roughly \$6 million to more than \$13 million, Grady says.

"The tangible goals are that we want to grow the business to about \$20 million in revenue over the next 24 months," he adds. "So \$3.5 million this year, \$3.5 million dollars next year, so at the end of 2020 we'll be at \$20 million."

DSS will do that by pumping capital into Premier's people and processes, Grady says. Premier employs 55 people at its 55,000-square-foot facility in the Village of Victor, and that is likely to grow as the printer adds equipment and space.

"I think we've got the nucleus to really drive this thing the direction it needs to go," Grady says.

### Changing of the guard

Premier was founded in 1989 by Robert Bzdick as an early innovator of upscale photo packaging. For two decades, Bzdick and his team continued to expand Premier's offerings to include everything from basic mailers and sleeves to folding cartons and complex 3D solutions to packaging and mailing.

In 2010, Premier was acquired by another Rochester firm, DSS, a leader in the development, design and manufacturing of secure identification and authentication technologies for documents, packaging and ID cards.

Bzdick, now retired, was named president and chief operating officer of DSS, as well as CEO of Premier, which had 32 staffers at the time.

The acquisition afforded DSS the opportunity to marry its own anti-counterfeiting technology with Premier's high-quality packaging capabilities.

"They wanted to be able to manufacture the goods that their technology resided on themselves," Grady explains. "The mindset was that they were going to put anti-counterfeiting technology or authentication technology on consumer packaging, whether it be pharmaceuticals, medical devices, food, luxury goods etc., and deliver that technology down through that particular channel."

When Grady joined DSS he already had a diverse background. With an undergraduate degree in medical illustration, marketing and design, Grady started his career in Chicago at a large healthcare organization illustrating surgical procedures and designing brochures.

But after a year of doing things he was told to do, Grady wanted a better understanding of why he was doing those things and, he acknowledges, he wanted to be closer to the money. So he returned to Rochester and earned an MBA from Rochester Institute of Technology in 1998. With degree in hand, Grady moved to Boston to work at a software company.

In 2003, Grady again returned to Rochester and worked for Parlec Inc., a machining component manufacturer.

"In my career, whether it be healthcare, software, manufacturing or packaging or printing, it was always around rebranding of companies, redeveloping sales organizations' go-to-market strategies," Grady says of his jobs leading to his time with DSS and Premier. "I knew of the former owner of Premier through my network. (DSS) wanted to roll all these operating divisions underneath the corporate umbrella. So it kind of fit my background, my skill."

### Niche growth

Under the DSS umbrella, Premier manufactures custom folding cartons, as well as document security printing. Those products include anything from temporary car titles and driver's licenses to college transcripts, passports and bank account checks.

The company serves the government, municipalities, financial institutions, the healthcare

industry and higher education within its document security printing, which represents roughly 30 percent of Premier's business. Its custom folding cartons and packaging side is 70 percent of what Premier does, Grady says.

"If we get a widget from somebody—a frozen pizza, frozen meatballs, a pair of sneakers, a medical device—we build a custom box around it," Grady explains of the packaging side. "We have design engineers from (RIT) that come in and design a three-dimensional structure via a CAD program. And then we manufacture it. We print, die cut, fold, glue and convert."

Some of Premier's biggest customers include Walgreens and Shutterfly, whose photo mailers the company manufactures. On any given day, thousands of orange mailers sit on pallets in Premier's warehouse, awaiting delivery to Shutterfly.

As the company continues its growth strategy, Premier will look to expand its facility, either with off-site warehousing or by taking advantage of the 4.5 acres the company has at its Victor facility. Already Premier has added new equipment to increase and speed up output, which will contribute to the company's overall growth.

That progress would not be possible without his team, Grady says, many of whom have a significant amount of time at the company.

"A lot of loyalty," Grady says. "And they're very good at what they do. I couldn't do it without them. I truly believe in a team atmosphere here and team environment. We can all push a lot harder together than we can as individuals."

Under Grady's leadership, says Premier's director of sales Jeffrey Knisley, the company's atmosphere is positive and upbeat.

"Jason Grady brings enthusiasm," Knisley says. "There are a lot of changes going on from the standpoint of equipment and capacity that's going to make it fun for all of us."

The biggest challenge Premier has faced is that for many years it "operated as a manufacturing company with a sales, marketing and customer service function as a secondary entity," Grady says.

"My philosophy has really been to switch that and go from a manufacturing company with a necessary evil, if you will, sales arm, to a customer service-centric sales company for the manufacturing arm," he explains. "At the end of the day it's all about empathy, being empathetic to my customers' needs."

Empathy and a focus on just-in-time delivery

## Jason Grady

Title: President, Premier Packaging Corp.

Age: 45

Education: MBA, 1998, Rochester Institute of Technology

Family: Wife, Christine; son, Alexander, 3

Home: Victor

Activities: Skiing, travel, family

Quote: "Let's face it, there's a lot of people that can do what we do around the country. What defines us and what builds a moat around our best customers is about customer service."

are key to the company's success, Grady says.

"Let's face it, there's a lot of people that can do what we do around the country," he adds. "What defines us and what builds a moat around our best customers is about customer service."

Mike Roy has worked with Grady in several capacities, he says, including at DSS. Roy says what Premier does well is concentrate on what it does well.

"There's lots of packaging manufacturers out there, and there are some very big ones, so to compete head to head with those types of companies is not really prudent," Roy says. "I think they've done a really good job of being focused on what they're good at, things that differentiate them and that they're unique in so that they can maintain some really good relationships with the customers they work with."

Roy says Grady is a "sales guy" at heart, and that he's magnanimous and has a presence when he walks into a room.

"He's also very detail oriented; it's something you don't see very often on the sales side of the business," Roy says. "The reason he's been successful from a leadership perspective is he understands the underlying detail, the numbers, the things that need to be in motion to make things succeed."

Grady brings youth to the position, Knisley says.

"In the past we had one person making a decision that would represent the whole company, and now we've got a management team of four that we rely on," he says. "Even though Jason's the president, he has the ability to listen to us and reason and maybe see our point of view."

The best part of his job, Grady says, is coming to work every day and "winning."

"Nothing makes my day like achieving a goal," he explains.

Grady says going back to school and then taking the helm at Premier were defining moments in his life, but he feared neither.

"I've never been afraid of change," he says. "I guess I'm lucky—that's a trait that I was born with. I don't mind adversity."

### At home

Raised in the Lake George area of the Adirondacks, Grady now makes Victor home with his wife, Christine, and his 3-year-old son, Alexander.

Despite a herniated disk and torn ligaments that ended his motorcycle racing career, Grady and his wife enjoy skiing here and in Utah. He also enjoys travel.

He says listening is a big part of his success in life and in business.

"You were born with two ears and one mouth and you should listen twice as much as you talk," he advises. "It holds true in life, but never more so than in sales."

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