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Future leaders in industrial distribution

Creativity, enthusiasm and a passion for their business inspire this year's crop of up-and-coming industry leaders

By Joe Nowlan, Associate Editor -- Industrial Distribution, March 1, 2009

Industrial Distribution's annual look at some promising young distribution leaders focuses on four individuals who, with one exception, didn't exactly plan their professional lives with industrial distribution in mind.

Pre-distribution careers in this year's group include a TV sports anchor, an Internet start-up owner and an (almost) school teacher.

All four, though, retain the enthusiasm and passion of a newly minted college graduate for their work—despite being steeped in the industry for many years now.

This enthusiasm is not unusual, and may even be essential for successful distributors, says Don Envick, professor of industrial distribution at the University of Nebraska-Kearney.

“[Successful distribution professionals] keep their own morale up,” Envick points out. “So they keep themselves and their staff jacked up.”

The four executives profiled this year also display an ongoing curiosity and eagerness for acquiring new skills.

“They are constantly learning,” Envick agrees. “They easily adapt and reshape themselves to the new realities.”

Another trait young executives must possess: The ability to use their knowledge to move into new areas.

“They are risk-takers, for sure,” Envick says. “Being born into an ambiguous and uncertain world, they're actually comfortable winging it.... [But] they hold themselves personally accountable for outcomes.”

Jessica Polychronis Industrial Supply Co., Salt Lake City

Although her grandfather started Salt Lake City-based Industrial Supply Co. in 1916, Jessica Polychronis never saw herself working there.

“Growing up, I definitely didn't think of working in the family business,” the 34-year-old Polychronis says today. “It didn't seem very attractive for a female. There was nothing glamorous about industrial distribution.”

Not glamorous, perhaps, but her distribution roots there give a deeper meaning to the expression “family business.” Her parents met while they were working at Industrial Supply, she explains. Her father, Phil Thompson, eventually became company president and today is its chairman.

Actually, Jessica was spending time at the company even before she was born.

"We have people still working here who knew my mom when she was pregnant with me," laughs Polychronis, herself now the mother of two.

Polychronis was interested in becoming a teacher. Upon graduating from the University of Utah in 1998, she planned to take a year off before pursuing her master's degree and teaching certificate.

She was waitressing in Park City, Utah, about 30 minutes from Salt Lake City, when she and her father had dinner and the talk drifted to the industrial supply business and his company, in particular. In mid-conversation, Thompson said there was a job opportunity at the company.

"He suggested I take it just to get some business experience while I was applying for my master's program," Polychronis recalls.

She was 24 at the time. Looking back, she says she can see why, from a parent's perspective, her father would make the suggestion.

"I had just gone to college for five years and was waiting on tables," she laughs.

But she also saw the pragmatic vein behind the suggestion.

"There were no strings attached," Polychronis explains. "There was no, 'Come here and work for the next 40 years.' It was more of a way to take some business experience into my master's program."

She never did enter that master's program. She took the job as a purchasing agent for Industrial Supply Co. and liked it right away, much to her surprise.

"It was kind of a reality check after college, but was a good fit for me," she says. "Even though initially it was more of a clerical job, I ended up taking a liking to it."

In hindsight, Polychronis says the company's purchasing department was ready for some younger blood and fresher ideas. Soon she was performing most of the department's duties, including meeting with suppliers and vendors.

It wasn't long before she became the company's purchasing manager. By then she was married and starting to raise a family.

Stints in the warehouse and other areas of the company followed, Polychronis says, including managing Industrial Supply's retail counter. Given her adaptability, when the company's marketing manager left, Polychronis went into that end of things, eventually taking it over full time.

"I've now had the whole gamut of jobs in my 10 years here. My current title is vice president of procurement and marketing—a weird hybrid of a job," she says. "So our purchasing efforts are coordinated with our marketing efforts and vice versa."

It gives Industrial Supply a unique selling point, Polychronis explains, in contrast to many companies in which the marketing people may not always talk the same language as the purchasing people.

"They can have different agendas," she says. "Purchasing is trying to get inventory down and marketing is trying to see about bringing new product. But this works well for us."

In her marketing role, Polychronis oversees a substantial advertising budget for Industrial Supply.

“We feel it’s important to make sure our name stays present in our market,” she explains. “We still have a strong footprint in our region here, and people know our name, but there’s a new generation of buyers out there and we want to keep our name in the forefront.”

It’s been 10 years since Polychronis decided to take that “no strings attached” offer before looking into graduate school.

“I really thought this would end up being a stepping stone job—[to] get a paycheck for a while. I can’t believe it’s been 10 years now,” she says. “I think because I’ve been able to jump around here internally, it feels like I’ve almost had a different job each time I’ve taken on a new responsibility. Many in my generation have been doing that in different businesses, but I’ve been able to do that here, in-house.”

She also finds the time to serve on the Industrial Supply Assn.’s Young Executives Forum.

“This group has been great for me personally,” Polychronis says. “It requires some additional travel, and having young kids, that’s difficult. But the relationships I’ve made with the others on the committee and getting the industry pulse from people across the country has been a real benefit.”

While she says some days are better than others, Polychronis admits she rarely looks back.

“I still feel I have to work harder than everyone else. You do that in a family business. If you want to be good, you have to put the time in to earn the trust of your fellow employees,” she says. “But I have a deep passion and love for this business now. Ten years in the business, and there’s still a lot to learn.”

Todd Carroll IDC-USA, Indianapolis

Todd Carroll can barely remember a day in his life when he wasn’t somehow involved in manufacturing or distribution.

For starters, Carroll’s father (Tom Carroll) worked in manufacturing with Aeroquip and later in distribution with Industrial Belting & Supply in Indianapolis.

“He started in manufacturing and later came to the distribution side,” Carroll explains. “Eventually he figured he could do [distribution] better, and he was a co-founder of Hoosier Rubber and Transmission in 1976.”

His father started Hoosier Rubber, based in Indianapolis/Lafayette, Ind., when Todd was a toddler and the younger Carroll had a uniquely intimate look at the growing business.

“When I was five or six years-old, I remember Saturdays going in and playing in the warehouse,” he says. “I also remember him having some late night calls. I’d sometimes go with him when he’d have to pick up some parts and take them out to one of the customers at two in the morning.”

The Indiana native, and vice president of distributor co-operative IDC-USA, looks back and says his first toys as a kid, “were pretty much gear boxes, conveyor belts and sprockets,” he laughs. “So I’ve grown up around the PT industry.”

While still in grade school, Carroll started his own business, a lawn care company, and grew it through high school and college, taking on a partner along the way. This involved more than just mowing neighborhood lawns, Carroll points out. His business was made up of three divisions: lawn care, irrigation and landscaping. He was still running it while in college, after which he sold it to a competitor.

“We had a couple of crews and more than 200 residential and commercial accounts,” he says. “It was something that really helped me understand the business side of running a [company] while also getting down in the trenches in front of customers.”

Carroll attended Purdue University where he was “an organizational leadership and supervision major. In a nutshell, that was business management,” he says. After graduating, he went to work for Martin Sprocket & Gear, heading first to Martin's training program in Texas, and then going to one of the company's Oregon locations. That was a good move in more ways than one. While there, Carroll met and married his wife, Jamie.

After four years and another move to Martin's Minnesota location, Carroll found himself loving the business but wanting to add to his knowledge.

“[Martin Sprocket] is a phenomenal company and their customer service is second to none,” he says. “I'd learned a lot from [working with] their product line, but wanted to learn more about bearings and other product lines.”

Carroll had heard about an opening with Rexnord Corp. back in Portland, Ore., as the company's full-line district sales representative.

It would not be his last move: from 1993 to 2004, Carroll would move 14 times, working in various states including Texas, Oregon, Minnesota, Tennessee, and Indiana.

The novelty of moving so often was wearing off, Carroll admits.

“They call some folks Army brats, but I was becoming more of a PT brat,” Carroll laughs.

The idea of returning to Indiana was always on his radar.

“After 14 moves in 11 years, building four homes and starting a family, it always made sense that if we could ever get back to [Indiana], we'd jump at the chance,” Carroll says.

At this point (2003), Carroll was working for Renold Jeffrey, which is also a supplier partner to IDC-USA. While in Indianapolis for Renold Jeffrey, Carroll heard that IDC-USA was looking for a national sales manager.

“Renold Jeffrey is a great company and gave me a lot of opportunities,” Carroll says today, “but sometimes you make decisions for family. So I threw my name in the [IDC] hat.”

He took the IDC position and the ticket home to Indiana in 2004. As vice president, today Carroll works daily with many distributors who made the same bold decisions to start their own business as his father did.

“Having the knowledge of the manufacturing side and the experience of calling on the national chains at a high corporate level ... and then to bring it back home to the independent [distributors] I was born and raised around has been great,” he explains.

During his time at IDC-USA, Carroll has been a part of a real growth spurt for the cooperative. In 2004, it had 58 members; today, it has 86 and closed the books on 2008 with double-digit sales growth, marking the group's eighth consecutive year of growth.

"We used to average one or two new members and product lines a year but now it's more like five or six a year," he explains.

For Carroll and his family, it's good to be home and not have the phone numbers of moving companies and truck rentals on their speed dial. Among other advantages, being home more often allows Carroll to spend time with his son and daughter. Taking his accumulated experiences in industrial distribution and making them work at IDC-USA is rewarding as well.

"I've had the opportunity to have been born and raised around independent distribution and manufacturing. We need these people and companies. It's what keeps the economy going," Carroll says.

Julie Copeland **Arbill Safety Products, Philadelphia**

Growing up in the greater Philadelphia area, Julie Copeland, president of Arbill Safety Products, had an ideal upbringing for a future business leader.

Her father, Barry Bickman, was president of Arbill, a distributor of industrial safety supplies. Her mother, Bonnie Bickman, was also running her own interior design business, and had worked in her own family's shoe franchise from the time she was a teenager.

"Both my parents were amazing role models in business leadership," says Copeland, president and CEO of Arbill since 2004.

Copeland graduated from Syracuse University's Newhouse School of Communications with a bachelor's degree in broadcast journalism. While there, she did some reporting for the school's highly regarded television station.

"It was a fantastic experience in planning how to communicate objectively and tell stories," Copeland explains. "But I felt I'd be better off creating my own stories instead of telling someone else's."

Soon after graduating, she and a partner started an electronic publishing company, Skyborough Associates.

"Skyborough was content management, although there are so many different words for it today," Copeland says. "The concept was data warehousing, taking content and putting it into a database system. We could then extract from it and populate it into print, CDs, all sorts of electronic formats."

From her experience in starting a business, Copeland realized she would benefit from an MBA and entered Temple University's Fox School of Business.

"I always had a thirst for learning. I'm a sponge. I like hearing about new philosophies, new best practices," Copeland says. "[In business school], I was excited to learn new ways of doing business and adopting it."

She continued to oversee Skyborough while earning her master's degree.

“Going through that MBA experience, it let me realize that anything is possible,” Copeland explains. “And I've worked hard as a leader to help people believe in that.”

In 1995, Skyborough was a success and Copeland had completed her MBA studies. Copeland's father was then president of Arbill and was about to hire the company's third marketing director.

The two talked about creating a legacy at Arbill, and Copeland soon found herself attracted to the notion. Copeland's grandfather, Robert Bickman, started Arbill in 1945.

“I thought [creating a legacy] and being a voice for the organization would be a great idea, so I came on board,” she says.

She accepted the marketing position, which gave her the opportunity to combine her MBA, marketing skills and technology experience—especially on her first key assignment: Arbill was about to release its first extensive product catalog.

“We were just on the cusp of deciding whether the catalog was going to be CDs or Internet,” Copeland explains. “There was a huge technology component, too, which was a good fit for my skill set and background.”

Unlike many older executives, Copeland's father was receptive to new technologies and ideas, she says.

“My dad was incredibly open to most of the new ideas,” she says. “At times that he wasn't, I'd ask him if I could test something or try it out. He is very analytical, so if I returned with an ROI showcasing the success I had, I'd be given a longer rope, so to speak, and try bigger things.”

Taking a broad, strategic view has served Copeland well in steering her company for growth over the last four years. She re-engineered Arbill to provide the full range of safety strategy, products and compliance services that corporations need to build a culture of safety.

“Our clients know that keeping their employees safe every day is key to retention and productivity,” Copeland says. “In an increasingly turbulent and uncertain world, people value safety for themselves and their families above all.”

Not long ago, safety was among the first areas of a company's budget to be cut when times got tough. Despite the sagging economy, Copeland says she no longer sees this trend.

“I feel our customers appreciate the value safety brings to their organization. It reduces workers' compensation claims and can boost productivity,” she says. “What I do see these days, though, are more shutdowns and layoffs. So there are fewer people to keep safe—fewer working days to provide protection for.”

Copeland's influences start with her parents, of course—the passion for business each of them has. Copeland also cites former GE CEO Jack Welch as an inspiration.

“He provides inspiration as he focuses on the absolute best in people, and on productivity and what motivates people—his core philosophies,” she says.

The 37-year-old Copeland serves on a number of Philadelphia-area business and civic boards, including the 3M Advisory Board, the Safety Marketing Group Board and the Young Presidents' Organization Membership Board.

With her time taken up with all this—as well as a husband and two small sons (5 years old and 9 months old)—she retains her passion for business and its potential.

“I believe people are inherently good, business is a game and winning the game is a complete blast,” Copeland says. “I have fun playing ball with all of them.”

Alex Wheelock

Connector Specialists Inc., St. Rose, La.

Alex Wheelock, vice president of Connector Specialists Inc., can tell stories of the time he threw passes to Hall of Famer Jerry Rice. He can also tell you what it's like to be on an oil rig in the Gulf of Mexico.

In a previous career, the 31-year-old Wheelock was a weekend TV sports anchor after graduating with a bachelor's degree in broadcast communications from Mississippi State University.

A life-long sports fan, it seemed like the ideal job. At first. But the combination of low pay and crazy hours made Wheelock think about another career. At one point, sports itself became more work and less fun.

“The hours were driving me nuts,” he says, referring to the mostly weekend and late-night demands. “I'd get home at night and the last thing I'd want to do was turn on yet another game. Eventually, watching sports became work, like any other job.”

He also evaluated his career path.

“I didn't feel I was making anyone's life better,” he adds.

Wheelock grew up in the New Orleans area, on the north shore of Lake Pontchartrain. His family was close friends with Edward Sutton and his family, founder of Connector Specialists. Based in St. Rose, La., Connector Specialists is a full-line Parker Fluid connector and automation house, Wheelock explains.

While Wheelock respected the company and Sutton's accomplishments, he didn't see it as a career. But as the appeal of being a sports reporter faded, he began to revise his viewpoint. He'd always had an informal standing offer to work at Connector Specialists and decided to give it a try.

“So I gave in and decided to see what the business was like,” Wheelock says. “I wasn't there for three months before I fell in love with [it]. I've been enjoying it ever since.

“Our motto is 'Your Solutions Partner.' From day one, that was the attraction. Even today, with a lot of my focus on operations and sales issues, the driving motivation is how we can be viewed as not just a vendor to our customers, but as a trusted solutions adviser and partner.”

The vast majority of his customers work in oil and gas exploration, Wheelock says. But neither he nor the company worries about putting too many eggs in that one industry's basket.

“We're kind of unique in that 80 to 85 percent of our business is in oil and gas,” he says. “We've been putting together record months because of what's going on in oil and gas. Much of what we do is in offshore drilling. Those dollars were invested long ago and they don't tend to react to the price fluctuations of the barrel price of oil the way land drilling does.”

Drilling into 6,000 feet of water, offshore oil rigs are expensive propositions, both because of the costs of the parts and machinery as well as insurance costs and other liabilities.

“When you're talking about \$500,000 a day just to stay up and running, you can't stop because of what they refer to as a 'blip in the radar' with oil prices,” Wheelock says.

Wheelock has stood on the rigs and it left a vivid impression.

“To see one, to go out and actually see one of these deep-water, semi-submersible rigs, is amazing,” he says.

Sutton was among those whom Wheelock considers a mentor in his career. Sutton passed away six years ago and his wife, Joanne Sutton, continues to run Connector Specialists.

“She has always been a mentor to me, too,” he says. “Bill Eaton [former vice president of distribution at Connector Specialists], who was at Parker, was someone I'd turn to for advice and support. He's retired but I still call him sometimes.”

And while he may not have been an actual influence on his career, Wheelock does have that Jerry Rice story.

During his sports reporting days, he was the weekend sports anchor and weekday sports reporter at WXVT, a CBS affiliate in Greenville, Miss.

Rice, considered by most football observers to have been the greatest receiver of all time, has family in the Greenville area.

“He just happened to be in town visiting and I caught up with him at a high school track and we did a feature with him,” he recalls. “So I got to throw him some passes.”

Rice became a Hall of Fame player in large part because of his remarkable level of focus and motivation. It is a motivation that Wheelock tries to apply to his work in distribution.

“The motivation is how we can help the customer better than our competition,” he says.

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