

Northwest Paper Box: Integrity. Service. Quality.



Photos courtesy of Northwest Paper Box.

From left, Brad Van Allen and his brothers, John Van Allen and Rod Van Allen.

There's a thoughtful, determined ethic in Brad Van Allen's way of doing business: "We're a good, family company. We've been around 70 years. We treat our people right, and we want to make sure our customers win."

Van Allen is CEO of Northwest Paper Box (NWPB) in Camas, Washington, a small community across the Columbia River from the Portland, Oregon, metro area. The company was founded in Portland in 1953 by Marvin "Van" Van Allen and his wife, Betty, and William "Bud" Van Allen and his wife, Elsie. As Brad tells the story, his father and uncle worked at the time for Grigsby Paper Box, a setup box company. "My dad and my uncle and aunt all worked for Grigsby," he recalls, "and at some point, the owner promised my dad and my uncle a bonus at the end of the year. He didn't have any profits to give them a bonus, but my dad and my uncle

and aunt were counting on it. So, they said, 'Maybe we can do it ourselves.'"

The seed thus planted, Van married, moved to Baltimore, and, while he was there, began buying up used setup box equipment. Meanwhile, back in Portland, his brother, Bud, got wind of the bankruptcy of another setup box company, Simpson Paper Box. The company and its assets were up for auction, and after rushing back to Portland with his truck filled with equipment, Van and Bud submitted a successful bid. "They found out how much the competition was offering," Brad says. "So, they bid \$1 more, and the next day, they started."

The Van Allens named their company "Northwest Paper Box," a tribute to their geography and their way of differentiating themselves from their competitors, Pacific Paper Box and Grigsby. It was also a sign to the market of the new company's reach.

Company: Northwest Paper Box

Established: 1953

Joined AICC: 1996

Phone: 503-240-2800

Website: www.nwpaperbox.com

Headquarters:
Camas, Washington

CEO: Brad Van Allen

The rich and diverse industrial base of the Pacific Northwest drove the company's early growth. From its early location in Portland, NWPB served several industries, from food to metal stampings to commercial printing.

NWPB's early success was founded in setup box specialty boxes and corrugated "triple-slide" boxes. Designed for heavier industrial parts, the triple-slide box consisted of three overlapping boxboard sleeves that essentially locked in the product. "Portland was a hub for Warn Industrial winches, and triple-slides were designed to carry heavy things," he explains, adding that this style of box was common before die cutters became standard equipment in paperboard converting operations. "Most people have gone to die cuts now; the triple-slide was a really good package, but it was far more labor-intensive than a die cut."

From the get-go, the new company was a family affair: Van, Betty, Bud, and Elsie ran the business, and when Van and Betty's sons and their daughter, Debbie, were old enough, they worked, too. "All of the family worked there at different times, beginning when we were pretty young," says Brad of his brothers Rod and John and sister, Debbie Guzie. "Sometimes my dad would bring home piecework for the whole family to do while watching TV—you know, jewelry boxes that get a piece of cotton in them or special inserts. He'd have this whole little setup for us."

Brad and his brothers all came into the business at different times. Brad, the eldest, joined in 1981. After getting his engineering degree from Oregon State University, he went on to Indiana University for his MBA in finance. From there, he joined White Motors in Cleveland, Ohio, and Farmington Hills, Michigan. "I learned a lot during that time," he says, adding, "I moved back because my dad started having health problems. I was 27 at the time."

Rod, now a vice president, was the next brother to join the business in 1983. He received his industrial engineering degree from Oregon State University and spent two years working for Kraft Foods in Buena Park, California. "I was doing efficiency studies, layouts, and modifying work stations," he says. "I joined Northwest Paper Box in 1983 after my father passed away."

John, also now a vice president, is the youngest of the three brothers. He attended Santa Clara University in California, where he earned a business degree. He joined the company in 1987, after a brief career in the commodities business in San Francisco; now, his focus at Northwest Paper Box is sales and marketing. "Being the best looking of the brothers, it became apparent that they had faces for accounting and production, but not to be out amongst customers," John recalls. "I was not thrilled with

the high-pressure sales arena of the commodities trade, and I was looking for a slower-paced living environment."

In the late 1980s, the three brothers decided to expand their footprint beyond setup boxes. "At the time, the rigid box business was not a growth business," John says. "We brothers wanted to continue to work together, and we chose corrugated as a logical expansion."

It was not an auspicious beginning, according to Brad. "So, we opened up a plant to do corrugated and promptly lost our shirts. We had no idea what we were doing."

The Van Allens began their bumpy ride into corrugated in a separate 20,000-square-foot building with a few pieces of rudimentary equipment: a 50" two-color printer slotter, a laminator, and a die cutter. Once the kinks were worked out, says Brad, things began looking up. "We thought we knew what we were doing at the start, but you know, there's a learning process," he concedes. "After we got our stuff together about how to price things, how to run things, we started making a little bit of money."

That early profitability prompted the Van Allens to look for additional converting capacity in better equipment and, if the opportunity arose, to look for companies that may be interested in selling. Brad found both. "We found another company called Taylor-Made Packaging that did corrugated boxes," he says. "They had a jumbo. We didn't. They'd been in business a long time and were profitable, but the majority owner wanted to get out of the business."

After the acquisition of Taylor-Made in 1993, the Van Allens consolidated their corrugated and their setup box businesses



Northwest Paper Box Euro Dong Fang crew (from left): Jeffery Dunn, Supervisor Daniel Raya, and Jacob Farrell.

in one location in the Swan Island Basin industrial area northeast of downtown Portland—a location they occupied until April 2023. It was during the 30 years at what Brad calls simply "the Basin" plant that the company continued to acquire equipment for both sides of their operations. "We were limping along with our printer-slotter and hand gluers, and we went to an AICC meeting and met Gene Wicks [former owner of Boxes Inc. in St. Louis]. He had bought a Langston Saturn III flexo folder-gluer, and he said, 'We can run the hell out of this thing and swiftly change from one order to the next.'"

Brad credits NWPB's membership in AICC for helping the brothers make prudent capital equipment investments. He recalls meeting Jim DeLine and Jim Davis of DeLine Box and Kevin Hartney of Peoples Capital at a meeting in Chicago. "My brother, John, and I went to the meeting, and those guys kind of double-teamed us," Brad says. "We weren't married then; we were just a couple of single guys trying to figure out what the hell's going on. They took us in and made sure we got to meet everyone. Kevin Hartney was a great advisor who helped us make the decision to purchase a new Saturn flexo folder-gluer from Langston's Ken Normann."

Member Profile

NWPB's growth from that point required additional investment in converting capacity in its corrugated and setup box divisions. Initially, says Brad, the choice was used. "We bought other used equipment," he says, "but we felt like it was all going to be a problem going forward, so [we] started buying new."

Rod looks after the equipment side of the business. "Rod is an engineer," says Brad. "Anytime we do any kind of machinery or moving things around, he gets involved."

The company's machinery acquisition philosophy is multifaceted, as Rod explains. "There are a number of things we look at when considering capital expenditures," he says. "First, we want to know if there will be gains in production efficiency, quality, and safety. Then we ask, 'What sort of ROI can we expect?' Or perhaps we can fill a niche where there is market demand and we could better serve that demand. Finally, we look at the availability of replacement parts and ongoing technical support via in-person visit or remote troubleshooting."

With these criteria employed, NWPB has built up a respectable arsenal of converting firepower: On the corrugated sheet plant side, an Apstar 6-color rotary die cutter; a Langston Saturn III 3-color and an EDF Europe Encore 4-color flexo folder-gluer; a Bobst specialty folder-gluer; an Eterna die cutter; and a Universal 74" printer-slotter. On the setup box side of the business, NWPB has five Emmeci setup box machines, multiple Crathern & Smith HNS setup box-wrapper lines, and ancillary equipment such as shrink wrappers.

Growing the setup box business in a static market challenged the company to look for viable acquisition targets in the Pacific Northwest. Brad credits his AICC connections with the guidance they needed at the time for valuations and structuring the deals. "We had a really good banker we were working with, and

then we also had Mitch Klingher of Klingher Nadler LLP to talk to. We were talking about how to structure a deal, and over time, I learned some of these things," he says. "Now, having bought four companies in the last 40 years, they have been important for our growth."

The chronology of the acquisitions goes like this: In 1995, NWPB bought the setup box assets of Grigsby Paper Box. In 1998, NWPB acquired the setup box assets of Pacific Paper Box. Then, in 2016, NWPB acquired the assets of Universal Paper Box in Seattle, a move that opened up the larger Seattle-Tacoma market, where Brad says there's "way more business."

"With these acquisitions, we have basically consolidated the setup box business in the Northwest," he adds.

The growth in volume eventually caught up with NWPB at its longtime location in the Basin industrial area in Portland. "Eventually, we felt like we had to do something to get more room to manage this volume," Brad says. "At one time, we had 20 truckloads of material outside for most of the summer because we could not process it fast enough through our plant. We moved our hand-fed die cutters around the building 14 different times to squeeze things in there and add new equipment, but in the end, it just was not an efficient plant. This, combined with our expiring lease and an increasingly unfavorable business climate, property tax structure, and crime near our facility, made us decide to look around for other options."

The search took them to Camas, Washington, to a former pressure washer company's facility, where NWPB invested heavily in the 2023 move and site improvements, including environmental



Brad Van Allen (left) and Emmeci Operator Tim Bentien.

upgrades to be a "good neighbor." Brad explains, "We have spent over \$10 million moving our equipment and upgrading our capabilities with our move to Camas from Portland. All of our upgrades were accomplished in order to drive out costs, increase efficiencies, and create growth opportunities. Our plant now is a show-piece of our customer-focused direction and capabilities."

"About \$1 million was spent on a waste building, which houses our wastewater treatment and scrap baler," he continues. "We designed the building to have the cyclone under roof because we wanted to significantly reduce the noise associated with scrap conveyance and be a good neighbor. Having it all in one place also creates a cleaner environment for printing and processing."

The Van Allens also improved the work environment through new lighting. "We also spent roughly \$200,000 on all-new lighting in the plant to provide a great working environment for our employees, create more accurate color measurement, and reduce energy consumption," Brad says, adding that the result is a plant with "improved workflow, quality, and safety. These initiatives help us create great products, service, and pricing."

NWPB's solicitude for its employees has been a core value since the beginning. Brad continues his family's desire to provide good careers for those in their employ.

“Creating family living wage jobs” was one of four founding principles, he says.

The company lives this ethos today, even in a challenging labor pool such as Portland. NWPB currently has 97 employees and has found great success in finding people who, Brad says, “felt like there wasn’t a place for them in America anymore. The people that we have been able to hire and have success with might have had some past difficulties that made it hard for them to find employment. They are some of our better employees; they like it here. We’ve moved some of them up into greater roles of operators and supervisors.”

Recently joining the three Van Allen brothers is Steve McDonald, a 43-year veteran of the corrugated industry. His résumé includes longtime positions with Commencement Bay Corrugated, Western Kraft, and WestRock and its predecessors. McDonald’s role is that of a general manager, but his card has no title on it. “He gets into everything,” Brad says. “He helps John in sales; he helps the salespeople. He’s kind of my eyes and ears out there in the plant.”

He lauds McDonald’s talents in those areas important for a corrugated and setup box operation. “He’s really good with people and understanding what they want, and he does a really good job for us in purchasing, helping us get our material costs in line with where they need to be.”

The story of Northwest Paper Box is as much a family business success story as it is a story about success in the setup and corrugated box industry. Says Brad, “One of the craziest and most interesting stories about our business is the fact that we have three brothers working together—and have worked together—for 35 years. And there have been times we want to kill each other, sure, but each of us has our strengths.”

Not surprisingly, then, each of the Van Allen brothers has his unique view of the path forward for NWPB. “We anticipate

NWPB’S CONNECTION WITH ‘ROYALTY’

Civic and community pride is a recurring theme in conversations with independent boxmakers everywhere. Company lobbies are showcases for various Little League, United Way, and other community service commendations and certificates of appreciation. So, too, at NWPB.

The founding Van Allens’ location and investment in the City of Portland reflected their community-mindedness, which is evident in the company today. Even the company’s logo reflects its dedication to Portland—also known as the “City of Roses”—by the inclusion of a rose blossom in the letter “o” of Northwest. “My mother insisted on it,” Brad recalls.

In 1961, this civic loyalty was recognized when Marvin “Van” Van Allen was honored for his contributions to the city by being inducted into “The Royal Rosarians.” A few years later, William “Bud” Van Allen was also recognized. “At one of the various parades they attended, Betty, our mother, drove a float because the original driver came down with an illness,” Brad says.

The Royal Rosarians act by mayoral declaration as “the Official Greeters and Ambassadors of Goodwill for the City of Portland.” The Royal Rosarians were founded in 1912 as a public outreach philanthropy for the city, and membership is reserved for citizens of civic and philanthropic prominence.

The brothers have continued this family tradition of community service. They have been involved with church-related missions trips and church leadership; coaching sports teams; volunteering; and being on the board of a local charity, Sunshine Division.



Northwest Paper Box founders Van and Betty Van Allen are ready for a Royal Rosarian event.

creating cost-savings and competitiveness via robotics and systems improvements,” Brad says.

Rod agrees, emphasizing the workforce. “Finding skilled people or those with an aptitude for manufacturing is a challenge. We are always looking for the next ‘thing’ that will help relieve manual labor or methods to improve workflow.”

John’s perspective captures both, and he weaves into NWPB’s motto of “Integrity. Service. Quality.” Says John, “Overall, we believe there is an opportunity to stand

out with excellent quality and service. I honestly believe our reputation for being a stand-up company, with unquestioned integrity, has helped buyers and companies we deal with spread the word about NWPB in the marketplace.” ■



Steve Young is AICC’s ambassador-at-large. He can be reached at 202-297-0583 or syoung@AICCbox.org.