

Growth is key to success

By PAM DAWKINS

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Despite differences in size and business type, the three winners of the University of Connecticut Family Business Program's annual awards share a common vision.

Growth.

"You can see where they've all branched out into new products, markets," Mark Sessel, president of Schmitt-Sussman Enterprises Inc. said Monday of the people he met at the Family Business of the Year ceremony in Storrs on Nov. 14.

The university selects nine finalists, three each in large, medium and small categories, and a panel selects the winners based on business success, multi-generational involvement, innovative practices and other criteria.

The 34-year-old Orange-based Schmitt-Sussman, also known as PFP Services, sells individual insurance programs — life, disability and critical insurance — to individual credit union members and helps the credit unions market themselves to new employees. Stan Sussman and John Schmitt II founded the company in 1973. Sessel is Sussman's son-in-law; David Sussman develops and manages the member's benefit call center, John Schmitt III is responsible for acquiring new clients and Timothy Schmitt manages the New York City sales territory.

The company won the first-place award in the large business category. Curtis Packaging Corp. in Newtown was first runner up, and ProMold Plastics in Cromwell was a finalist. About half of its nearly 250 employees are in Orange, with the rest in sales offices across the country.

"The key to incorporating a second generation, the number one key, is growing the business," to make room for the succeeding generations, Sessel said. But it's also important to be selective in who comes in.

Schmitt-Sussman's rules prohibit both spouses from working for the company and also requires two years of outside experience, a college degree and time spent in a variety of jobs within the business. "We're not bringing in any members of the third generation at this point," Sessel said.

North and west of Schmitt-Sussman Enterprises, Ervie "Bud" Hawley is working with his wife and four children in Danbury.

The Hawley Cos. owns and manages more than 1 million square feet of shopping centers, retail stores and office buildings in Danbury, Bethel, Brookfield and Newtown; its construction division operates around the state.

"If you want to grow your business, you have to go outside your own business," said Hawley, who did just that in the 1950s when he moved from a milk distribution business to a developer. He and his partner, who was also his uncle, opened Danbury's first strip mall, the Berkshire Shopping Center, in 1961.

His company won first place in the small-business category; Cavaliere Industries Inc. in Stamford was first runner up and BGR Radiator in Plainfield was a finalist.

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In addition to Hawley, employees include his wife, Carolyn, daughter, Barbara, and sons Gary and David. Another daughter, Nancy, operates a uniform rental store, which Hawley thought would be a good fit, considering the multiple medical office buildings the company has built.

Carolyn Hawley took care of the books in the early days, but Hawley said he didn't know then he was building a business for the family.

"You just don't know [then] how it's going to grow," he said. But as the shopping centers kept growing, he needed more help.

One grandchild is out of college and working in a legal office, he said, and the others range in age from 3 to college junior, so he doesn't know if the third generation is interested in taking over eventually. He would like to diversify a bit and take on the management of buildings the family doesn't own, which would mean adding staff, most likely non-family.

"Everything that we manage now is family owned."

Toward the center of the state, the winner in the medium-sized business category, Motorlease Corp., manages vehicles instead of buildings.

Century Spring Manufacturing Co. Inc. in Bristol was first runner up and Teddy's Transportation System Inc. in Norwalk was a finalist.

"It's very nice recognition" for the company and its employees, said Beth Kandrysawtz, vice president and treasurer. Her grandfather, Daniel Leary Sr., founded the company with Horace Corbin and Philip O'Neil in 1946. The company started out with individual vehicle leases then moved into managing small fleets in the 1970s. Daniel Leary Jr. took sole control in 1976.

Kandrysawtz, who earned an MBA from the Wharton School of Business and worked at Ford Motor Co., joined the business in 1985. Her brother, Jack, took over as president from their father, Daniel Jr., in 1987.

Motorlease has about 30 employees, Kandrysawtz said. "We want our employees to enjoy coming to work here."

About seven years ago, as part of that effort, the company changed its structure, and became "flatter," with employee teams that are "fairly self-directed." Motorlease tracks the buying, selling, insuring and maintenance for its customers, whose fleets run to 25 to 100 cars that are spread around multiple locations.

Through the awards process, Motorlease learned more about what the program offers, she said.

The challenge of a family owned business is also its opportunity, Kandrysawtz said.

"You wear a lot of different hats You need to keep yourself informed in a lot of different areas [but] that's part of what makes it so interesting."

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