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C&A Industries expands divisions, services throughout 40-year history

by Michelle Leach

In 1969 the forerunner to C&A Industries was a one-person venture specializing in matching companies with engineering and architecture talent. Now the organization's 400 team members work for four specialized staffing firms that match companies and talent across fields — from accounting to nursing. It also has three staffing-related affiliates, two nonprofits and status as one of the top 10 medical staffing companies in the country.

"What we're proud of is we took an entrepreneurial operation, which was a ma and pa operation, and built it into a corporate structure that has a national reach, a national audience and is fairly well-known nationally," said founder, CEO and owner Larry Courtneage, as he reflected on the company turning 40 this year.

"That's good for us, that's good for Omaha, it's good for the economy and it proves that Omaha can do it."

C&A, housed out of its 100,000-square-foot quarters at 136th and California streets, has expanded its reach in the staffing world through its portfolio of businesses: AureusMedical Group, Aureus Group, Celebrity Staff and AurStaff specialize in medical staffing, financial and executive staffing, administrative and legal staffing and industrial, technical and engineering staffing respectively.

"We're highly specialized — we're like Toyota, all Toyota does is make cars and all we do is staffing," Courtneage said. "We have specialized groups that focus on specialized niches. The success that we've had is because we specialize in staffing but we're not the Jack of all Trades."

"We have a group specializing in nurses, a group specializing in rehab people, and a group specializing in accounting and computer people and so forth."

Even the affiliates that are not specializing in matching organizations with talent, such as AurTravel and AurHomes, are still related to staffing, he said.

"We do have a travel agency and a housing organization, but that's all to help with the staffing side," Courtneage said. "We have employees working throughout the nation and we have to find housing and travel for them, so it's all staffing-related."

Though the groups that fall under the C&A umbrella are highly specialized, COO Scot Thompson said, diversity in the fields they serve has helped C&A through the years.

The nature of the operation has contributed to the company's status as one unique

to the city, Courtneage said.

"If you look around the Omaha area, there are lots of staffing firms but most are small or the branch office of a national company and have, at most, a dozen or so employees," he said.

Three-fourths of C&A's employees work for AureusMedical Group. This unit competes on a national level with larger companies — yet they are still a major market contender, ranking among the top 10, Courtneage said.

Thompson said the company is a leader in other local and regional markets through its other units that focus on that local and regional level.

Courtneage attributed C&A's status to the absence of regional and area offices. He said C&A strictly focuses on its Omaha office.

"It allows us to do a better job of hiring, training and quality control — versus having a zillion little branch offices," Courtneage said. "A small branch office is very hard to control."

Thompson said this structure has enabled the company to foster a culture more conducive to long-term growth.

"If you have a small outside office, you can put in policies and procedures, but it's hard to maintain the culture," he said.

"If you have a great culture and build upon the culture in one location, we found that we can be much more successful more quickly by surrounding our new people with our existing successful people."

That culture is expressed, in part, through the company's community giving, Courtneage said.

According to its Web site, C&A employees have organized toy drives to benefit the Salvation Army, an AurElves holiday program to support groups like the Ronald McDonald House and area shelters, and community walks like Susan G. Komen Race for the Cure and the National Alliance for Mental Illness Walks, among other philanthropic ventures.

In addition, C&A launched its own nonprofit, The Kim Foundation, to provide support for individuals and families touched by mental illness.

Its other nonprofit, Career OutReach, empowers individuals who are unemployed, under-employed or unsatisfied with their careers to improve their employment situations, according to the organization's Web site.

Its culture is also defined by team-gear initiatives, such as the day-long event at FunPlex for employees to celebrate the company's 40 years in Omaha together.



From left, co-CEOs and owners Larry Courtneage and Kathy Wolf-Courtneage, with COO Scot Thompson ... Ma and pa engineering staffing firm spurs seven divisions, two nonprofits and national reputation in medical world due in part to unique corporate structure.

A week later, Co-CEO and Co-owner Kathy Wolf-Courtneage said, C&A staff, clients, prospects and close business friends will converge on the top floor of its headquarters for an open house to celebrate the anniversary.

Thompson said the company is in a good position to celebrate another 40 years — and beyond — as demand for their staffing services grows.

"The Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that over the next six years it is estimated that there will be approximately 3 million people that leave the workforce, and the population is projected to grow by 19 million people," he said. "So we're going to have nearly 20 million more people and 3 million less people to provide the goods and services for those people. The long-term fundamentals are still there and aren't going to go away."

The gap in employees to provide those goods and services is being driven by the aging baby boomer population — and the initial projections with regard to the number of boomers leaving the workplace is actually lower than reality dictates, Courtneage said.

An example of the shortage, Thompson said, is the nursing field — the Department of Health and Human Services projects the 12 percent shortage of nurses will balloon to 20 percent by 2020. But it's not just the medical field that's suffering, Courtneage said.

"It's not just nurses — it's every profession that has similar problems," he said. "And down the road there will be more of a resurgence in hiring the senior worker because the necessity is going to demand that."

By its very nature as a staffing solution, available to match talent to an organization's needs or shortages, Thompson said, it's in a good position.

"Finding great people for your organization never goes out of favor, regardless of the economy," Thompson said.

"We all need great people all the time."

And, in some respects, those great people are at an even higher premium during economically challenging times — when each employee must be top-notch to take on more, possibly, with less.

"Sometimes you're hiring individuals to improve your existing work staff and sometimes you're hiring individuals to expand your work staff," Thompson said. "It's not prudent for any organization to not continually look for the best people to be in business for them."

With regard to C&A, the number of employees may once again reach — or transcend — its former peak of 500 team members.

"We expect as things turn around to be back up to that number and more," Courtneage said. "It's just a matter of finding the right people."

The right people may involve re-hiring former employees.

"We'll have to analyze their skills when the time comes to see if they match the skills we need at that time," he said. "As the economy and the world changes, the required skill set seems to change."

"We have to adapt to a changing world."

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