Mill-Rose: A Century of Excellence

The gift of agility transformed a confectionary store into the largest manufacturer of twisted wire brushes and other products for the PHCP industry.

BY RUTH MITCHELL

They say there is no such thing as coincidence.

In 1919, Victor H. Miller purchased a confectionary store on the east side of Cleveland. In addition to candy, the store sold the usual picture postcards and other trinkets that were popular at the time. To display the items, Miller needed pegboards and wire racks to showcase them. With agility and an artistic eye, he fashioned the wire racks and boards by hand.

One day, as fate would have it, a representative from a manufacturing company was in the store and watched Miller with his deft hand twist and bend the wire. The man knew Miller would be perfect for helping his company make percolator brushes and offered him a contract to do just that. From that offer developed a partnership between Miller and a gentleman with the last name of Rose and, in 1919, the Mill-Rose Co. was established.

The duo was in business for many years; eventually, Miller became the sole owner. Today, the company, located in Mentor, Ohio, remains family-owned and -operated, with the fourth generation carrying on the tradition of unvarying quality and customer excellence. Mill-Rose is a manufacturer with a foundation of engineering and making quality brushes, and a global distributor of solvents, adhesives and tools for multiple industries, including the PHCP channel.

The man who started it all, Victor H. Miller, whose ability and agility to transform wire changed the trajectory of his business.

The company has an industrial division serving gun manufacturing to aerospace and the PHCP industry. Within this division is a line of Clean-Fit products which consists of a complete line of brushes, abrasives and PTFE sealants, and includes the Blue Monster brand of products. With almost 300 employees, the company uses more than 100,000 square feet of manufacturing space in Ohio and Mexico. With a variety of products made in addition to brushes, the company operates a 70,000-square-foot distribution center in Mentor.

The company is run by fourth-generation family member Greg Miller, who has been in the business for many years. He was appointed president upon the unexpected loss of his father in late 2018. Other family members who work in the company include Miller's brother and cousin, who are involved mainly in the industrial brush division, and an uncle who runs the Texas and Mexico facilities.

Mill-Rose is a fascinating study of how one product, in different forms, is used in several industries. In 1934, the company manufactured cleaning brushes for the electric shaver industry. In 1940, the company received the first lend-lease contract for rifle cleaning brushes. By the end of World War II, Mill-Rose had produced more than 35,000,000 brushes.

"The industrial division is one of the founding parts of the business that helped us grow," Greg Miller says. That division manufactures brushes for a cross-section of industries: aerospace, agriculture, automotive, defense, energy manufacturing, medical, technology and telecommunications. "When I was younger, I asked my dad, "Why so many brushes? He said that a brush is needed in production to prepare, deburr, and smooth surfaces, and just about everything that is produced, from glass tabletops, to microchips in computers, to engine blocks, are touched by a brush."

This applies to the manufacturing process in the PHCP industry as well. Mill-Rose manufactures brushes that deburr, polish, finish, sort, auger, conduct, dissipate, collect, move and protect materials from cleaning pipe to cleaning the tools that make the industry run. "How many brushes do you imagine are in the average household?" Miller asks. "More than you think —37 is the average number. From mascara wands to hairbrushes, toilet brushes, grill brushes — you name it." It's easy to see how the company has designed more than 100,000 special brushes with unique configurations for unique applications.

Included in this division is the Clean-Fit product line, including the Blue Monster line of professional-grade brushes, abrasives, sealants and hand tools, and is the most visible side to the PHCP industry. "There was a demand in the industry to clean and prep copper for soldering," says Miller.

The products are sold through wholesale distribution and focused on the contractor. The company has a long-standing partnership with wholesalers, and is active in supporting the channel by being a long-standing member of the AD, Blue Hawk, Embassy, WIT, and IMARK buying groups; rep group AIM/R and the American Supply Association (ASA), where Miller and other colleagues like John Kirkland, National Sales Manager at Clean-Fit Products, have been volunteers and participants in numerous ad hoc groups.

> "CONGRATULATIONS TO MILL-ROSE AND GREG ON THE COMPANY'S 100-YEAR ANNIVERSARY! A GREAT MILESTONE AND A COMPANY THAT IS A PLEASURE TO DO BUSINESS WITH. GREG IS ALWAYS UPBEAT AND HAS BEEN AN INNOVATOR IN PRODUCT DEVELOPMENT. GOOD LUCK IN THE YEARS AHEAD!"
>
> — AJ MALONEY, EXECUTIVE VICE PRESIDENT, COBURN SUPPLY CO.

"I enjoy the relationships I have developed in the industry — it's fun and personal," he explains. "Many of

Avid sports fans and golfers, Greg Miller (right) alongside his father Paul, enjoying a round of golf. Paul was the third generation in the family business and taught Greg the value of being a good industry steward and partner. He will be remembered for instilling in Greg this philosophy: "When you buy from us, it's not just a transaction — it's the beginning of a relationship."

those relationships developed into lifelong friendships. We have grown up and through the ranks and have taken over leadership roles — that's fun and fulfilling for me." And, as Miller tells it, these friends support each other and help build the bonds of trust and integrity.

"My philosophy is building relationships and reaching a trust level with our customers," Miller says. "We provide a service and a product that one doesn't need to think twice about because it is built on a foundation of quality and service. It takes a lot to build that bond."

Supporting the wholesaler is a foundation for the company, and "we go above and beyond to help our customers shine," he notes. This includes participating in customer trade shows and demo days, hitting the road for joint sales calls, and co-opting merchandise such as mugs, shirts, hats, and boxer shorts, that get the customers' customers excited about the brand. "I would like to think we have an ease of doing business, and we make it fun," Miller says.

Building foundations of trust and accessibility are part of the company's success. It also helps when your product has such a unique identity. When launched 15 years ago, the Blue Monster line needed something to make it stand out from other products on the shelf. Miller and his team collaborated on what would differentiate the product from others.

"It all started with a simple review of our line of thread seal tape. There wasn't any blue colored tape, and no one was offering a monstrous sized roll," he explains. "When I was in school — and wasn't paying attention — I would sketch." So, the idea of a big, blue monster struck him. "I sketched it out, the team illustrated it, and bam — the monster was born."

The Blue Monster has become iconic and has a personality of its own. The manufacturer will often deliver full size- cutouts to industry events that make surprise appearances. You may find one greeting you upon entering a bathroom, down a meeting room hallway or near a hotel elevator. It usually elicits smiles and giggles of familiarity. The same goes for displays at the counters of wholesalers. The cutouts and displays draw attention and a smile from customers — bonds of trust and partnership.

"We develop and sell premium, professional-grade products," Miller says. "By developing and creating a premium product, it means fewer issues and brand reliability. All of us at Mill-Rose recognize and share the same vision of providing a great product to the end-user. This ties into the company motto of "A Century of Excellence."

Mill-Rose is continually looking at ways to innovate and provide new products, and Miller excitedly describes one of the newer launches — compression seal tape. Unlike others on the market, this product "allows a contractor to repair a live leak up to 150 pounds of pressure live in a wet condition and walk away from the job." It is a temporary fix, but it allows for pipe with significant water leaks to hold the leak and buy time until a permanent fix is available.

OUR MOTTO: OUR FOCUS IS ON QUALITY AND INNOVATION AND HOW WE TAKE THE PRODUCT TO MARKET TO BE MORE NOTICEABLE AND EFFECTIVE. WE TAKE CARE OF THE CUSTOMER, BECAUSE WE KNOW THE CUSTOMER IS KING.

Miller explains how the wholesaler has been an invaluable partner with the Blue Monster line: "Our wholesaler partners are the ones who have been instrumental in building brand recognition for us. Their partnerships have provided significant growth for us over the years — and its thanks to their collaboration. We value their partnership and, in turn, do our best to be the best partners. As things are changing, we are looking at how to align ourselves with industry trends and, most likely, it will be with a Blue Monster product."

"There are very few companies that understand the value of marketing and partnerships. Greg Miller and the Mill-Rose Co. set the bar. It is impressive when a company that produces cleaning brushes, Teflon tapes and thread sealants can command a market and drive volume the way that Mill-Rose does. They sell the vast majority of wholesale distributors across South Florida; however, since the beginning, they have made Lehman Pipe feel as if we are their only customer. I am proud to be a Mill-Rose stocking distributor, and I am truly excited to see what products they come out with next." — Josh Aberman, executive vice president, Lehman Pipe and Plumbing Supply

With an active research and development team, Mill-Rose is focused on the future to enhance its solid reputation for outstanding customer service and support, as well as quality products. "Some of our best products and ideas come from contractors calling us to say, 'If I had this product in the field, it would make my job so much easier,'" Miller notes. By listening to the contractor, developing products that can resolve problems and providing those products through the distributor — it strengthens the channel. The company was founded to solve problems, address challenges and provide excellent customer service.

Building a Culture of Family

Surviving and thriving for a century in business goes beyond providing exceptional products; it relies upon employees to bring the vision alive. The Mill-Rose company culture is that of a family — just like the individuals that oversee its operations.

Driving down the road to the company's headquarters, you pass by many businesses with "help wanted" signs lining the street. What is the Mill-Rose magic for the nearly 300 employees it maintains? "It's important to take care of your employees — that is first and foremost," Miller explains. The company does it in small building blocks that add up to employee loyalty. "We provide a clean working environment, treat our employees to company picnics that include their families, which are an extension of ours," he adds. "We provide good benefits and an open-door policy where anyone can come in and discuss what is important. It's about understanding that each of their jobs is just as important and making sure they know it." Several employees have more than 45 years of service at Mill-Rose and many generations of families have worked for the manufacturer.

An interesting fact is that close to 90 percent of the workforce on the shop floor is female. "My grandfather told me we need to accommodate our workforce with more flexible hours," Miller says. "We delayed the start of our morning shift until 8:30 a.m. to accommodate female workers, knowing that moms are usually the primary caregiver in a home and need to take kids to school." A delayed start time would allow for the family unit to thrive and the company unit would as well.

Miller described heartwarming stories of employees. He smiled as he did — and it's evident he knows the name of each employee and cares about their livelihood. "I know life is short, and it's too important not to take care of your employees," he notes. "I want people to come here and work hard, but I also want them to be able to enjoy life. I'm sure that's how the company was founded, and that's how I'll continue to operate because they are what make it happen."

An example of the Blue Monster line of products, the line of PTFE tape stands out from others on the market due to its reputation for quality, reliability and its "personality."

Looking Toward the Future

With a shrinking labor pool and expanding markets, the company is looking at options for filling the gap in the future – and the future is robotics.

"We have a great staff of engineers throughout our facilities that examine how we are doing things today and what we can invest in for tomorrow, five years, 10 years down the road," Miller says. "Robotics will complement the efforts of our workforce to meet future demand," he added.

The future is beginning to take shape, as the company has invested in robotic arm machines that can produce a thousand brushes in minutes vs. hours.

"We are investing heavily in equipment," Miller adds. "With Mill-Rose Laboratories and Clean-Fit under one roof, Mill-Rose industries down the road and the Mexico and Texas facilities, we have more than 200,000 square feet of production space. We are still crammed — but that's a good sign."

There is a lot of demand for brushes!

Is a Brush just a Brush?

Mill-Rose designs and manufactures more than 15,000 different brushes. On the industrial and PHCP side, those range from cleanup to burring and polishing, etc. But there is another area one wouldn't typically think of. From gastrointestinal items to breast biopsy wire, the company has the medical field covered. "Design engineers from the medical field around the world contact us to create a prototype," Miller says. He shows me a wire and explains that it is a breast biopsy wire, which was developed with doctors to move through a syringe for breast tumor surgery.

He went on to discuss how the company is working with an offshore firm on the development of a device that can alter blood flow to an area of the body that could potentially reduce or halt the growth of cancer cells. "It's innovative and it's fascinating," Miller says. "That's why I feel the story is so great, because brushes touch so many industries in so many ways."

Brushes wear out and are also disposable, so there is always a demand for the product. "There's always a need, and a want for something new," he notes. "Calls come in daily from customers looking for something new – its every day, all day. So that is why we are constantly developing parts and fulfilling the needs of the PHCP and every industry."

Pictured is the manufacturing operations of the Mill-Rose Co.'s industrial side. Thousands of different brushes are made in its facility in Mentor, Ohio, that service a wide array of industries.