Whip Mix, like the rest of the dental industry, has been challenged by the rapid rate of change both in technology and in dentistry. In reflecting on our 100th year in business, we find many reasons to celebrate, but it is the changes we have made in the last 20 years that have proved to be the most significant to prepare for the future. A brief overview of our first 80 years sets the stage.

1919 - 1990s

From its first product, a dental inlay casting unit with a mechanical spatulator that whipped and mixed (and thus gave the company its name), the company expanded its product line through both internal development and acquisition. Our legacy product lines included gypsum and investment materials, dental lab equipment, and furnaces. Subsequent generations of these products are still being made today. The chemical line grew to be extensive, and our early mechanical products, such as vacuum mixers, trimmers and articulators, are still seen in dental laboratories, some literally lasting a lifetime (60+ years). Because Whip Mix made products used in producing restorations — but not the final restoration — there was minimal FDA regulation. Initially, our regulatory risk was limited to OSHA, dust control and safety.

2000 – Today

In 2007, our digital technology journey began with the opening of new division — Digital Technology Solutions — to design and manufacture zirconia restorations for laboratories. As desktop mills became more affordable, our business strategy then changed from being a milling center to a CAD/CAM provider. Today, DTS is a print service for models, surgical guides and patterns. Milling services are provided at cost as a back-up for customers if their mill goes down.

We are presently manufacturing the fourth generation of Vericore zirconia. Our other disc materials include Gradient Temporary PMMA, burnout pattern PMMA, and a variety of millable waxes. The addition of Medical Device Class I, II materials and additional certification requirements for ISO 13485, CE and MDSap has necessitated increasing personnel in our regulatory and compliance team. Our latest research and development focuses on one of the fastest growing areas in dental technology — 3D printing.

Today, we have a hybrid sales model: Whip Mix legacy products are sold through distribution and 3Shape, Roland, Asiga and the products we manufacture to be used with them are sold direct. Our sales team now includes additional regional territory reps both in the U.S. and Canada and we continue to expand our technical support team for training and supporting digital equipment, software and computer networks.

(Left) Pictured l to r: Will Devine, Whip Mix; Asiga’s Justin Elsay; and Whip Mix’s Bernie Jaroslow, Sheri Weatherby, Cheri Pieper, Anne Steinbock, Margaret Overmear, Chris Frye, Evan Kemper and Cory Lamberton

photo courtesy of LMT Publications
Anne shared with the JDT some of their struggles, successes lessons learned over the years.

What were the biggest challenges in transitioning your staff from analog to a digital world?

Constant changes in technology such as software updates. When error codes or glitches occurred in design modules we needed a workaround before the problem was solved in the next update. For our team to troubleshoot they required problem-solving skills to work through it as it’s not just a matter of reading a manual to fix a mechanical part.

A digital workflow requires a computer network to capture and transfer data from scanner to design to mill or print and the complexity increases with open source equipment and new materials. Our team needed access and training on each of the workflow components to troubleshoot for our customers’ installations.

The hardest challenge was getting each team member to recognize that change was happening with or without them. To be part of the team, each had to commit to learning a new digital way of applying their dental expertise.

What are the skill sets you believe are needed for general managers and department managers in today’s dental laboratory?

I believe that the skill sets lab managers need are first and foremost, communication skills. It all starts with listening. Second, an understanding of the generational differences between the millennials, GenXers, and Baby Boomers and what motivates them. What are some lessons/takeaways Whip Mix has adopted from industries that you believe dental laboratories can learn from?

Our executives are active in a local Vistage Leadership Group and along with several other members are implementing the Entrepreneurial Operating System (EOS). The book TRACTION by Gino Wickman contains all the tools and components that make up the EOS. It’s based on strengthening the six key components of any organization: Vision, People, Data, Issues, Process and Traction. I encourage every lab owner to take the time to work on your business — not just in it.

Lean manufacturing, which started in the automotive industry, is an ongoing process at Whip Mix. All labs can benefit by eliminating waste in time, materials and human capital.

Funding for Lean and other employee skills is available through state grants.

Continuous Improvement programs are easy to implement yet effective. Encourage all employees to provide recommendations on how to improve productivity, customer service, and product performance.

How have your global partnerships allowed Whip Mix, a relatively small company, to continue to grow in a competitive market?

Our global partnerships with other industry leaders such as 3Shape, Roland DGA, Carbon and Asiga have given us an advantage of working with world class leaders in digital technology. This allows Whip Mix to focus our resources on developing materials for milling and printing such as resins, zirconia, wax, and PMMA as well as accessories for integrating our occlusion products into lab scanners. We can better support the products we sell because the equipment and materials are used in our DTS production center.

What do the next 10 years look like for Whip Mix? What about the next 10 years for the dental laboratory market?

The next 10 years at Whip Mix:

- Continue to be a people-focused business and to invest in new technologies
- Incorporate artificial intelligence into equipment
- Provide more service and software solutions
- Grow through acquisition and strategic partnerships
- Develop biological regenerative materials for dental and medical applications

The next 10 years for dental labs:

- Growth of DSOs will add pricing pressures for lab services.
- Dentists who bring digital technology in-office will need technical services provided either in-house or remotely to design and manage the digital workflow.
- Advancements in equipment will automate lab processing, thus reducing labor costs.
- There will be a shortage of technicians skilled in both dental and digital technologies.
- There will be fewer labs as the cost of technology and aging workforce will cause some labs to close or sell.

Lessons Learned

Changing a 100-year business to meet the new demands of its customers has been no small task. It’s taken a lot of effort and investment of time and money. Here’s some of what we learned.

- You can’t do everything at once — Break it into small chunks to start and then build on from there. It gets easier as the knowledge base can be applied to new technology or applications.
- Technology is expensive, yet it’s not a matter of IF but HOW you will incorporate it into your business.
- Commit to change. JDT

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