

THIRD GENERATION LEADS ONWARD!

Mt. Lebanon Awning's Triple Threat: Leadership, Technology and Customer Relationships

by **Tonie Auer**

Since taking over Presto, Pa.-based Mt. Lebanon Awning (MLA) from his late, great-uncle Louis Schmitt in 1980, Bob Campbell has brought in the third generation of family members to run the company and has implemented state-of-the-art technologies and processes. Now, he's ready to expand the business.

MLA has grown over the years, but remained a small family-owned company and that's the way Bob wants to keep it—with a few caveats. Having the right technology to improve the product and stay on the cutting edge of the awning industry is one of his biggest goals.

"We want to have control over everything that comes in and goes out of the building. We do everything here and subcontract very little. We have all the graphics equipment that sign companies have, like digital printers and plotters, because I want to have control over the final product. We even do some graphics work for other awning companies that don't have our capabilities," says Bob, who serves as MLA's President.

Looking ahead, company leadership is planning now to buy property to expand the business within the next few years. While the specifics aren't concrete, Bob says the timing is right with a great team of hardworking family members, combined with the fact that some competitors are going out of business.



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Continuing a proud family tradition are (from left to right) Bob Campbell, Linda Campbell, Lauren Costello, Cristin Conlon and Ryan Campbell.



“I think one thing about a family business is that it is yours. It is something everybody can take pride in. When it is yours and bears your name and your family depends upon you, it makes you want to work harder and be a little more conscientious in what you do.”

Bob Campbell, President, Mt. Lebanon Awning

“The timing is good to make this move,” Bob says. “We have built lasting relationships with our customers, residential and commercial, that span decades. We attribute this to our great product, hardworking employees, and individualized customer service.”

CHANGING WITH THE TIMES

To make the family business run even smoother, Bob has made great strides in updating the firm’s technology and how it manufactures the awnings. The company started in

1950 with the majority of business coming from residential home awnings and that hasn’t changed much; but what has changed are some of the processes to manufacture and install the products more precisely.

“My philosophy has always been to stay ahead of the curve,” Bob tells us. “The industry has evolved from just residential fabric awnings and some industrial products manufacturing,” Bob says. Over the years, he is seeing more demand

for commercial awnings and some storefront awnings.

“Most frames were originally made using fittings and pipe that screwed together. In the early 1980s, we started using tubing and welding frames for commercial awnings. That gave us a little more ability to be creative with the shapes and styles of the awnings and make them so they could remain up year-round. Additionally, fabrics are more color-fast and hold up to the elements better now,” Bob explains.



Intricate awning installations like the one shown here at The Palace Theatre in Greensburg, Pa., are an easy feat for Mt. Lebanon Awning's experienced service crew.

TECHNOLOGICAL ADVANCES

"One thing that hasn't changed over the years is the intricate measuring and design for each individual job to ensure a custom fit," Bob says. "We try to stay ahead in the industry; we no longer just sew awnings, basically we seal them. We do still sew, but there are other methods of putting fabric together, which makes them stronger and makes the seams last longer than when we were just sewing alone," he explains.

"We also do a lot with computers and CAD programs," he adds. "Previously, we would measure and have to take the framing materials to the job site to build them on premises. Now, with computer advancements, we can design the awning, manufacture both the frame and cover here, and then install. It is much more accurate and less time consuming."

Within the last four years, MLA purchased a CNC machine, which helps with manufacturing and cutting the awnings. Bob says the design is exported from the CAD program to the cutting machine, which cuts the shapes and marks the fabric so it can be put together. "That has helped increase accuracy in the fitting of the awning and is also a big timesaver

in the manufacturing process," Bob tells us.

What used to be done by hand is now done by utilizing CAD software provided by Vectorworks to lay out the patterns, which are then cut by MLA's automated CNC cutting table for precision. MLA also heat-welds all of the seams for a superior waterproof product.

For awnings with logos or lettering, MLA uses the Sunbrella® Graphics System, which uses heat to bond the prints to the acrylic fabric, assuring high-quality, long-lasting graphics for customers, Bob says.



Cristin Conlon (left) and Bob Campbell use an impulse fabric welder to seal fabric seams, which utilizes high pressure and heat for a quality seal.

"All of our work is done in-house to control the manufacturing process: measuring, cutting, sewing, graphics and installation," he tells us.

ALL IN THE FAMILY

Bob believes running a family business instills more pride in the products and services offered.

"I think one thing about a family business is that it is yours," he says. "It is something everybody can take pride in. When it is yours and bears your name and your family depends upon you, it makes you want to work harder and be a little more conscientious in what you do. Each family member brings their skills to a different part of the manufacturing process. Each of them ensures the family business will continue its ongoing tradition of personal service."

His wife, Linda, runs the sewing shop and operates the heat sealers. Son, Ryan Campbell, is the lead installer and also does all of the graphics using Illustrator, Photoshop and the Sunbrella Graphics System.



The service crew is trained to ensure quality installation on all residential and commercial jobs.



In addition to fabric awnings and canopies, Mt. Lebanon Awning can also provide vertical roller shades for residential and commercial applications, as seen here in a recent installation at a Pittsburgh, Pa.-area restaurant.

Daughter, Cristin Conlon, is involved in the fabrication process of the awnings. The couple's other daughter, Lauren Costello, is an interior designer and does CAD drawings and design for the orders, as well as for commercial project bids. Bob's brother, Rick Campbell, is a salesman. One of Linda's sisters, Debra Monaco, works in the sewing shop, and the other sister Carolyn Fall is the Administrative Assistant.

EXPERTISE & LEADERSHIP

Bob learned the company business from his great-uncle and embraced the original goals of the company: to maintain existing client relationships and continue to enhance technology and equipment, all while maintaining the extraordinary quality of the products.

He has earned the Awning and Canopy Master Fabric Craftsman (MFC) certification from the Industrial Fabrics Association International (IFAI), which means he has the highest level of expertise in all phases of product design, craftsmanship and installation for awning or graphic specialties. He is one of the few MFCs in the area and is also one of IFAI's few Lifetime Certified members, as honored by the IFAI in 2012.

His love of the business has translated to his family, as well, and they all look forward to keeping the family tradition of awning design, creation, and maintenance going for the foreseeable future. 🍷

Author Bio: Tonie Auer is an award-winning North Texas-based freelance writer and longtime journalist.