

| MULTIGENERATIONAL PRINCIPLES |

Collaboration, innovation and customer focus define the longstanding brands of Morris Group International

BY JIM SCHNEIDER



In 2013, Morris Group International (MGI), the umbrella company that encompasses well-known brands such as Acorn Engineering Company and Jay R. Smith Manufacturing Company, is celebrating a series of milestones it refers to as MGI 360. The “360” is the total number of all the anniversaries the group is marking this year. Acorn Engineering Company is celebrating its 60th anniversary, Elmco Group is celebrating its 65th, Potter-Roemer is celebrating its 75th and Murdock Manufacturing is marking an impressive 160 years in business.

Part of the success of MGI comes from the fact that its operational strategy is based on a partnership model that encourages independent thinking and creates a fertile ground for innovation. Each brand within Morris Group International has its own history and identity, but still fits within the framework of the overall group. Like a family, the sibling companies have different personalities, but share a common outlook that brings them all together.

Managing these partnerships, and Morris Group International as a whole, is President and CEO Don Morris. He is the son of Earl L. Morris, who founded Elmco Sales Inc. and then Acorn Engineering Company in the 1950s. While Earl L. Morris is said to have chosen the name “Acorn” simply because it starts with an “A,” and would appear in the front of alphabetical directories, the name proved to be prophetic. From those

relatively small beginnings, a large tree grew. Today, after decades of growth, acquisitions, partnerships and alliances, the branches of Morris Group International have grown to include many international major product lines and markets. Today, MGI holds more than 75 patents and continues innovating and growing.

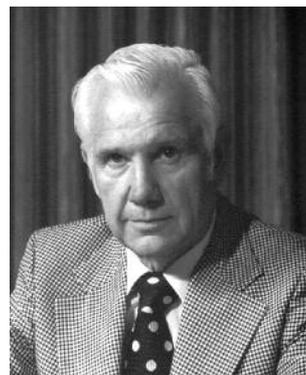
In recognition of this eventful year, *Phc News* took a trip to visit the headquarters of Morris Group International in City of Industry, Calif. We had the opportunity to chat with some of the players that have kept these brands vibrant and cutting-edge over the decades. In this, the first of a multipart series, we profile Don Morris, the man who sets the tone for the workings of the entire group. In future articles, we will share conversations with Tom Duddy, president and COO of Acorn Engineering Company; George Brown, vice president of Sales and Marketing at Potter-Roemer; and Bob Murdock, president of Murdock Manufacturing.

Building a foundation

When we arrived at Morris Group International headquarters, we were first treated to a tour of several working manufacturing facilities, as well as the showroom. With high-tech



Earl L. Morris Company's employees outside the original location in Los Angeles, CA. Front row, left to right: Speakman's Sales Manager; Earl L. Morris, Founder; G. Lee Curtice, Larry Huck, and George Scanlon, early partners; Johnny Meyers, New Mexico rep. Second row, right: Steve Reiter, Earl L. Morris Company employee.



Managing Morris Group International is President and CEO Don Morris (right). He is the son of Earl L. Morris (left), who founded Elmco Sales Inc. and then Acorn Engineering Company in the 1950s.

touchscreens and lots of products on display, it was a good way to get a scope of the wide variety of solutions produced by the companies of Morris Group International. Everything from faucets to drains and fire suppression solutions to high-end outdoor drinking fountains – some of which even include clever low-to-the-ground fountains for dogs– come from this family of companies.

Bringing together this variety of companies and product lines, as well as the cast of characters that makes it all go, isn't always easy. It takes a unique approach that puts responsibility in the hands of the right

people. Don Morris credits his father for setting the people-focused tone that defines Morris Group International to this day.

“What I look for in people is integrity, honesty and hard work. Those are the same things my dad looked for,” Morris explained. “Nobody handed him this business. He had nothing. He got what education he did at night school because he had to go to work and earn a living at 12 or 13 years old. I can’t imagine that. Dad did the hard work – building the foundation is the hard part. That gives you your core principles and values. Without that, you can build a company and it can run for a while, and then out it goes. To build a multigenerational company requires those kinds of founding principles.”

Traditionally, an umbrella entity such as Morris Group International operates by outright acquisition or majority partnerships. But Morris himself prefers a more unique approach to his partnerships.

“The way we’re built is through collaboration, so I started 50/50 partnerships,” Morris said. “We have several of them and they’ve worked really well. Because when you’re 50/50, neither partner controls [the relationship]. Either you get along and function together, or you have an automatic triggered buyout, which is like divorce court. If you want to go there, it’s going to be expensive. So it behooves you to cooperate. If one partner has a 51 percent stake and one has 49 percent, then you have a boss-subordinate relationship. I don’t like boss-subordinate relationships. I like collaborative partnerships.”

Rep mentality

The growth experienced by Morris Group International is as varied and diversified as its product line. Over the decades, MGI has expanded with a combination of acquisitions,



One of Acorn Engineering Company’s welders works on parts for Acorn Wash Fountains.

partnerships and organic growth. Even in the midst of the difficult economic times of the past several years, the group as a whole has continued growing and introducing new product lines.

“Somebody asked me the other day how we pop out so many new products, and I said with a lot of dang work,” Morris said. “Its’ really difficult. If it was easy, everyone would do it.”

Like choosing the right partners, finding the products to take to market requires a keen eye and ear. For Morris Group International, the key to its approach to product development is understanding what the customer wants and how they use it. Getting close to the end user and knowing what they want comes from the company’s roots as a rep firm.

“Dad started as a rep and we still have a rep mentality,” Morris said. “My first job out of college was working on the rep side and I still have a rep mentality. Everything is on a 30-day contract.”

Just what is a “rep mentality?” Morris explained his definition, which is a cornerstone to how Morris Group

International operates.

“You have to be very flexible, agile and able to adapt to your environment quickly,” Morris explained. “So many manufacturers think their widgets need to be made a certain way and aren’t adaptable. But if they don’t sell in the marketplace, no one cares about your widgets. A rep understands that. Because if a rep goes in and sees in a customer’s eyes that they don’t want the product, he is going to come back and realize that he either is going to sell something else or get the manufacturer to change that product.”

A great deal of attention and effort is given to research and development, and the patent process at Morris Group International. But the bottom line is that the market makes the final decision on a product line’s success or failure.

“Our brands are built to last, but if they can’t be fixed or corrected or can’t fit into the whole package, they will be jettisoned,” Morris admitted. “They have to be. You have to stay strong and you can’t limp along with your arms in a cast all the time or tied behind your back in a sling. It’s not going to work.”

Morris recognizes that people, both inside and outside of the organization, make everything run.

“I have a lot of dedicated employees and dedicated partners, as well as customers that have dealt with us for decades,” Morris said. “Without customers, who cares about all this stuff you make? Part of the philosophy of our management always has been to go back to our roots as a rep. As a rep, you have to collaborate. You have to collaborate with your manufacturer and you have to collaborate with your customers, wholesalers, plumbing engineers and contractors. Part of the way we’re built is collaboration.” ●



Acorn Engineering Company opened its doors in 1953.