

# Bronze Manufacturer of the Year: **Mesa Sign & Stamp Co. Inc.,** **Mesa, Arizona**

by David Hachmeister

*Marking Industry* publisher David Hachmeister traveled to Arizona to interview Connie Drizigacker, winner of the 2006 Bronze Manufacturer of the Year award.

**David Hachmeister:** Congratulations! It is a pleasure visiting with you, and I look forward to the interview and talking with you a little about your company. So, here you are in Arizona, and I understand there's a story behind how you ended up here.

**Connie Drizigacker:** Yes, there is. My dad had a bad accident the night before my high school graduation—he got burned real bad with anhydrous ammonia, a liquid fertilizer the farmers put on their crops back in Illinois. He lost his sight in one eye, received damage to his lungs and lost his taste buds.

In 1971, Dad and Mom went to California for my uncle's funeral; on their way home they stopped in Arizona to visit Dad's aunt and uncle. They liked it here and decided that they might like to move out here. The next morning he opened up the paper and found an immediate opening for an American Oil agent in the classified ads. He went for an interview and was able to transfer from his Standard Oil Agency in Cowden, Illinois to Mesa, Arizona. He took the job and they moved to Arizona.

Back in Illinois Dad could drive a hazardous vehicle with one eye, but the state of Arizona won't let you, so he had to hire a driver to make his deliveries to the different places. The driver was out on deliveries one day and found this rubber stamp business for sale. He told Dad that maybe this was something he could do, so Dad went and checked it out and bought it; that was in 1972. In 1973 Dad called me up and asked me if I wanted to come out and run the business. I said, "Well, yeah." I lived in Illinois at the time, and after I had been out here for a visit and went back, it rained for three solid weeks, so I was ready to move.



Connie Drizigacker at work in the shop.

**DH:** Yeah, that'll do it!

**CD:** I flew out here around April 30 with my 15-month-old son, and that was on a Saturday. The following Monday I started working. Dad taught me how to do it in a month's time, and on June 1 Dad and Mom were out of there for the summer. I was either going to sink or swim, and I swam.

**DH:** And you've been swimming for 33 years, is it?

**CD:** Going on 33 years.

## My theory is that there's enough out there for all of us if we can just share and help each other.

**DH:** Congratulations.

**CD:** Thank you.

**DH:** Has the business always been at this location?

**CD:** Yes, it's always been at this location. Originally it was on the other side of the building when he first started, but shortly after I came out we divided the building up and made this part for the stamp business, while in the other part Dad started a new business.

**DH:** This must've been almost a rural area then, I would assume.

**CD:** Across the street used to be a baseball diamond, and now they've developed it into the Mesa school district's operations warehouse. When I first started giving people directions on how to find us, I used to tell them, "We're down by the old Jackrabbit football stadium." Now you can't use that as a landmark because you've got so many more new people, they don't know where the Jackrabbit football stadium used to be.

**DH:** Is it "Jackrabbit?"

**CD:** Yes, it is Jackrabbit, and it is still the mascot for Mesa High School that used to be over here on Center Street. That was where the high school was, and then they had the football field over here on Lewis. The area has changed a lot over the years. Mesa High is now over on Southern.

**DH:** The first thing that strikes somebody who's been around the stamp business for a long time is that you're working on a Ludlow.

**CD:** Oh yes. I will stay with Ludlow. You get in your own comfort zone. I'm a person who doesn't like changes. There are opportunities out there that have opened up where I can subcontract things out if I need to, but for me I will continue to do most of my work on the Ludlow.

**DH:** So every stamp you make is a traditional rubber stamp.

**CD:** Yes. I feel rubber stamps hold up a lot longer than polymer stamps. Polymer stamps don't work with a lot of the inks we use in the industry.

**DH:** Are most of your customers industrial or office types? What type of customer base do you have?

**CD:** I do business with all types, including retail and wholesale. I find that more than 50 percent of my customers are retail. I do advertise in the Yellow Pages, but I find that my best advertising is by word of mouth.

**DH:** That always has worked well, because people trust their friends to give them good advice. Do you do anything at all in art stamps?

**CD:** Yes. Not a high volume of them, but if somebody comes in with a design, I can get it reproduced. Joe at Calumet Rubber Stamp in Calumet City, Illinois does most of my art stamps and anything else I can't do on the Ludlow. I had a customer come in the other day wanting an art stamp that he could stamp in clay and make a necklace out of it. It will be interesting to see how it comes out. Joe also does my notary stamps and any border stamps that I might need done.

**DH:** Obviously last year you had some growth. Was there a particular reason behind it?

**CD:** I had some really good orders come in. I also was able to open into the pharmaceutical field, and I received a few good orders from them. They would order anywhere from 50 to 100 at a time. For some people that's not a big order, but for me as a one-person operation it was. There was a logo of the prescription they wanted to have on it, and United Marking was able to do that for me. United helped me to get the order, as they gave me a good price so I could pass it on to my customer. They also mounted the stamps and got the order out fast.

**DH:** I couldn't help but notice the pin that you're wearing. Could you tell us a little about the pin?

**CD:** Well, this pin is an angel pin. I'm a collector of angel pins. This pin I found at a craft show. It has a little stamp pad as well as a stamp with a little handle on it. In small print

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on the pad it says "Ink," so being an angel collector I had to get it. It was so appropriate, with me being in the rubber stamp business. My husband and I belong to the Shrine, and every year they have a Cornfest and Craft Show. They have different vendors come in and sell their goods.

**DH:** What kind of special problems do you face being, in essence, a one-person shop? I mean, obviously if you get sick...

**CD:** Even when my sister used to work with me, I would almost always come to work. A lot of the times you start feeling better a lot quicker by doing it that way. I have a friend of mine who works for me part-time whenever I need to be out of the office, like when I have doctor appointments or I need to go out of town. Last year we took a lot of trips with the Shrine because my husband was chief of staff for the potestate of our local Shrine Center. When I'm out of the office, Mike answers the phone, takes messages and helps customers. Then when I get back in I do the orders. If I have any question about the orders then I call my customer back.

**DH:** Of course, you're a woman in the business. Has that changed—people accepting or not accepting you—over the years?

**CD:** Not really. I can recall back, probably 14 years ago, when I had a gentleman call me on the phone and inquire about rubber stamps. Later I became friends with him, and he commented to me that what drew him to come here was my personality on the phone. He said, "You're welcoming, you made me feel like I wanted to do business with you." That's what I try to do—no matter how bad of a day I'm having, to answer the phone with a happy, cheery voice. Most of the time people, even if they're having a bad day, need that stamp right away, and I try to get it done for them.

**DH:** Amazingly, there's still room for human beings in this world. It's not just all about speed and automated processes.

**CD:** Well, it's service. Some people will come in here with a stamp they've maybe gotten someplace else and they need it inked. Maybe they're ordering another stamp and this one here is dry, and I'll say, "Why don't you let me ink it for you?" They'll say, "Is that OK? We didn't get it here." I tell them "I know you didn't get it here, but that's fine, it's a service I can provide for you." "Well, what's the charge?" "Nothing. That's a service I like to provide for people."

Sometimes people will ask me, "Well, how long does is the stamp going to last?" I tell them, "First of all, they're re-inkable. Second of all, if you don't want to buy the ink, then feel free to bring it back in and I'll re-ink it for you at no charge." They look at you kind of funny, like, "Everything usually has a dollar bill behind it."

**DH:** Yeah, that sort of stuff is valuable. I heard you on the phone earlier checking on an order with a customer; because you knew the customer you knew enough to question it, which somebody who's just a clerk taking an order wouldn't necessarily know enough to do.



Connie Drizigacker at work in the shop.

**CD:** I find it saves a lot of time. Working for myself, I question more sometimes than I probably should, but if I do it right the first time then I don't have to do it over. So by calling her and asking, "OK, was this in red ink or was it in black ink?" she confirmed that it was in black ink, and that way I can send it out correct the first time.

**DH:** I see you sell self-inkers as well as traditional stamps. What percentage of your sales are the different types of stamps?

**CD:** I would say a good part of what I sell is self-inking—the Ideal self-inkers. I do sell a few pre-inked stamps. Of course, with pre-inked stamps sometimes you have to wait for the ink to go back up into the die. I find that a majority of mine are the self-inkers.

**DH:** Is all your business in stamps, or do you have other business?

**CD:** I do take orders for engraved signs—I subcontract those out to someone here local and they do them for me. Sometimes I've also done orders for vinyl letters—for example, the people next door needed some vinyl letters and I outsourced that as well. Anything I can do on the Ludlow I will do here unless it's a big job, like that pharmaceutical order was. I also do inspection stamps, and I subcontract those out to Action Seal in California. With a one-person operation, doing the stamps and the book-keeping and keeping up with everything, you kind of have to spread a little of it out. I can't spread myself too thin.

**DH:** There are only so many hours in the day and so many skills you can learn.

**CD:** I also do quite a few band stamps for my different industrial accounts; I have different suppliers I get them from. I also do inspections stamps for a company back in Minnesota. Just this

morning I got a fax from a company in California that wanted a quote on some stamps with a fast-drying ink that could be put on a self-inker, which was something new for me. You never know where they're going to come from, but I'm thankful when I get them. I figure the dear Lord has blessed me to keep me going for this long. It's a long time to keep in business, especially when I haven't had a price increase since 1994.

**DH:** We've got to talk about that!

**CD:** Yes, we do, desperately.

**DH:** Well, congratulations on your achievement. I know the stamp business has been tough for everybody, but you've managed to grow and obviously are satisfying your customers' needs.

**CD:** Thank you, and thank you for being patient with me and giving me the opportunity to do this, because I of all people never thought I would be chosen. You figure you're just a small guy. I guess it pays to be a member of IMIA!

**DH:** Congratulations on that, too! You're a member of IMIA, and what benefits do you get out of belonging to the association?

**CD:** Well, I was really impressed when I first joined—I've been a member before and in 2003 I went back. One of the reasons was, when we went up to Las Vegas for the IMIA convention, I figured, "OK, if I'm going to have to pay so much to get into the show and I was going to go, for a little bit more I could be a member." That's one of the reasons I joined, but I also wanted to keep up-to-date on the notary impressions in the different states. Sometimes even though people live in Arizona, they also need notaries for other states, so I felt I needed to keep up-to-date with those. I noticed recently the Association has been doing them on the Internet, and also people will write in and ask questions—"Where can I find this?" or "Where can I find that?"—and people reply. I think that's very helpful. I mean, there are things on there I never even realized were available, and I think it will be a benefit to a lot of us, especially the small businesses that maybe can't afford to go to a trade show. One thing with the trade shows is that you learn about the new items that are coming up.

**DH:** And also resources for products that you want to resell.

**CD:** Yes, that too. And if you don't go to those shows and aren't able to go, maybe because you're like me and a one-person operation or because at the time it's not affordable, I think it's beneficial to have it on the Internet the way they have it, where people can e-mail questions in. My theory is that there's enough out there for all of us if we can just share and help each other.

**DH:** Wonderful. Thank you very much again.

**Mesa Sign & Stamp Co. Inc.**  
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