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Williams Office Products has carved out a strong position in Southwestern Illinois the hard way—one customer at a time

As markets shift and buyers evolve, independent dealers, no matter where they are located, are continually challenged to grow and find new customers. There are no more easy sales—perhaps there never were—but today's digital-savvy consumer puts a new spin on the age-old search for additional business. Having an educated sales rep who knows the product line inside and out and who brings value-added services was never more important, suggests Dave Jones, president and co-owner of Williams Office Products. "That's because you have an educated customer today who can get what they want on the Internet without ever calling on an independent dealer or even a superstore."

"We have a loyal customer base," adds Jones, yet he is wary of falling back on past practices. Since the economy took a nosedive in 2008, he has seen everyone's approach to doing business become more circumspect. "As the economy changed," he says, "the world changed and nothing is a given anymore. You can't count on anything; you have to go out and work hard to seize every opportunity and serve your customer base in every way possible."

Williams has been serving businesses in southwestern Illinois for the past 60 years. Based in Alton, just across the Mississippi River from St. Louis, the dealership calls on companies located in approximately nine Illinois counties along with numerous customers in Missouri. "Williams is built on traditional values of customer service," says Jones. "We do everything for the office from floor to ceiling." He means everything—in addition to traditional office products, Williams sells furniture, janitorial supplies, tech supplies, and business machines, such as multifunction copiers along with computers and networking equipment.

Jones is enthusiastic in his praise of all the advantages his company has gained by doing business with United Stationers, from the products and marketing opportunities it makes available to the training it offers and the knowledgeable associates he regularly interacts with. He credits his partnership with United, and Rob Hubbard, his United sales rep, with helping his company survive the economic downturn and go on to achieve substantial growth over the past couple of years. Williams does as much as 30 percent of its business in furniture and believes that United's Alera brand helped save this business. "We sell a lot of furniture for a dealer our size in a territory like ours," he says. "We are probably one of the biggest Alera dealers in the Midwest."

A Clean Bill of Health

The territory served by Williams is primarily rural and the majority of its customers range from mom-and-pop operations to medium-sized businesses. At the same time, it has carved out a successful niche in the health care market by offering competitive pricing along with its signature value-added services. Jones explains that his employees consistently give customers the extra attention that demonstrates to them that they are spending their money wisely. "They don't leave the customer site without asking themselves and the client if there is anything more that can be done to ensure they're 100 percent pleased," says Jones.

Many tasks that were once considered a normal part of health care administration have been harder to facilitate, especially in today's cost-conscious atmosphere. With their staffs now lean and overworked, medical institutions no longer have personnel available to do what once were considered normal operations, so Williams has stepped in to pick up the slack. "During the economic downturn, we got into medical records management, where we design record storage areas, rotate per the client's requirement, and move X-rays and patient records. In addition, we relocated offices because everyone was downsizing," says Jones. "We filled that void for our customers and kept our people busy; that helped us build a niche in health care."



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Hard work, exemplary service, a strong marketing plan, and impressive teamwork elevate Dave Jones and Williams Office Products above the competition.

Photo: Ashley Gieseking

The firm's furniture expertise isn't lost on its health care clients either. Through many years working with business customers, Williams has become adept at furniture sales. Williams not only takes the time to understand the customer's needs and requirements, but stays with them through delivery and installation to make certain the furniture fully meets their needs. As Jones explains it, his people don't just deliver a box or throw product at a customer; instead, they serve as complete furniture consultants. This assures customers will get the best return on their purchase/investment.

"We offer what the Internet and box stores can't—on-site relationships," says Jones. "We eliminate customer concerns by being involved in the design process, offering proper space planning and ergonomic consulting, and by making sure that the furniture is assembled correctly and that the customer understands how to maintain it properly."

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Quality and Selection

Roughly a decade or two ago, Williams used to supply a substantial amount of contract furniture, and participating in that niche, it gained expertise in producing furniture layouts for clients and developed a fair amount of installation know-how as well. In the past five years or so, the marketplace changed and Jones became aware that he needed to find different furniture price points.

"We didn't want to give up too much quality, but we were looking for a competitive price and product that we could stand behind," he says. "We offer something that a lot of independent dealers don't in that we have a showroom with both equipment and furniture." Clients are able to kick the tires and see what they are getting for the money. That really helps with customers who are used to shopping on the Internet. After they visit the showroom and see the furniture live rather than as an image on a computer screen, the sale is all but closed.

"United's Alera product enables us to compete in a very competitive marketplace and at the same time provide a quality product with a great selection," says Jones. Not only do customers get a quality furniture product, but often, he adds, they're able to buy more furniture and fill a larger space because of the price point. The CAD drawing they received at the onset, which gave them a visual of what the space would look like, only improves their satisfaction.

Also helping to differentiate Williams from its competition are the multifunction machines that it offers. The dealership is an authorized Sharp copier reseller, and it specializes in the large walk-up machines that have become the backbone of the modern office—black-and-white and color units that scan, fax, print, and copy. "These bigger machines help customers control their printing and copying costs while enabling them to print from multiple



workstations within the network," says Jones. "We don't just sell copiers anymore, we sell an integral piece of the way the client performs and services their business and clients. If we need a low-end desktop unit, we go through United and get a Brother or HP product."

Marketing Made Easy

A finely detailed marketing plan keeps Williams Office Products competitive and enables it to keep customers and prospects informed about its offers and capabilities. Williams' marketing plan was developed during the mid-point of the preceding year. "The majority of the plan is established and follows the trends that we form and plan to go to market with, using materials from United Stationers," says Jones. Marketing materials such as catalogs, flyers, and email touch points are regularly implemented and used for both growth and acquisition efforts. There was a time when materials were ordered in bulk and mailings were done en masse without tracking or follow-up, but not anymore. "We've become extremely focused and strategic in the marketing materials we use as well as making sure that we put materials in the right person's hands in the right market at the right time," adds Jones.

Besides what it does with United, Williams also produces its own monthly and weekly flyers. "We do a tri-fold mailer with an insert, at least once a month, which touches more than 2,000 clients," says Jones. "We also blast out daily and weekly flyers for our reps with product specials in their territories." Flyers feature products that demonstrate a cost saving and are chosen to generate activity within certain territories or vertical markets. To be competitive and save money for its clients, the majority of the marketing materials that Williams sends out are based on products that it gets from United, including its dealer brands—Alera, Universal, Innovera, and Boardwalk.

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the aim of the sales rep, and virtually every Williams' employee, is to convince clients that the perception that big-box suppliers are the best choice is illusory. "Clients don't have to sacrifice customer service and they can have a sales rep who works hard to save them money when they deal with an independent dealer," says Jones. "Always putting a face with a name and forming partnerships with your customers doesn't hurt either."

Teamwork Is Key

A culture change within the Williams organization focuses on sharing information between all departments to support the common mission of taking care of customers. "It takes every person on staff to deliver an outstanding customer experience," explains Jones. "When all employees are united to serve customers as a team, great experiences follow, and when those experiences are exemplary, you see customers return."

"Looking at the complete picture—traditional office supplies, JanSan, breakroom, and equipment—our customers don't have to give up value-added services, and 9 times out of 10 we can save them money with alternative products available through our partnership with United Stationers," says Jones. When those customers deal with a big-box supplier, they never deal directly with a rep and no one visits them to present special offers and promotions. With staffs cut back, customers just don't have the manpower to efficiently research and track their business supply needs.

People in health care, for example, are there to take care of patients and help sick people get better, says Jones. They're not in the office supply business. They don't have the time to spend their days searching for products online and locating the right coupon to get the best deal. "We not only provide competitive and cost-saving prices, but we also have 25,000 items in our catalog," he says. Whether it is a full range of business furniture or cleaning and breakroom supplies, it's up to the independent dealer to let his marketplace know that all of these products are readily available at a competitive cost.

"In a lot of cases, the businesses that we sell to are not a whole lot different from ours," says Jones. "They are trying to streamline processes and make business operations easier." As long as you're willing to change and meet client and market demands, you should be able to capture a great share of your marketplace, he adds. **OL**



Left: Dave Jones (l) of Williams Office Products credits Rob Hubbard (r), his United Stationers sales representative, with helping his company survive the economic downturn. Above: Dave Jones of Williams Office Products with his new Great Pyrenees, Jax, delivers the company message that Williams works hard for its costumers' business, and that deliveries and smiles are always free of charge.

With increased feedback opportunities, for instance knowing how much revenue is attributable to a specific flyer, Williams can pinpoint applications of different marketing materials. Jones can double up on successful flyers to sell more of a specific line or category or see where activity is soft and increased emphasis is needed within a territory or with a specific group of customers. Jones is a long-term eDeals customer, who uses the emails to tie into his website promotions and to monitor who is buying and what is being bought.

Market Research Drives Sales

His appreciation of the value of marketing data led Jones to contract with United Stationers Outbound Tele-services team to conduct market research on behalf of Williams Office Products. Outbound Tele-services employs experienced United customer service operators with deep industry knowledge to conduct outbound interviews. On behalf of Williams, these experienced tele-operators contacted moribund accounts with the goal of reviving them.

Jones explains that the information obtained through this effort was invaluable. "We learned who our competition was for this business and who the decision-makers were," says Jones. Williams employees typically had not been able to get past the gatekeeper at many of these companies. With this new-found entree, salespeople have been able to break through and present marketing materials along with references and capabilities. "We're seeing a return on revenue on this effort and know that we will for months to come based on our ability to use this information properly," says Jones.

In this effort and in virtually every sales activity that the dealership encounters, big-box competition is a certainty. "The superstores are constantly touching our existing customers and prospects," says Jones. "They have an unlimited market checkbook, if you will, compared to the independents." He acknowledges that