

# Repeated Double-Digit Growth Just Part of the Success Story at This Franchise

*AlphaGraphics in the Cultural District (Pittsburgh) is highly regarded for efficient operations, visionary management and advanced services as well as high growth. By Derrick Doi*

**H**ow many businesses have grown every year since 2000—and at double-digit rates, except the year the Great Recession hit? And for those established in that timeframe by owners with no industry experience, the odds to achieving these results must be insurmountable, right?

Welcome to AlphaGraphics in the Cultural District of Pittsburgh, which bucked the odds to achieve all of the above. Today Clare and Bill Meehan's franchise has 27 employees and annual revenues of just over \$4.5 million (2011)—up 24 percent from 2010. They are a top 10 producer for AlphaGraphics worldwide and number 53 on the 2011 *Quick Printing* Top 100 list.

In many ways, they run a model communications business. They provided design and marketing services long before the MSP (marketing services provider) acronym was coined. Operationally, their systems are ISO 9001 certified for quality and use of lean principles further optimizes efficiency. Their comprehensive management excellence was recognized with a 2011 NAPL Management Plus Silver Award. And the Meehan's philanthropic contributions and service on boards of cultural institutions has woven them into the fabric of Pittsburgh's ongoing renaissance. "In some ways, I guess we've been like the little engine that could," said Clare Meehan, president and CEO.

## Starting Fresh

In the late 1990s, Bill Meehan wanted to break from his corporate management career at Fortune 500 companies like Citicorp and Motorola. His wife, Clare, who had left her middle-school teaching career to be a stay-at-home mom and volunteer fund-raiser and board member, was also ready for a new challenge.

Through a friend, they were introduced to AlphaGraphics, liked what they saw, and learned that an attractive territory was available in Pitts-



*Top: The mailer in the "Use Your Coconut" multi-media campaign was a coconut wrapped in a nylon net with a hangtag. Left: Clare Meehan, president and CEO, AlphaGraphics in the Cultural District of Pittsburgh.*



burgh, where Clare grew up. So in 2000 they moved from their long-time home in Boston to start fresh in a new town and new industry.

They began with a five-member staff, offering offset and digital printing, and—as a differentiator—graphic design. Clare took the sales lead, targeting vertical markets "where I have a comfort zone and something I can bring to the table," she said. Those included education and, from her volunteer experience, not-for-profits and healthcare. The franchise's design services enabled her to initiate agency-style discussions with marketing professionals. And often, winning design work led to more business.

But Clare wasn't going it alone. "We figured out the business from the ground up, but we did it with a lot of help from experts," she said, including key people at AlphaGraphics, trade associations like the Direct Marketing Association, and suppliers like Xerox. They've been a Xerox customer since 2002 and now have four Xerox

devices, including a Xerox iGen3 Press.

## Adding Services

These experts have helped the franchise add services and grow. In 2005, the franchise was among the first to deploy AG Online for Web ordering. Two years later, a presentation by Julie Higgins, a Xerox business development executive who was with AlphaGraphics then, sparked them to initiate

multi-media campaigns.

"Julie was my rock star," Clare said, acknowledging Julie's role in building the capability. Now, using software from Mindfire and XMPie, a Xerox company, Clare considers their multi-media services the best in Pittsburgh, counting among their clients the Pittsburgh Pirates Major League Baseball team.

Other services they've added over the years include signage, website development, and mailing services. To promote their mailing services offering, they produced a memorable "Use Your Coconut" multi-media campaign; mailing an actual coconut wrapped in a nylon net with a hangtag. Results included a projected 200 percent return on investment and a PODi 2012 Best Practices Award in cross-media marketing.

And more growth. The franchise moved to a larger location in 2007, and they are on the verge of outgrowing that now, too—particularly as Bill is hatching plans to double their size in the next five years.

The little engine that could has become a bigger engine that can.

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