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Four-year-old Paragon Label ventures into new markets

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Youngster grows up **FAST**

Laser diecutting makes four-year-old Paragon a new force in wine-label printing. Next up: Gourmet foods, cosmetics, HBA markets.

Twenty years ago, the *New York Times* interviewed Jason Grossman about the then-burgeoning scrapbook craze and the printed sticker business. What will you do if sticker sales ever slow down, the reporter asked? "Off the cuff, I just said, print wine labels," Grossman recalls, and Petaluma, CA-based

COVER STORY

By Editor in Chief Mark Spaulding

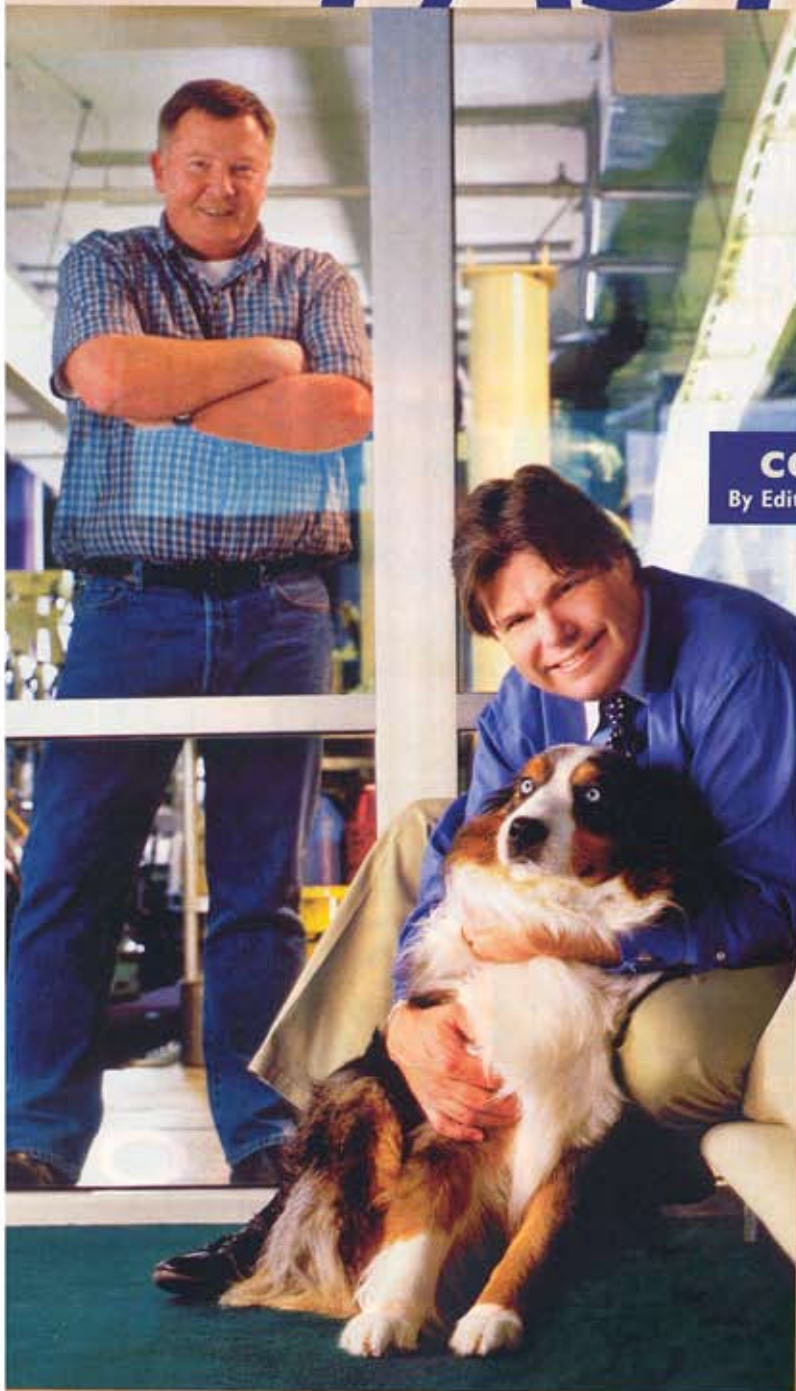
Paragon Labels was born.

Of course, it wasn't really *that* simple. Four-year-old Paragon is an outgrowth of parent company Mrs. Grossman's Paper Co., founded in 1979 by Grossman's mother Andrea. As the country's largest sticker manufacturer, Mrs. Grossman's prints more than 15,000 miles of p-s stickers a year in over 600 different designs. The company was previously featured in *Converting* (August 1997, p. 50).

Meeting the needs of one particularly large customer drove Jason Grossman, president of Paragon, who also continues to be vice president of production for Mrs. Grossman's, to add extra equipment. "We had everything in place to print labels," he says, during a recent visit by *Converting*, "except the sales technique."

Today, Paragon occupies about one-fifth of the 110,000-sq-ft, two-story Mrs. Grossman's plant overlooking the tranquil Petaluma River. White-washed inside and out and with floor-to-ceiling windows bringing in lots of natural light, the facility is in stark contrast to most printing plants. Paragon's 17-member staff also shares another 10 employees with Mrs. Grossman's.

Paragon Label managers include president Jason Grossman (right) with company mascot Angus, and general manager Gary Cane (left).



"We weren't a serious label company at first," Grossman admits. "The first year was futzing around a lot, but we've kept growing tremendously since then."

The real McCoy

A big boost to Paragon's growth was its purchase in December 2002 of local rival McCoy Packaging, an 80-year-old flexographic label converter. Together, the merged business has about 400 customers. Ninety percent are in the wine industry (a natural given Paragon's prime location north of San Francisco), and the remainder are food, cosmetics and HBA packagers.

"We want to level out the wine-label business, splitting that in half," Grossman says. "HBA is fairly new for us, and we're interested in gourmet foods. Those markets are a perfect fit for us; they're just like wineries. We want to diversify first into different markets for p-s labels, then move forward into different products."

Along with McCoy came British-born general manager Gary Cane. A 30-year veteran of the printing industry, Cane brought with him some much-needed expertise in how a labelmaking operation should be run. "I had three production managers before Gary, and he's finally the one who's figured out all the problems Paragon had in prepress, in printing," praises Grossman. "And he's brought a camaraderie, with all the groups in the company working together now."

Specifics:

PARAGON LABEL: Petaluma, CA
OPERATIONS: P-s label printing, converting
PLANT SIZE: 20,000 sq ft exclusively, 110,000 sq ft overall
EMPLOYEES: 17 full-time, 10 shared
MAJOR EQUIPMENT:
One 13-in., 8-color Mark Andy flexo press
Four 10-in. Mark Andy flexo presses (two 10-color; one 9-color; one 6-color)
Three 7-in. Mark Andy flexo presses (two 10-color, one 8-color)
One Iwasaki TR25 hot-stamp press with two foil heads, three embossing heads, inline UV-varnisher
One Lasercraft Laserweb® template diecutter with twin tracks
Two 13-in. Rotoflex inspection rewinders

On a united front

Paragon is not unlike a hundred other label converters, Cane explains, in terms of production or product mix. "I've only been here for a year," he says, "but the biggest attribute this company has truly is the service and the personnel. The staff makes us who we are."

Cane also believes Paragon has become more focused in its structure and business direction. Prior to his arrival, Mrs. Grossman's and Paragon operated like separate companies, he says, which wasn't the best situation. "Now, we're more united and have the same goals. We all want to succeed," Cane says. "My goal is to make Paragon an entity that the other label companies have to worry about, and I think we've done a great job so far."

The hardware key

Certainly one key to that performance is Paragon's collection of label-converting systems. An all-Mark Andy house (St. Louis), Paragon runs 10 different narrow-web presses (7-in. to 10-in. widths), printing from six to 10 colors. The newest unit—a 10-in., 6-color Scout—was installed in 2001, after Grossman saw one on display at Labelexpo Americas the prior year. All presses use BST Pro Mark (Elmhurst, IL) video web-inspection units, and all hot-air printing stations exhaust to a centralized dryer to reduce noise.

One important piece of equipment brought from McCoy Packaging last year was its Iwasaki TR25 hot-stamp and embossing press. The offline unit features an inline UV-varnisher.

"We had an offline foiling system," Grossman says, "but nothing can compare to the Iwasaki. That allowed us to go after customers we couldn't otherwise approach. It cut costs and runs faster."

Paragon switched to a polymer-bead blasting method to clean anilox rolls in 2001. The wide-width unit from Absolutely Micro*Clean Intl. (Rancho Cordova, CA) replaced a former ultrasonic-cleaning system, and lets Paragon clean multiple aniloxes simultaneously.

The pinnacle of Paragon's converting equipment, however, remains its custom-built Lasercraft Laserweb® twin-lane diecutter. Sharing production with Mrs. Grossman's, the system and its capabilities



End Product Profile

Sebastopol, CA-based Iron Horse Vineyards bottles its Fairy Tale Cuvée sparkling wine exclusively for The Walt Disney Co. The product is sold only at Disney hotels, resorts, theme parks and on its cruise ships.

Using inhouse-processed BASF Printing Systems and DuPont Cyrel® photopolymer plates, the label was printed on Fasson Estate #8 laid stock with S100R p-s adhesive from Avery Dennison and employs water-based inks supplied by Water Ink Technologies and Fluid Inks. Paragon Label ran the job via its

7-in., 8-color Mark Andy 2200 press at an average speed of 125 fpm. Press runs are typically 50,000 labels/yr for the Disney product, and the Fairy Tale Cuvée wine is only one of several types printed for the customer.

After printing, the labels were finished with hot-foil stamping and embossing using Paragon's Iwasaki TR25 press. Foil is provided by Foil Kurz Hastings; cutting die from Wilson Engraving; and embossing die from Metal Magic. Paragon inspects all of its products on 13-in. Rotoflex VS1330 rewinders.

A labelmaker's best friend

You could say that Paragon Label (and its parent sticker-converter Mrs. Grossman's Paper Co.) has gone to the dogs. But it would be more accurate to say that the dogs have come to Paragon.

How? Corporate policy allows employees to bring their dogs to work. "At any one time, there might be as many as 20 dogs in the building," says Paragon Label president Jason Grossman.

Company managers have long believed that the presence of the canine comrades makes for a more peaceful—and hence more productive—working environment. The well-behaved animals mainly stay near their owners in offices or work cubicles but are also free to roam and visit with other four-footed friends.

"The dogs sometimes even attend meetings," says Grossman. "They'll just lay quietly under a conference table. You'd be amazed at how much having a dog in the room when you're working out a solution with a work team eases the process."



Company mascot Angus, a blue-eyed Australian shepherd, sat in on Converting's interview with Paragon Label's human managers.

are a Paragon exclusive (see sidebar).

Approvals a team effort

Paragon press operators mount their own plates and even set up their own inks. The process gives press operators more control over the jobs they run while it also eliminates the potential for conflicts between printers and platemounters, Grossman says.

"We also involve the pressmen in the actual press check," Cane adds. "It's not just me sitting down with the customer and going back and forth to the pressman without the customer there. They offer their opinion and listen to what the customer has to say."

Both Grossman and Cane are naturally proud of their work; they're also proud of the advancements that flexography has achieved. The team is pushing flexo as much as possible with customers right now, says Cane. "We manage over 200-line screens on our process jobs, and magnetic dies are drastically cutting tooling costs."

Unfortunately, that's sometimes not impressive enough for some label designers who are stuck in an "offset-only" mindset. "Think about

flexo and the humongous changes that have been made in just the last 10 years," Cane says. "Some designers will never get it."

Thinking about all the changes that Paragon Label has made in its short history, "just printing wine labels" is only a hint of its future success. ■

FOR MORE INFORMATION

CONVERTER:

PARAGON LABEL,
800/799-9599, fax: 707/765-8551,
www.paragonlabel.com

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Diecutting in a flash

The number of converters that use laser-diecutting as a finishing process for labels probably totals less than a dozen. Count the converters with a twin-track Laserweb® system operating 24/7, and you'd have only one—Paragon Label.

Running since March 2000, the offline



system (at right) was custom-built by Santa Rosa, CA-based Lasercraft and uses PC Industries web-handling components. Mrs. Grossman's Paper Co. primarily employs the equipment to manufacture its growing line of delicately die-cut Paper Whispers™ sticker and border products. Paragon has taken up a share of the lasers' production for a handful of wine-label customers, such as Vinum Cellars, Oakville, CA (at left).



For the process, a roll of printed labels is first delaminated, separating the label web and release liner. The label web is then laser-diecut via a copper template by one of the Laserweb's two 4,000-watt, mixed-gas lasers at speeds up to 15 fpm. The laser vaporizes the area of label to be removed at 10,000 deg F, producing virtually no ash. The label web is relaminated to the liner and rewound.