

LYNKA Promotional Products

MODEL Shops Project

BY MARK BUCHANAN

KRAKOW, POLAND—What do you get when you deposit a pair of American expatriates in, until recently, communist-controlled southern Poland? Well, of course! You get one of the premier apparel-decorating and promotional-products facilities in all of Europe—in fact, let us make that *all the world*.

LYNKA Promotional Products exemplifies the forward-thinking, innovative and intelligent marketing and management standards that qualify apparel decorators in the U.S. for the status of "Model Shop" and is, therefore, our August selection. Indeed, this ultra-modern facility can and should be recognized as a role-model for its industry.



Everything in style: One thing that's conspicuous about these American entrepreneurs in the Polish market—LYNKA's John Lynch and Anne Kalin—is that they tend to do everything first-class.

From consultants to residents

In 1989, when Lech Walesa was bringing down communism in Poland, Anne Kalin and John Lynch were living, respectively, in New York City and Philadelphia. "What was occurring in that far-away land was as remote to us as we could imagine," says Kalin. "But eighteen months later—with John and I having finished our MBAs at Wharton School, then gotten married—we found ourselves living in Krakow as business

consultants, working with Polish entrepreneurs to revitalize an economy devastated by a half century of neglect."

By 1992, the pair had fallen in love with Krakow—a beautiful medieval city, miraculously overlooked by the ravages of two World Wars—and decided to stay in Poland to try their luck as entrepreneurs. They founded their business—with its name a combination of their own—and began selling contract-printed tourism T-shirts at airports and hotels. And now, nine years later, LYNKA is Poland's leading imprinted-sportswear and advertising-specialty business, servicing medium- to large-sized Polish and multinational companies such as Coca-Cola, McDonald's, BP and hundreds more. The products it offers include the same mainstream apparel products that dominate the U.S. market, along with the entire promotional-product gamut, from Mont Blanc pens to Victorinox Swiss Army Knives.

Fortunately, the fact that they found the Polish decorated-apparel industry decades behind that of the U.S. in terms of technological sophistication did not lead them to a similar conclusion about the sophistication of Poland's market....

Growth . . . and more growth

"We followed the path of leading U.S. screen printers and ad-specialty companies," Kalin explains, "by offering superior quality and service. It turns out that Central European clients expect the same high level of service as do American clients. And, as for quality, ours is hard to beat in Poland, or the rest of Europe for that matter. In the past five years, with our 14-color presses and 12-color embroidery machines, we've won more than 30 international awards for our

screen printing and embroidery, including numerous SGIA Golden Images and their equivalent in Europe—the *Images Magazine Awards*."

Kalin explains that, today, she and Lynch continue to grow their company at a pace of 30 to 40 percent annually. At the same time, with the help of venture capital, they have launched Central Europe's first multi-country imprinted-sportswear distributor—AVALON Sportswear—servicing Poland, The Czech republic, Slovakia and the Baltic States including Lithuania. Last year, LYNKA opened one of the most modern apparel-decoration facilities in Europe—a 35,000-square-foot production and warehouse complex that performs state-of-the-art screen printing, embroidery, pad printing, custom packaging, re-labeling and fulfillment.

Kalin explains that her company plans to continue to expand internationally, in hopes of becoming the dominant promotional-products and imprinted-sportswear distributor in Central Europe—all by 2004, when the C.E. countries become part of the European Union.

The people of LYNKA

"First and foremost," says Kalin of her company's 100-plus employees, "it is critical that people are treated with dignity and respect. Money is important, but it's not everything. You also must develop a *personal* touch, whether it's giving a birthday present or remembering they've just passed a school exam, or simply to show praise when they



The new facility: This 35,000-square-foot, state-of-the-art production/warehousing facility was opened in 2000. It contains screen-printing, embroidery, pad-printing and various other capabilities.

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Clean, modern, lovely: As the leading apparel decorator and promotional-products distributor in Poland, LYNKA is prepared to properly receive clients from every social, commercial and economic strata.



Comfort and utility: LYNKA's showroom is a comfortable place where clients may be shown the complete array of the company's products—from printed T-shirts to Mont Blanc writing instruments.

achieve a quality or productivity goal."

She also points out that, on the flip side, reprimands are critical: "People must know when they've done something wrong. But remember, it's not *what* you say but *how* you say it. 'You screwed up,' is wrong. A manager needs to find out *why* the employee screwed up and work out solutions from that end. I've found that there are usually good reasons for messes...including management-induced inappropriate procedures."

In addition to this approach, LYNKA also maintains a rather unique level of information sharing: "It's more than just hanging production statistics on the wall or posting memos in the kitchen. John and I hold regular meetings with the entire company wherein we tell them about profits, lost orders, competition in the marketplace and struggles we're having. Employees care and they want to know about good news and bad. I can't tell you how many great new ideas have come as a result of these meetings."

The company also sends its entire staff (in small groups) on annual, three-day retreats for intense brainstorming—and a tiny bit of R&R—away from the ringing phones and constant interruptions of a busy production facility.

Too much organization?

Kalin describes her business as one that rests on a solid foundation of organizational efficiency. "You might even call us *hyper-organized*. But I'll tell you this, everywhere in the world, I see the market moving away from

the really big orders. Today our clients want small orders of special products that are just as detail-intensive as large orders of common products." Kalin points out that it takes essentially the same amount of time to process an order of 100 pieces as it does one of 5,000, in terms of selling and administration, making screens and inks, job change-over and so on. Hence, the only way a company *can* succeed is to have a highly organized and efficient means of processing orders.



Getting away from it all: "We send people from sales, customer service and production on annual retreats," says Kalin. "Top management has its own retreat as well ... and we really do work for these three days!"

"All our sales offices are linked to the head office here in Krakow, so data is available on line. Nearly everything is digital, from design acceptance to archives of old orders, along with thumbnails of those designs. Everything is labeled, stored and documented so repeat orders are a breeze. We

processed 1,500 orders in June alone—with a relatively small staff—and we can take on even more without much more overhead."

Three keys to success

The elements behind LYNKA's success are three basics, according to Kalin: a passion for constantly reinventing itself in response to an ever-changing marketplace, an equally passionate commitment to customer satisfaction, and the dedication—when it comes to technique and technology—to test, test, test.

"We are always experimenting with new inks, new forms of packaging, new emulsions. Just because something works does not mean there isn't something better out there. And when a client asks for a product we don't have, we get it, test it, price it and—assuming there's a market for it and we can make some money—we offer it."

"When we win awards year after year, people ask, 'What's the secret?' The secret is in all those hours and days and months of testing and experimentation. Management has to encourage experimentation, reserve press time for it and, yes, even authorize overtime for it. For example, our high-density offering was a direct result of many Saturdays of teamwork between my screen, art and printing employees. We are now the *only* ones in Poland offering high-density printing."

Clearly, this team's commitment to open-mindedness and hard work has not only put it on the map—albeit in a rather remote location, from our standpoint—but will keep it there...and elsewhere in the years to come. **pw**