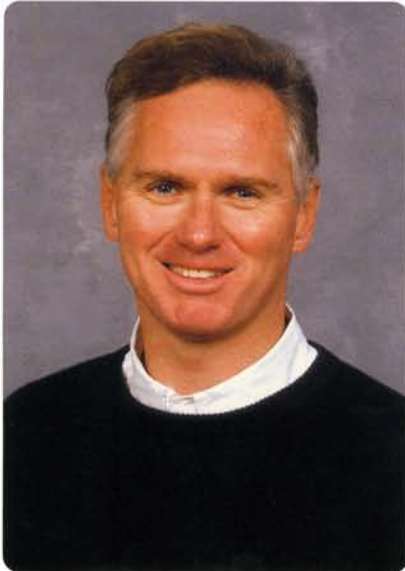


# Bradford Makes Strides in a Three-Part Transformation



Steve LeGraw is the president and CEO of Bradford Soap Works.

A new CEO, organic certification and a growing global presence distinguish a family tradition



BY NANCY JEFFRIES

**A** recent journey to West Warwick, Rhode Island gave Soap & Cosmetics an insider's look at a progressive soap maker with a 125-year history. The "new" Bradford has undergone a number of significant changes over the past two years: introducing a new logo, increasing their visibility as both an interpreter and an advocate of trends and vision in the personal care arena, and presenting a new management perspective and style.

With the accession of President Steve LeGraw to the CEO position, succeeding John Howland, who remains the company's chairman, Bradford Soap Works has transitioned to a new generation of leadership. In addition to leveraging advanced systems and tech-

nology to achieve high quality and efficiency, Bradford has also integrated across multinational operations. This in turn has helped to synthesize their global product development initiatives. Bradford's presentations, displays and attention to artistic detail succeed in perpetuating this message, as clearly evident in their lifestyle trends displays at HBA in New York City.

According to Steve LeGraw, it is important "to meet the creative challenges of integrated retailers and other specialty customers on the one hand, and to address the production efficiency and productivity concerns of mass-market customers on the other." This was a strategic priority of Bradford's recent evolution.

## CUSTOMIZATION

"Clearly," said LeGraw, "building awareness of Bradford through consistent marketing and innovative promotions is key." He notes a major goal is, "Ideally, to gather trends from around the world and relate them to the soap process." Since enabling the production of products is critical, LeGraw reports that, "We have aligned our organization to streamline product development so we can deliver exactly what customers need as efficiently as possible. One example is our Custom Options program, which provides a straight-forward, menu-driven process for implementing innovative product concepts within realistic production parameters." LeGraw adds that, "In keeping with these changes, I think our outlook has



After milling, extrusion and pressing, the soap bars are conveyed, packaged and distributed.

changed a bit too. We've become very tuned into our customers' consumer markets and the role of different channels, which has helped us tremendously in tailoring new product ideas and in focusing our resources more appropriately to each market and channel."

LeGraw highlights the importance of programs tailored to the specific needs of Bradford customers. "We can't be everything to everyone", he said, "but we can excel at whatever we put our minds to within a disciplined framework." He noted that their bar soaps are sold in three divisions – creative, custom and contract. The major challenge is to meet the needs of the customers by "pulling our creativity down to earth and making it work."

John Howland pointed out that Bradford occupies a distinctive position in the marketplace – as the largest specialty bar soap manufacturer, as the largest maker of specialty soap bases, and as a multinational company. LeGraw added, "Some people have this

notion that small, independent suppliers can be more responsive than a big organization, but when you are trying to launch a product into a sophisticated global market it becomes clear that that's a myth. Very simply," he continued, "we have resources others don't have. And customers benefit directly at every stage, from sources of materials to scientific expertise to flexibility in production."

Both Howland and LeGraw agreed that improving the ability to quickly and accurately create the prototype and then replicate that in manufacturing is pivotal to getting the order produced and out the door on time. An example of Bradford's investment in this area is their computer color matching systems. "With effective systems that are properly integrated into the order execution cycle, we are able to consistently meet customer imposed speed-to-market criteria," said LeGraw.

As an additional way to increase productivity, LeGraw came up with a system of clusters, permutations of Bradford's extensive manufacturing capabilities, that enable them to use thousands of possible combinations of equipment to get their products out. Said LeGraw, "the more permutations you have, the more flexibility you have." In devoting their energies to speed, need and product development, Bradford has clearly ascended to a new level of establishing and maintaining strategic priorities to fulfill their business goals.

## BASES AND TECHNOLOGY

In light of the breadth of their capabilities, it's no wonder that attention to speed, need and development is scrupulously defined. Bradford makes its own soap bases and maintains a collection of more than 50 proprietary bases. These are vegetable, tallow, synthetic and combination bar soap bases, and their collection is the largest in the world. From translucents, transparents and opaques to organics and super-mild

synthetics, their bases enable a wide variety of finished products, while meeting a range of requirements for appearance, color, performance and application.

Their traditional bases are made using the full-boiled kettle process, a classic saponification method that results in bases of exceptional purity and uniformity. Through their computer modeling program, they control the content and characteristics of the bases. LeGraw noted, "We can fine tune formulations and match each new product to its intended market," and he added, "Being close to so many geographic markets gives us access to market intelligence around the world." This, says LeGraw, "helps us in everything from new product concepts to sourcing raw materials and evaluating new manufacturing technologies. Later on, in production, being multinational provides logistical advantages—we can ship more product further and faster."

Bradford utilizes a variety of production equipment and resources; and Executive Vice President, Joseph Sosnosky, with Ed George, VP Technical Services, explained some of their technological capabilities. From its proprietary Kettle Soap Process Simulator to its enterprise resource planning system which can integrate customer procurement with Bradford's scheduling, order tracking and supply chain management, the company has demonstrated an investment in information technology and an attention to quality that has propelled Bradford into their current position. Patented product innovations include microsphere and striation technology; and their quality assurance systems include GretagMacbeth color matching instrumentation and their HPLC (High Performance Liquid Chromatography) system. George notes, that "Chromatography, a separation science, enables the chemist to separate ingredients in a formula, and allows you to test for specific compo-



Beautiful soaps are Bradford's business.

nents in a formula, both quantitatively and qualitatively.”

Solid soap pellets are weighed, dispensed to mixers, have color, fragrance and other ingredients added, and undergo various customizing and/or decorative technological processes. After milling, extrusion and pressing, the soap bars are conveyed and packaged. After flow wrapping, pleat wrapping, clear overwrapping, bundling and more, the soap bars make their way to the distribution warehouse, where computer systems enable storage, access and ultimately shipping and dissemination of the products to customers.

According to LeGraw, “Bradford is selling capabilities and creativity within a disciplined framework.” Their three bar soap divisions, creative, custom and contract, substantiate their versatility, and their Organic Manufacturer certification represents another significant milestone. They are the first commercial-scale bar soap manufacturer in the US to have received this distinction, which raises the bar in quality across the board and strengthens their credentials.

### VISION AND THE ECONOMY

In reconciling today’s uncertain economy and a vision for the future, LeGraw takes a fundamental approach to integrating business and sustained value for consumers. “I believe challenges in this business go beyond the economic cycle,” he said. “And while no industry is recession-proof, personal care products will always be a necessity, and specialty soaps offer consumers a relatively inexpensive way to feel good on an extremely personal level. Soap is still one of the most interesting things to differentiate. . . . In fact, at the Harvard Business School we learned that the most fundamental techniques of marketing began with the selling of soaps,” said LeGraw. He adds, “It’s important to be able to stay abreast of fashions and trends, which for a manufacturer means looking ahead, while also managing risks, going beyond novelty to products that deliver sustained value to the consumer and create semi-permanent constituencies.” That is, according to LeGraw, “a line Bradford has learned to walk very well. We’ve been helped by

economies of scale, but we can control the whole process and have total command of soap chemistry and manufacturing, allowing us to concentrate on the essence of the product and the brand behind it. That is how we maximize the value to our customers.”

Howland added, “The total transformation of Bradford was our goal, not just a new identity or a new technology or new machinery or a new product line, but rather a total transformation of our people and resources to make certain Bradford remains a premier business partner and a first-rate company.” That is the “new” Bradford.

In a concise summary of their mission, LeGraw’s vision is to be in all channels, to offer full service in product development, including liquids, and to maintain a culture of honesty and integrity. This extends to developing good strategic partnerships and offering manufacturing and product expertise on a global level. **S&C**