



TORCH BEARERS

Connecticut Lighting Centers can attribute its success to three generations of the Director family joining together to move the business forward.

BY MARK OKUN

It's refreshing to see a family business continue successfully through generations, and that's exactly what is happening at Connecticut Lighting Centers in a big way. Amidst a tumultuous business climate that the digital economy has unearthed, everything is different than it was in 1972 when the company began.

In full disclosure, I spent 10 years working with the Director family – an experience that impacted me greatly on a personal and professional level. It also provides me with a unique vantage point of which to tell this story.

Arthur (Art) Director and his wife, Edythe, founded Connecticut Lighting Centers in Hartford, Connecticut in 1972. During the early years, Art balanced family, business, and civic responsibilities while building friendships and alliances with local businesses, fellow showrooms, and lighting manufacturers. Out of the couple's two children, only David stayed in the business.

As time moved forward and the new concept of a "lighting-only store" grew, so did Connecticut Lighting Centers, where David eventually assumed leadership as President. David's skills allow him to play an important role; he leads his team from the front with both purpose and course while in the background, he serves as the final



David Director (far left) with his children Brett, Jemma, and Todd.

filter as the business strives for perfection. David spearheaded the growth of a second location and increased the hours to be available early for the trade and evenings and weekends for the public.

Art's commitment to giving back to the community is mirrored in David. Both have held leadership roles in organizations such as Middlesex County Community Foundation, Northern Middlesex County YWCA, Middlesex Memorial Hospital, and Rushford Substance Abuse Centers. Their generosity in donating both time and money made me a proud member of the Connecticut Lighting Centers team.

ENTER GENERATION 3

David and his wife, Carol, have three children – Todd, Janna, and Brett – who are all an integral part of the company. They say history may not always repeat but it sure does rhyme, and the Directors have a great legacy to echo. Each of the children brings a set of skills that will build the company as it moves into the third generation.

In May 2018, Connecticut Lighting Centers had a Grand Opening of its new branch in Southington, Conn., just down the road from its former location. This new store is truly an experience center of products and applications. I sat down with Todd before the event to learn more about the new showroom and his plans for the future.

MARK OKUN: WHEN DID YOU KNOW YOU WANTED TO BE IN THE FAMILY BUSINESS?

Todd Director: It was 2005 between high school and college. I worked for the summer in a variety of positions and decided this is where I want to be.

MO: REGARDING THE NEWEST SHOWROOM, WHY DID YOU SELECT THIS LOCATION?

TD: We have easy access to the highway and our neighbors are a furniture and appliance store; that makes this a prime destination. It's a central location that draws from a very large radius. We feel that the most optimal lighting store is an open space, and we have that here.

MO: WHAT IS YOUR MERCHANDISING STRATEGY?

TD: The concept is to see everything with no walls or obstructions, while having enough space to segregate product categories without crowding them. With the increased use of LED products, we felt that it was important for the customer – both the homeowner and tradesperson – to have real examples of application and installation.

This is a large space sectioned with display islands and vignettes. There is a working light lab for the client to experience the lighting and see how it is installed. Plus, the lab has an area for controls and window shades.

“The scale of the showroom, and the way it is designed, seems to make people think we have more on display.”

–Todd Director



David Director, with his parents Art and Edythe

A newspaper ad from 1989 proclaims, "Light Your Way Into 1990" and features photos of Art, David, and Todd to reinforce the idea of three generations of family ownership to the community.

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MO: WHAT HAS BEEN THE FEEDBACK ON THE NEW LOCATION AND STORE?

TD: The scale of the showroom, and the way it is designed, seems to make people think we have more on display. We want this to be a resource for our customers and one way we do this is to show how channel lighting looks installed — but with a twist. We have cut away the wall so everyone (homeowner, builder, or electrician) can see how it goes in. This reduces the fear of something new. People love working displays.

MO: HOW ARE YOU APPEALING TO TODAY'S CONSUMER?

TD: We stock product. Approximately 8 out of 10 people leave with some kind of box. If we don't have an item, we'll get it for the client — and we are aggressive against the digital competition. We will get the customer the lighting they want and deliver it to their house at the same — or better — price than they will find online.

MO: SO, YOU WILL BEAT INTERNET PRICING?

TD: Beating internet pricing is rarely the issue. Price concerns disappear when a well-trained staff educates the customer. For example, the public is bombarded with so much poor LED product out there that when you explain the real differences in quality, it sets us up to be the expert.

MO: HOW DO YOU COMMUNICATE THAT MESSAGE?

TD: The only way to convey it accurately to the client is through training our team. I spend a high percentage of my total work time communicating with them so the message they share is clear and consistent.

We don't want to make the shopping experience only about price; we want to offer more than a low price. Our appeal is service and selection first — really educating the consumer. We can demonstrate controls and show the client/tradesperson how the install should go. We are the resource for what they need.

MO: WHAT ACTIVITIES ARE YOU FOCUSED ON?

TD: Service, selection, quality staff, and available products. I'm focused on teaching our sales team to educate customers on the right product and to not just be selling them something to sell something. Sell them the right product or solution and you'll have those customers for life.

MO: WHAT ARE THE CHALLENGES IN PROMOTING YOUR BUSINESS?

TD: Marketing has changed a lot. We are shifting our marketing dollars around to get the most reach possible. Another challenge is helping our staff understand that what worked in the past in sales, service, and marketing 5, 10, and even 20 years ago does not work today. Times have changed and much of our staff has been with us a long time — some well over 20 years. The speed that changes occur is mind-blowing; it's probably the biggest issue we face. You have to keep adapting. Some people adapt quickly and others don't. My goal is to help us keep moving forward and staying in front of the curve. We do this by utilizing a variety of sources including the American Lighting Association (ALA), our reps, and in-house training.

MO: WHAT ABOUT STAFFING CHALLENGES?

TD: There is a lot of pressure on people with the changes that have happened in our industry and in retail in general. An important point we drive home is that nothing is stagnant. We, as a company, and also as individuals, must adapt to the changes — from the technological changes in lighting to the changes in the customer. We must keep everyone moving forward.

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4 THINGS THAT CAN IMPROVE ANY SHOWROOM

Todd Director imparts helpful advice he has learned over the years.

- **LOOK** backward and see if any of the principles that made you a success have been abandoned. Then adapt those activities to today.
- **STOCK** the correct products as take-with items. There is a trend going on with showrooms limiting the goods they stock. I think many want too far and don't have the items that the weekend warrior or Diver want on-hand and are losing the business to the big box stores.
- **SPEND** time and money on educating your team. The more we educate and communicate to the team, the better they perform. Too often price is the only focus; you have to be able to talk about - and demonstrate - quality and performance. Like cars, the products all get "you from point 'a' to point 'b,'" but they can do that in a sports car or a truck. It's all about what the customer wants and values.
- **INCLUDE** new product categories that complement your business. It could be anything from hardware and window shades to candles. If it works in your showroom without having to reinvent your image, it's a good thing.

MO: HOW DOES YOUR NEW SHOWROOM IMPROVE THE CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE?

TD: We have built displays that explain differences in products, such as a visual that shows an IC can vs. a non-IC can. We are also committed to educating consumers to the level they wish.

MO: GIVEN THE LEGACIES OF YOUR FATHER AND GRANDFATHER, WHICH OF THEIR CHARACTERISTICS DO YOU BRING TO THE COMPANY?

TD: I want to continue their respect and passion for the business, from our customers and vendors to our staff. I learned a valuable lesson when the 2008 Recession hit. I witnessed friends in and out of the lighting industry laying off employees and scrambling to keep their businesses alive. Connecticut Lighting Centers did not lay off one person. That said, we absolutely made drastic changes, and those changes started at the top. We had to put a freeze on hiring and payroll expenses, plus eliminate bonuses to keep our employees working. Those changes were a major investment in our people, and today - as we are turning the corner with our team - we are happy we did.

The other thing I learned from both Art and David was to become a part of the community

and give back to it. Both my dad and grandfather taught me, Brett, Jenna, and our cousins that being an active member of a community means to be active in any way you can. We practice this in our personal and business lives. Most important: When we give our word, we keep our word.

MO: WHAT DOES THE FUTURE LOOK LIKE TO YOU?

TD: A consolidation of our industry, but not a reduction of the need for good products and service. Retail will get better. Much of the failure that retailers have experienced is because they have taken their eyes off the activities that made them successful.

MO: WHAT DO YOU WANT YOUR PEERS TO KNOW ABOUT YOU?

TD: I am very excited to be in the lighting business with my sister, Jenna, and brother, Brett, as the third generation of a family-run company. Both Jenna and Brett are in an intensive skill-building period. They both focus on sales because that is where our customer is. When they are not selling, they each assist in expediting orders and working with our vendors.

With the changes that have happened in the industry, I feel there is more opportunity for showrooms. In fact, the changes have made it harder for other channels to offer the level of expertise needed by customers that can only be found in a showroom.

EVERYONE LOVES A PARTY

After I finished my interview with Todd Connecticut Lighting Centers held its grand opening gala, which was attended by local businesses and a cadre of whos who in the lighting industry.

The event finished with a speech by David, who cited his late mother and father as the pioneers they were - not only in lighting, but in their community. David paid tribute to his wife, Carol, for nurturing their children in ways that are evident in their actions today. He also acknowledged the industry partners that have been with Connecticut Lighting Centers since the beginning. He noted how proud he is of his children and the roles they are growing into as the third generation in the business. While this was not a torch-passing ceremony, everyone in attendance could clearly see the entire Director family has their eye on the prize. ❖



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