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The CEO Magazine
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Evolving with the Market

Lanier Australia is diversifying and developing its offering across the document-management and print-solutions market as the print industry matures.

Images courtesy of Lanier Australia

The print industry is rapidly maturing as technology and consumer knowledge quickly escalate. One company that is identifying and leading these seismic shifts is Lanier Australia. As a provider of unique and customised software and hardware products for Australia's document and print needs, Lanier has offices in every major capital city and an extensive dealer network across the nation.

The CEO Magazine recently spoke to Lanier Australia's Managing Director John Hall about his time at the company, the shifts he has seen across the industry, and how Lanier is transforming itself to meet market needs.

The CEO Magazine: What led you to your current role as managing director?

John: I think it found me, rather than me finding the position. I joined Lanier to start up a finance company for them. I was looking for an opportunity to further my career in finance, and I'd had a few experiences with starting finance businesses before. I enjoy building things, and the opportunity to start a finance business from scratch intrigued me and drew me in.

Not long after setting up that business, an opportunity came up to move into this role, and I took the job.

How do you think your management style has evolved over your time at Lanier?

I've become more relaxed. When you first come into the role, you need to find the lie of the land and understand the business and the people. As time goes on and you evolve into the role, you become more trusting of the people around you and gain more of an understanding of what their capabilities are. As a result, you're able to delegate a bit more effectively and watch your own people develop. As long as you surround yourself with great people, the job becomes a little bit more relaxing.

Over the past 10 years or so, I've made sure I have the right people around me in the right jobs, and that they're effective. I did this through internal promotions, assigning people to roles I believed they were capable of filling. A couple of my direct reports have come up through the organisation. I also did some careful recruiting, picking people who would fit into our culture and who carried the right values.

It was a combination of internal and external. You have to get that mix right. You don't want everyone thinking the same way as you; you want some people who are going to challenge you and help push the organisation forward, rather than them all just saying yes to you.

What changes have you made to ensure Lanier leads market shifts and continues to diversify?

We reinvent ourselves every three to four years in terms of the technology changes that have come through—embracing them and trying to keep ahead of what's going on in that space.

We've seen a huge change from 15 years ago when our products were simply stand-alone devices that lived in the hallways of offices. Our devices are now all networked, they've got multiple functions, and they print in colour. All of these are changes that have happened in the past 15 years in this industry, so we've seen quite a massive shift.

How did you ensure that Lanier moves with these changes?

We've been very fast in adopting the technologies. We've tried to spend a lot of time and effort in training our people, and I think we've been good at it. A lot of our employees have stayed with the business, and we've retrained them and kept their skills up to date over the years. That investment in training has paid off in the long run.

How has this training contributed to your long-term retention rates?

We've got an ageing population in our technical area, which is going to be a challenge in the future, but >

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- John Hall

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we have quite high retention rates among our technical and field staff.

For instance, with our technical training, we need to keep our technicians up to date with new technologies. Every time a new model comes out, we need to make sure that our technicians are well equipped to service them in the field. There's a combination of workshop training for them, and it is quite a large expense to keep them current with the devices as they change.

What have been your greatest achievements since becoming managing director?

I believe I've achieved above-industry revenue growth for many years, and have also generated good profits and turned the business into a profitable and growing company that's continued to expand.

We keep a very good eye on our costs, and ensure that we keep our business at the right size and try not to run too far ahead of ourselves in terms of our costs. It's about keeping the costs down while getting maximum productivity out of our people.

How has the culture at Lanier shifted?

We've had quite a significant cultural shift within our sales teams in terms of trying to understand our customers' requirements. As our customers' requirements have changed, so have our skills in identifying what those needs are.

How do you promote that customer-focused culture?

We incorporate it into our staff induction and training. We're very focused on customer feedback, and employees are celebrated when a customer offers compliments and positive comments.

The feedback that we receive from customers is shared throughout the organisation to ensure everybody knows when we're doing well, as well as understands the customer expectations we're not meeting.

By regularly talking to our customers and using that feedback internally, our teams can look at how they can improve and continue to drive high levels of customer satisfaction.

What kinds of changes have you made based on that feedback mechanism?

The main changes would be around response times in terms of how quickly we get out to see our customers when there's a problem with our machines.

From the sales side of the business, we received feedback from our customers around the fact that they weren't seeing our account managers enough, so we've made some changes to the way we track how often those customers are being seen and have set up alerts so that the sales people know the customers that they haven't seen in a while who are overdue for a visit.

That's monitored by management as well, so we can see that those expectations are being met. We've implemented changes in those two areas fairly recently as a result of customer feedback.

How do you work with suppliers and strategic partners to encourage innovation?

Our main supplier is our parent company. In terms of product development, we have a feedback mechanism that goes back to the technicians and engineers who design the products. We get information from our customers and we feed that information back to them so they can understand what our customers are looking for. It's really driven there.

For our local suppliers, like our freight suppliers, we're looking for reliability and always being able to know where our products are when we're shipping them. We ship a lot of consumables and spare parts right around Australia, so it's important for us to understand where those products are in terms of being able to set the right expectations



for our customers in regard to delivery times.

We've been using Star Track for more than 20 years, and they're a very strategic partner for us. In terms of what we do, they're an extension of our business every day. We put through more than 1,000 consignments a week from Melbourne to Sydney with Star Track. We have around 150 per week from Melbourne to Perth, and approximately 175 per week from Melbourne to Brisbane. There are a lot of consignments going through, and it's essential that we can track them. So that relationship is very important to us.

How will Lanier continue to grow and develop?

We will continue to diversify our business. We are definitely moving towards becoming a services-type business. IT services is an area that we've identified as a potential growth area for us. We've already started to move into that space.

The traditional business of print and print devices is a very mature market, and it will be hard for us to find significant growth in those markets moving forward. We need to keep looking and diversifying, which we've already started to do, but that will become a bigger part of our business in the future. •

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