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Vendor Focus: In pursuit of excellence

[Michelle Sturman](#), 27 February 2017

In OPI's second Vendor Special issue, Michelle Sturman is putting the spotlight on companies that have excelled in one or more specific areas over the past 12 months.



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After some heated debates, a panel of independent industry experts has decided the shortlist for the 2017 European Office Products Awards (EOPA).

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While some may bemoan the lack of innovation in the business supplies industry, in reality all they have to do is simply have a good look around. There are still plenty of vendors that are driving transformation, be it through new product design, technology or functionality, by realigning the business or laying the groundwork for the future through acquisitions.

To ensure the vendors featured in the following pages are truly worthy of inclusion, **OPI** asked for anonymous feedback from the industry – wholesalers, resellers and dealer groups – from around the world. The final selection, perhaps predictably, includes some of the biggest names in office products. Judging by the responses received, however, there's certainly an expectation that some of the companies put forward which are relative newcomers to our sector right now are likely to play a much more important role in the not too distant future – and that's always a good sign in an industry on the move.

The manufacturers featured this year certainly earned the right to be included and are (in no particular order): Epson, Emerald Brand, Fellowes Brands, Newell Brands, International Paper and Acme United. New for this year are the 'Ones to watch' –



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Emerald Brand has announced a partnership with Shoplet.com that will see the online retailer offer a full branded line of over 225 sustainable products ranging from Tree-Free paper and petroleum-free plastics, to environmentally-friendly cleaners.

Event Review: European Office Products Awards

Alright on the night...

ADVEO rewards excellence

European wholesaler ADVEO held its second Excellence Awards in Madrid recently.

Members of the industry have further applauded the vendor's efforts in sustainability – which includes all of the above print innovations – and in particular its work in Australia with Planet Ark on cartridge recycling.

Epson is also in the process of bringing to market the world's first compact office papermaking system, which will be demonstrated in Europe later this year. PaperLab is capable of producing new paper from securely-shredded waste paper with minimal use of water, and can produce thousands of sheets of recycled paper a day.

The vendor has certainly upped its game in terms of lowering the environmental impact across its manufacturing processes and Epson President Minoru Usui was quoted recently as saying that as part of the company's Environmental Vision 2050, it has set itself a goal of reducing its CO₂ emissions by 90% across the lifecycle of all its products and services.

The company already achieved by 2015 a 43% reduction in CO₂ emissions, on top of a 33% reduction in waste emissions, and a 55% reduction in water consumption.

Last year saw the vendor release its 2025 corporate vision which is to create a “connected age of people, things and information with efficient, compact and precision technologies that generate value to customers in the form of smart technologies, the environment and performance in four areas of innovation: inkjet, visual, wearables and robotics”.

Emerald Brand

Sustainable product manufacturer Emerald Brand has spent the past year bedding down its e-commerce plans and that is currently paying serious dividends.

The company now has partnerships with major e-commerce outfits such as Amazon, Shoplet, Max Delivery and Jet.com.

On Amazon, Emerald saw sales rise by 207% year on year in 2016 compared to 2015. On Shoplet, the vendor offers a full branded line of more than 200 products ranging from tree-free paper to environmentally-friendly cleaners. Emerald Brand Managing Director Ralph Bianculli Jr says the company's focus and growth in e-commerce is due to a number of factors.

The first is the general increase in online ordering, particularly from the millennial generation. The second is due to the growing appetite over the past five years for healthier, more sustainable products.

Bianculli also refers to the connection between price points, the quality of sustainable products and the desire to purchase them. “We continue to narrow the gap compared to traditional, or less sustainable products, and are seeing a linear demand increase and growth reflection,” he says.

He expects to see further expansion as more of the company's production moves to the US this year: “We anticipate even greater growth in acquiring new customers as well as improving our retention rates.”

companies that should be on everyone's radar.

Epson

Global technology manufacturer Epson has made giant strides in terms of pushing the boundaries of technology, most notably in its Printer division with its high-capacity ink tank printers that include replaceable ink pack system (RIPS) and EcoTanks.

Its innovations have clearly struck a chord with customers as Epson revealed last year that these high-capacity ink tank printers had achieved cumulative global sales of 15 million units since their launch in 2010.

The company attributed the success to a number of factors, including the ability to print thousands of pages before refilling, and ultra-low-cost per print. Going forward, Epson expects these printers to account for almost 40% of the company's inkjet printer sales.

Recognising the innovation, Epson Europe has been shortlisted for a European Office Products Award (EOPA) 2017 in the Business Product of the Year category for its WorkForce Pro RIPS series.

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Leadenhall Building, London, UK

Society of Old Friends – AGM and Members Dinner

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B2B retention rates are already at 93% and no doubt Emerald will continue to work hard to improve them over the coming year.

Fellowes Brands

Fellowes Brands is a rarity these days – as it celebrates 100 years in business it's still family-owned and run.

One of the main reasons the company still exists after a century is its ability to recognise gaps in the market as well as innovate in areas where many would think it difficult, such as its traditional shredder business. At the end of last year, Fellowes was granted yet another patent to protect new technology related to this segment – the latest in a line of more than 50 shredder utility approvals and applications.

The true genius behind the company, however, lies in its ability to think laterally and successfully manoeuvre into new categories. In the past few years, Fellowes has started the shift away from a reliance on the declining paper category and into the burgeoning 'health and wellness in the office' space, especially ergonomics.

One of its most successful forays outside of its original Bankers Box is the AeraMax air purifying series, one of which – the AeraMax Pro AM III – won both the EOPA and North American Office Products Awards 2016 for Product Innovation of the Year. Talking to OPI, Fellowes CEO John Fellowes says: "Over the past five years, Fellowes has very intentionally responded to industry-wide trends which has impacted end-user demand for paper-based products, as well as changed how consumers research and purchase products. Given our 100-year history, the need to evolve is not new to us and we have learned to approach these sorts of situations as opportunities.

"Today, we are in the midst of running two growth strategies, one that draws from our expertise and capabilities in maximising mature categories, and one which is more entrepreneurial in nature – focused on emerging trends and new category opportunities. These two strategies are providing both short and long-term opportunities for our organisation to thrive as we move into our second century as a family-led business."

Breaking into even more new categories, Fellowes has kicked off this year with the launch of its Lotus sit-stand workstation. According to industry members, it certainly lives up to its tagline 'Innovation in Motion', not only in terms of the products it offers, but also in its way of selling and developing these new categories.

Newell Brands

2016 was a huge year for Newell Brands, not least because of its renaming from Newell Rubbermaid after it acquired the Jarden brand in April, creating a \$16 billion company. Restructuring of the company has taken place in various stages over the past year, all designed to simplify the newly-merged business.

As part of its streamlining, Newell has been busy offloading numerous divisions including its Rubbermaid consumer storage totes business, Pine Mountain business and selective parts of its Diamond brand that comprises lighters and its laundry business.

At the same time, the company has been boosting other divisions with the acquisitions of food storage container manufacturer Sistema Plastics in New Zealand, and Smith Mountain Industries, which owns the Woodwick Candle brand.

In its February 2017 earnings call, CEO Michael Polk said the company's new corporate strategy strengthens its overall portfolio while focusing resources on the categories with the "greatest right to win". He added that the new strategy allows for investment in "growth capabilities like insights, design and innovation".

Adjusting for acquisitions and the divestiture of 10% of its portfolio, Newell has shifted much of its original bulk and trimmed down from 32 to 16 divisions. Under the restructuring, Newell has created a new global enterprise-wide e-commerce unit which, when fully staffed, will be 300+ strong.

With a team that focused, Newell is clearly not resting on its laurels when it comes to tackling changing buying habits. The company's online sales have grown over 30% over the past three years and currently sit at over \$1 billion – Polk's aim is to double this revenue by 2020.

Amid all this transformation, Newell has still managed to keep an eye on product innovation. Two of its label writers, the DYMO LabelWriter 450 and the MobileLabeler, have been shortlisted for the Business Product and Innovation of the Year award categories at this year's EOPA.

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International Paper

International Paper (IP) is one business supplies vendor that continually crops up as leader in sustainability. It is often held up as a beacon for others to try and emulate.

It is doubly important for a paper company to have sound environmental credentials as this specific industry sector has come under continuous fire. But IP has no such concerns and always punches above its weight on important environmental benchmarks.

Guided by its Vision 2020 Goals which were set in 2010, its 12 voluntary objectives include energy efficiency, greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, water use, fibre certification, recycling, supply chain and community involvement.

Some of the accomplishments so far – against the 2010 baseline until 2015 – include a 4.7% improvement in energy efficiency; 16% reduction in GHG emissions; 28% rise in certified fibre volume; 3% increase in the recovery of old corrugated containers for recycling; and \$15.5 million donated to charitable organisations.

In October last year, the Forestry Stewardship Council (FSC) honoured IP with a Leadership Award for forest certification which recognises extraordinary commitment to responsible forest management and the FSC. Taking its FSC membership very seriously, IP developed its own FSC forest management group, Certified Forest Management (CFM), which along with its support of supplier-based FSC groups, has influenced the growth of over one million acres of FSC lands in the US.

Talking to **OPI**, International Paper said: "Our entire business depends upon the sustainability of forests. We will continue to engage in responsible forest stewardship to maintain healthy and productive forest ecosystems for generations to come by tackling the toughest issues in our value chain, reducing our environmental footprint and promoting the long-term sustainability of natural capital. International Paper also cares for the community and wants to give back through new programs like our Paper is Power. This free Common Core Based curriculum helps elementary and middle school educators teach children the value of learning on paper."

But the company's success is not all about sustainability. The slow decline of the paper industry has seen IP expand into other related categories such as packaging and pulp. In December 2016, the manufacturer acquired Weyerhaeuser's pulp business for \$2.2 billion. The deal includes five mills and two converting facilities to produce consumer products including tissue.

The business is also ensuring that its brand is widely available, and last year signed up to become the first print and copy vendor to join Amazon's Dash Button automatic replenishment programme.

Last month, IP was once again named as one of 'America's most admired companies' by Fortune magazine – an accolade it has been awarded 14 times in the past 15 years. Criteria for inclusion include quality of management, innovativeness, quality of products, effectiveness in doing business globally, and social responsibility to the community and the environment.

Acme United

The past 12 months for Acme United have been about steadily building upon its previous success in new categories. In February 2016, the vendor acquired Diamond Machining Technology (DMT), a sharpening company which was designed to complement its existing Westcott, Camillus and Cuda brands.

Over the year, all of its product lines, including those from acquisitions, have done exceeding well, leading Acme to a number of record-breaking quarters.

It will be interesting to see how its latest purchase, Spill Magic, fares over the coming 12 months. The safety firm was purchased in February for \$7.2 million and includes products designed specifically for the medical supplies industry.

In fact, first aid products represent over 40% of its corporate sales and Acme is widely recognised as one of the top suppliers in North America. To retain its cutting-edge position, it not only ensures growth through complementary category expansion, but also by introducing additions such as a phone app that replenishes products by creating an automatic order when a barcode is scanned. Acme CEO Walter Johnsen told OPI: "Innovation is definitely our biggest differentiator. It is real here and we mean it."

Acme's current focus is in the hobbycraft and DIY sector, with its recently launched tool line and glue guns.

Ones to watch

The following vendors are worthy of inclusion for a wide variety of reasons, including category diversification and technological innovation – or for simply being on-trend:

Smead Manufacturing

North American OP vendor Smead is a stalwart of the industry and it's always been highly-respected since its founding in 1906, and under successive generations of the Hoffman family.

Last year, the company celebrated 110 years in business, as well as the handing over to the next generation with the promotion of Casey Avent to the position of President exactly 18 years after his mother Sharon Avent (née Hoffman) became President/CEO.

The manufacturer has signalled its intent to expand the business through actively pursuing acquisitions this year, something it has done (mostly) successfully throughout its history. Smead will also continue its ongoing successful diversification into adjacent categories beyond its traditional paper-based organisational products.

HP Inc

Now that HP Inc is settling down in its own skin and is in charge of its own destiny, it is concentrating on turning around the business. This includes the launch of products into expected growth categories such as 3D printing and what the company calls 'blended reality', which comprises the Internet of Things and artificial intelligence. The PC and printer manufacturer has also been sorting out its divisions in terms of restructuring and realigning its partner channel. And let's not forget HP's acquisition of Samsung's printer business which is expected to close later this year.

Safco

Celebrating its 50th anniversary last year, Safco is sitting pretty as the requirement for ergonomic office furniture explodes, thanks to the health and wellness trend in the office. It's not just riding the wave however, but has also made a few decisions recently that sets it up strategically for the future.

In August 2016, Safco agreed to buy fellow office furniture brand Mayline, while a few months prior to this, it acquired Focal Upright, an award-winning manufacturer of ergonomic office furniture.

CEP Office Solutions

CEP is definitely one to watch in terms of desktop products as it continues to innovate in this category at every turn. It has also successfully branched out into other categories and is now well-known for its 'Take a Break' beverage solution for the breakroom. In the past year, the France-based manufacturer has further released products that include wireless charging stations for smartphones, 'Take Care' safety stickers and the stylish Ellypse Xtra Strong desktop accessories range.

The Navigator Company

2016 was a sterling year for The Navigator Company. The paper manufacturer – formerly known as grupo Portucel Soporcel until February 2016 – posted record paper volumes and was named the number one paper brand in Europe following an Opticom study on customer recognition.

Navigator has also been shortlisted for the Product Development of the Year category at this year's EOPA for its Advanced paper product.

Tags: acquisitions, adjacent categories, sustainability, Vendors, Acme United, CEP, Emerald Brand, Epson, Fellowes, HP Inc, International Paper, Newell Brands, Safco, Smead, The Navigator Company

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