

A Minute With...

John Linder

Calibre Door Closers Inc.



USGlass sat down with John Linder, president and chief executive officer of Calibre Door Closers Inc. in Orange, Calif., to discuss his history in the hardware industry and what he sees in the industry's future.

Q: Your father became a glazier in 1948 and later founded U.S. Aluminum Corp. Did you get your start in the industry by helping him?

A: I worked at U.S. Aluminum; I probably was getting paid money for working there when I was 14 years old and, later, as I became older and became more responsible and developed more skills, I actually worked summers and holidays there in the door fabrication shop.

When I left high school my options were to go to junior college or to go work for my father and, as it was during the time of Vietnam and the draft, I went into the service—I was actually going to be a career military man. I was in the military for 10 years. When I got out of the service, my dad had, by that time, sold U.S. Aluminum. He was still a young man, relatively speaking, and he had a couple of people at U.S. Aluminum that weren't getting along with the new management and between them they brainstormed and said, "You know what can we do? What's out there that we can maybe be successful at?"

U.S. Aluminum had used a lot of door closers in their products, just like companies like Kawneer use aluminum and YKK ... but at that time, back in the mid-1960s, virtually all of the door closers were manufactured domestically. If it was an overhead concealed closer, which is very popular in the industry, it was a Jackson overhead concealed closer, and if it was a surface applied closer it was either a Norton product or a Yale product. So what they did was they took samples of both of those closers and went to Japan and had them made ... and then began importing the product back into the United

States in late 1967, early 1968. So they were one of the first to bring imported door closer products into the United States. They did that under a company name of International Door Closers.

At the time I was in the military, I was overseas. I got out of the service in 1982 and I told my father I'd give him a run for his money and see what we could do together at International Door Closers.

This went along pretty well up until about 2005. My father had died about four years earlier and there were some changes in the ownership of the company and changes in management style and several of us had left the company, similar to what my father did with U.S. Aluminum, and we started our own company called Calibre Door Closers.

Q: What are some of your professional pet peeves?

A: I'm a nuts-and-bolts-type person, I'm more of a design-type person. I come to great odds with some of these salespeople and some of these companies that are sales-oriented, in particular when they come out with these "We have a 25-year warranty," "We have a lifetime warranty [statements]"—it has no meaning in the industry anymore. It's a sales tool, but when you look at designing something you don't want to design something that will last forever. It's an implied value, I grant you that, but people look at it and they say, "I want to go back in two or three years and replace it. I want to maintain that kind of business." It's become sort of like a dog chasing its tail.

Q: What words of wisdom or advice can you/do you share with others?

A: I think that the biggest issue, and the thing that we're really getting back to ourselves, is that you've got to stay close to your customer. You have to listen to what your customer is telling you. You have to cater to the customer. I have a motto, that's in our mission

statement, that's "Take care of your customer because if you don't someone else will."

We're finding a lot of people getting into the business now that are coming in from outside the United States, and in the last few years they've had a hard time getting established—they were foreigners, they spoke a foreign language and they were hard to communicate with—but they're very persistent. Despite all the negatives that seemingly are there, they're listening to the customer and they're taking care of the customer and they're winning the customer over, and a lot of the domestic manufacturers are losing the business to these foreigners because of that. It's a problem that really permeates an awful lot in different segments of our industry. The Americans seem to think that we're the best and we can do no wrong. And it's not working anymore.

Q: Knowing how early you came to the industry—what would you be doing if you weren't in your current profession?

A: I thought about that two years ago when I left International, and I had already been there for 24 years, which is almost half of my adult life. I really wanted to get out of the business. It's the kind of a business that really does get into your blood. The people—still in this day and age many of our customers are owner-operator. If it's not the founders and the fathers and the grandfathers, it's the sons and the grandsons that the business has been passed down to. It's the direct interaction with these people that makes it very interesting. A lot of characters, a lot of strong personalities and a lot of really good people. ■

