

[Home](#) » [News](#) »

Exclusive Coverage: Gilman Bros. Turnaround in Full Effect

Pimentel

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[Tony Kindelspire](#)

August 27, 2015



[The Gilman Brothers Co.](#), a foamboard manufacturer based in Gilman, Connecticut, is in full-on expansion mode. The company is spending what it says is “several hundred thousand dollars” on improvements to its headquarters and has leased off-site warehouse space to keep up with demand.

The steps are the latest in a corporate culture turnaround that director of operations **Mark Pimentel** says he has brought to the company since joining it seven years ago.

Gilman Brothers has redesigned its lobby, entrance and sales offices and is devoting its second floor to the build out of what it’s calling its Customer Experience Center, a new feature for the company.

In the past, Gilman Brothers’ customer service was handled by live staffers only during typical business hours, with the website serving as the off-hours and weekend destination for people seeking contact with the company. Given that it’s a global company, Gilman Bros. says it won’t make anyone wait anymore to talk live with an employee, no matter what time zone the inquiry is coming from. The CEC will be staffed 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

But the Customer Experience Center will be much more than just a call center. It will be staffed around the clock with employees providing immediate answers on topics such as printing, cutting guidelines, laminating, fabrication, pricing or material recommendations. The company is also investing heavily in equipment that can be used to make prototypes for customers after hours or on the weekends, making for an extremely quick turnaround time.

The new 24/7 approach to customer service and upgrades to the building match what has been going on behind the scenes at Gilman Brothers the past few years. The company, according to Pimentel, has undergone a transformation.

DARK DAYS IN THE PAST

“Out of 365 days, we’re probably running 320 to 330 of those days around the clock, seven days a week,” says Pimentel, who was hired seven years ago to run the company’s logistics and warehouse operations.

Pimentel says he's comfortable talking about it now, but circumstances were anything but comfortable when he first arrived at the company. In his eyes, he says, it had a lot of problems, but instead of being scared off he welcomed the challenge to help turn it around.

"I actually was excited because I was going through a point in my life where, alright, I was used to working with companies that were organized, disciplined, and you knew what you were doing. You knew the mission, you knew where you had to go," he recalls. "Here, I knew that I could just take what was going on in my life and turn it into a positive, and come here and make a difference. And I saw so much potential."

Despite what he perceived as flaws in the company's operations, he also saw that certain people were willing to roll up their sleeves and help get the company back on track, if they only had some leadership. That's where he saw himself helping.

As one might expect, an outsider coming in and recommending sweeping changes to the way things were run caused some hard feelings early on, Pimentel says.

"It was difficult the first year," Pimentel acknowledges. "I got into a lot of heated arguments with other managers here."

Some of the people accepted change, others just left, he says. Three years ago, when he took over running the factory, it was much easier to begin implementing some of the best practices that he had seen in other places he had worked.

"Over time I just started hiring people to replace some of the people who were stagnant and not willing to change," he says.

As far as he's concerned, he says, looking back, the biggest change he made was getting everyone to work together as a team. But that required a fundamental shift that rippled throughout the company, he says.

"Everything's transparent; there's no silos between sales and manufacturing and accounting—we all work together," Pimentel says. "And before... there were silos operating individually. Now it's all open. All those walls are down and you can just feel it. You can feel the camaraderie here at the company, and it's exciting. We have procedures in place, we have standard operating procedures, which we never had before; giving people reviews, raises—which, a lot of the guys hadn't seen in years."

A key moment in the future of Gilman Brothers occurred when **Bill VanHorn** was hired as director of sales in August of 2014. A veteran with more than 20 years of sales and marketing experience, VanHorn appreciated the new vision the company had and he delivered. In fact, Pimentel says, due to the volume of business VanHorn brought in, the company has had to lease some additional off-site warehouse space.

Being director of operations has allowed Pimentel to revamp the way every employee is treated.

For example, the plant is shut down on Super Bowl Sunday—a big deal considering the rabid sports fans who work there, Pimentel says.

"The other big day is Mother's Day," he says. "They really don't want to work Mother's Day. They're really not concerned about Father's Day, which is sad, but Mother's Day is huge."

On Halloween, the guys who don't have kids will adjust their schedules to fill in for those who want to go trick-or-treating with their kids, a practice encouraged by management.

“The key thing with the employees and the plant is just the positive energy,” Pimentel says. “They’re not treated like second-class citizens. We do cookouts for them, where Bill and I will flip hamburgers, we bring pizza in for them, we get ice and Gatorade for the guys. We try to do our best to communicate to them and tell them what’s going on in the field and how their work is impacting the business. Because they can see it, you know? And they take pride in what they do.”

He says he took a lesson from a former boss of his and goes around—every day, unless he’s tied up in a meeting or otherwise detained—and shakes every employees’ hand and asks them how they’re doing.

“I remember in the '90s when I first started working, an owner of a company did that to me and it made a big impact on me,” Pimentel says. “I thought it was important that this guy that was the owner, dressed to the nines, actually went out of his way to shake my hand every morning and say hello. Even if my hand was dirty, he didn’t care. He shook my hand. And that’s what we’ve brought back to Gilman and I think it works.”

About the time that VanHorn was hired the company had just introduced two new product lines: MountCor, which is specific to the picture framing industry, and INFINITY, a 100 percent styrene board that can be used for screen printing, shipping, visual merchandising and POP displays.

Asked how much of The Gilman Brothers Co.’s resurgence has to do with those new products and how much has to do with the new management style and the new staff members he’s brought in, Pimentel says the credit should be split evenly three ways.

“Once people start to see that you do care and that you have passion, then they change, and they go from being negative to being positive, and that’s kind of where we’re at right now,” Pimentel says.

The Gilman Brothers Co. currently employs about 84 and is expected to add another dozen or so by early next year.

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