

High Profile

BY ANNE PECHULS ■ PPAI

Certif-A-Gift: From Catalog Supplier To Business-Solution Provider

Many industry suppliers offer awards and recognition products, but Certif-A-Gift Company (UPIC: CERTIF) in Arlington Heights, Illinois, offers these products in a different way—through catalogs showing a variety of

lifestyle merchandise as well as travel, gift certificates and gift and reward cards.

“Since our founding, our intent has been to provide gifts and awards that recipients have the opportunity to select themselves. This ensures they want, need and will appreciate the products,” says Andy Tobutt, executive vice president. “Our award and recognition packages work well because they meet all different tastes and interests.”

When Certif-A-Gift was founded in 1954 by Randy Tobutt and Brandon Decker, the original concept

for distribution was to offer high-quality merchandise gift booklets to businesses to use for holiday gift programs. Soon, however, award and incentive programs were added to minimize the seasonal sales cycle. In 1959, when the company dis-

covered the specialty advertising industry and its distributor network, a nationwide sales staff and national exposure opened up for the owners. “Since then sales efforts have been directed toward our distributor partners through education, lead development and complete sales support,” says Trish Decker Duh, president.

Partner input is vital for Certif-A-Gift because it allows the company to continue to provide new services and product offerings to meet the



The management team of Certif-A-Gift, (from left: Lou Barnett, director of merchandise operations; Mark Repkin, vice president; Trish Duh, president, Andy Tobutt, executive vice president; and Greg Kern, director of IT) celebrates fifty great years with its distributor partners.

Certif-A-Gift Celebrates Its 50th Anniversary

History At A Glance

- 1954 — Randy Tobutt forms Certif-A-Gift in a three-flat walk-up on Hinman Avenue in Evanston, Illinois. The company offers a multiple selection gift catalog that includes food baskets, magazine subscriptions and lifestyle name-branded merchandise. Brandon Decker joins the company, and his Park Ridge basement becomes the company warehouse. These entrepreneurs produce the company's first multi-level catalog in time for the holiday season.
- 1955 — Certif-A-Gift moves into a storefront/warehouse on Main Street in Evanston, Illinois. Tobutt and Decker sell their first incentive program to increase new deposits for Oak Park Federal Savings & Loan.
- 1959 — The expanding business requires larger quarters, and a move to a 10,000-square-foot office/warehouse (next to what would become O'Hare Field) in Schiller Park, Illinois, is made. Certif-A-Gift joins the promotional products industry and exhibits at its first trade show at the Palmer House in Chicago.
- 1962 — The concept of independent distributors begins to show true promise as the multiple selection gift booklet idea is taking off.
- 1969 — Randy Tobutt retires, and Brandon Decker becomes the sole owner.
- 1970 — Certif-A-Gift offers specific product lines such as Sony, Bulova and Corningware in its catalog program to the promotional products distributors.
- 1972 — Andy Tobutt, Randy Tobutt's son, joins the company as a sales representative.
- 1978 — Trish Decker Duh, Brandon Decker's daughter, joins the company as operations manager, and she and Andy Tobutt take over management responsibilities.
- 1983 — The company backs away from specific product line distribution and begins to put full emphasis on catalog sales.
- 1990 — Certif-A-Gift offers a point-based deluxe catalog, Treasures of Success.
- 1993 — Certif-A-Gift buys its largest competitor, the Pick-A-Gift division of Carlson Marketing Corp., and Andy and Trish buy Certif-A-Gift from Brandon Decker.
- 1995 — Certif-A-Gift replaces multi-line reps with a direct factory sales force to continue strategic growth.
- 1998 — The company moves to its current and larger headquarters in Arlington Heights, Illinois, and runs its first incentive program using the Internet as technology for data administration, browsing and redeeming from a virtual catalog.
- 1999 — Certif-a-Gift introduces new technology offerings such as an Interactive Voice Response system and electronic data transfer.
- 2002 — The company uses Behavioral Analysis as an assessment strategy to structure an incentive program.
- 2003 — Certif-A-Gift develops a Web site for online redemption of Gift Booklets to improve efficiency.



recipient to choose the gift he wants... at the price you want to pay.

These gifts have been professionally designed for quality and to appeal to a broad range of interests and tastes. In order to present all the gifts on one page for your convenience, we have arranged our products in alphabetical and best-guess order. In this gift certificate, these groups appear. In each of our gift catalogs, there are 250 gifts. In each gift catalog, there are 250 gifts. In each gift catalog, there are 250 gifts.

Here is what your friends receive when you honor them with Certif-A-Gift:

1. A personal, deluxe certificate, hand-addressed with beautiful penmanship, stamped with colorful commemorative stamps. Every detail indicates personal consideration. And inside:
2. A picture album album-sized envelope filled but stamped and addressed with gleaming shiny gold letter with your name and/or company name tastefully incorporated throughout it.
3. Inside the beautiful cover is a gold and white 30-page gift booklet printed in vibrant full color, illustrating a broad and varied range of famous top quality items from which to choose the one gift he or she really wants most.

We think his choice on a prepaid post card that is provided, shows it is the real and he knows we will deliver the gift to him—again to your satisfaction.

Certif-A-Gift GROUP 1

Illustrated here are 25 of the gifts you will find in Certif-A-Gift Group 1. The entire group of 250 gifts is available for only \$4.95 each when purchased in bulk.

These gifts have been professionally designed for quality and to appeal to a broad range of interests and tastes. In order to present all the gifts on one page for your convenience, we have arranged our products in alphabetical and best-guess order. In this gift certificate, these groups appear. In each of our gift catalogs, there are 250 gifts. In each gift catalog, there are 250 gifts. In each gift catalog, there are 250 gifts.

\$4.95

Certif-A-Gift GROUP 5

Illustrated here are 25 of the gifts you will find in Certif-A-Gift Group 5. The entire group of 250 gifts is available for only \$22.50 each when purchased in bulk.

These gifts have been professionally designed for quality and to appeal to a broad range of interests and tastes. In order to present all the gifts on one page for your convenience, we have arranged our products in alphabetical and best-guess order. In this gift certificate, these groups appear. In each of our gift catalogs, there are 250 gifts. In each gift catalog, there are 250 gifts. In each gift catalog, there are 250 gifts.

\$22.50

Certif-A-Gift catalogs are designed to fit all budgets.

industry's ever-changing demands. Duh says, "New products that offer additional profit avenues to our partners allow us to provide a fresh mix for them to present to their clients, show new ideas and ensure continued client loyalty. We have grown from selling our company as a catalog supplier to selling it as a business-solution provider."

Fifty Years Ago

When Randy Tobutt worked for the Detroit-based H.L. Joynt Company, a provider of gift booklets of multiple selection magazine subscriptions and gift baskets, he suggested that the company expand into merchandise—but the company declined. As a result, he moved to Evanston, Illinois, to pursue his dream of beginning his own multiple selection merchandise gift booklet company. There he met Brandon Decker, who had attended Kendall College before joining his father in the real estate business. Decker helped Tobutt find an apartment in the tight housing market after World War II and soon agreed to join

him in his new venture. Because both men enjoyed a play on words, they felt Certif-A-Gift was a clever name for their new company that offered certificates for gifts.

These entrepreneurs were now the owners, sales staff and buyers for a business that originated in the apartment Randy rented from Brandon, and the merchandise was shipped from Brandon's Park Ridge basement. They along with some neighbors (who worked for sandwiches and beer) prepared the merchandise for shipment, applied postage stamps and drove the packages to the post office in Brandon's station wagon. The growing business moved in 1955 to larger facilities in Evanston with a storefront and warehouse; and in 1959, the company moved to Schiller Park to an even larger office and warehouse facility.

After 1960 and with the development of more advertising specialty distributors, which changed the company's focus of business from a local company to a national company, sales personnel and other staff members

were added. Four regional sales offices were opened, and a second warehouse and office were leased to accommodate the growing business. Continued growth required another move in 1998 to an even larger facility in Arlington Heights, Illinois.

The Second Generations

Both Andy Tobutt and Trish Decker Duh, the owners' son and daughter, grew up involved with the company. Tobutt, who eagerly came on board full time as a salesperson immediately following high school graduation, had spent his early years helping in the warehouse and working the printing press. Duh worked summers during her college years as the receptionist as well as in the billing, order entry and customer service areas. She graduated with a BS degree in education from Northern Illinois University and worked several years as a claims supervisor with Allstate Insurance before joining her father's company.

Since Tobutt and Duh had grown up in the business, knew all facets of its sales and operations, and shared



In 1998, Certif-A-Gift moved to its current headquarters in Arlington Heights, Illinois.

similar goals for its growth and success, they were ready in 1978 to take over the company's daily management after their fathers' retirements.

With Tobutt's two sons, 18 and 14, and Duh's 15-year-old son learning the business, a definite possibility exists for Certif-A-Gift to remain a family-operated business through a third generation.

Challenges For Certif-A-Gift

Duh says the greatest challenge for the company has been the introduction of multi-million dollar direct catalog firms. "We have seen huge firms enter the promotional products arena and grab market share—only to disappear a few years later. For the past 50 years, we have stayed true to our commitment to support our partners, while trying to maintain margins for both of us in spite of the increased direct competition."

Another challenge for Certif-A-Gift is standing above the competition by helping its partners solve their clients' performance needs. "The feedback our partners provide us plus our passion for helping businesses motivate, improve and recognize performance drive our development of technology

and services so we can build better results," says Tobutt.

Measuring Success

Certif-A-Gift has been successful as a result of remaining focused on its core business, developing relationships and partnerships, and supporting and enhancing the products and services it provides to its partners. "We must meet our clients' expectations every day by offering quality products and service as a measure of our success," says Duh. "Our goal for 2004 is to continue to emerge from the slowdown we have all experienced the past two years and to review and reinvest in our people and processes so we can excel for the next 50 years."

The company's general goal is to provide a positive experience for program participants from the moment the program begins until they have received and enjoyed their gifts or awards. "We realize these people are the most important asset the client has," explains Duh, "and their satisfaction is our responsibility and our number-one concern."

Success has come to Certif-A-Gift because of its understanding of the partner side of the sale. "We strive to learn the obstacles our partners face

and how to assist them in assessing their clients' needs. We want to provide a solution that is right for their clients and profitable for our partners and our company," says Duh.

Technology And The Bottom Line

An industry change Certif-A-Gift has noticed is the desire for more choices in awards for program participants and the flexibility to customize the selection of awards. "There has been a demand for more technology and information for customers to manage their incentive programs. Producing and managing an awards catalog has become significantly easier with the use of the Internet," says Tobutt. "We are able to effectively provide tools such as peer-to-peer recognition, quizzing and sales reporting. We can give back efficient, insightful and useful information to build better results for the customer."

In recent years, Certif-A-Gift has put a substantial investment into its technology capabilities, which have attracted clients who demand state-of-the-art technology, such as interactive Internet catalogs with shopping cart functionality and Web-based order redemption. "Our technology has increased efficiency through electronic data transfer, which provides more prompt and accurate order processing and improved information flow," says Tobutt. "This has all definitely resulted in an increase to our bottom line."

During the past 50 years, Certif-A-Gift has grown from a mere idea of including merchandise catalogs in award and gift programs to a stable, profitable business that has weathered lean years, recessions and increased competition. With its focus on helping its partners build incentive programs to motivate, improve and recognize their clients' program participants, Certif-A-Gift is sure to be successful for the next 50 years. **PPB**

Anne Pechuls is an associate editor for PPB.