

INCITE

Picking-up the pieces

The original title of this column was “Making Matters Worse.” I changed it when I realized that people have grown weary of being told how dreadful everything has gotten and that one more reminder may push them over the edge. Or, God forbid, have them direct their hostility at me.

I’m not sure exactly who’s to blame for all this and I’m really not sure that it matters. But as far as



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Blair County Chamber
Concerned, we’ve got an uphill battle that even the most effective vaccine can’t touch. Beyond the physical consequences of the virus has been a psychological intruder that is wreaking havoc, especially within our education system. And inadvertently our best-intended attempts to help are only, excuse the expression, making matters worse.

Since March, students and teachers have been linked by technology. Those who have been espousing distance learning for k-12 as the wave of the future might want to take another look. By all accounts, it has been a disaster. Even the hybrid programs that combine in-school and virtual platforms have created a high measure of dysfunction.

The schools, certainly, are not to blame. With health and safety mandates superseding everything including quality education, would it be fair to say that any education is better than no education at all? The longer the process plays-out, however, the more that question suggests a different answer.

I’ve had the opportunity to speak to educators who are concerned that study habits, class preparation and overall focus have taken huge hits, even among students with reputations as high-performers. With standardized testing off the table for the foreseeable future, the incentive to excel has been diminished.

In an effort to help students fill free time and even make extra money, some local businesses have made questionable moves. They’ve hired students and have scheduled them during school hours on days when virtual classes are in session. Since those classes are more difficult to monitor, students feel less inclined to attend them.

The businesses should know better, despite the fact that many are facing their own challenges of survival. They are doing a disservice to young people who need to be encouraged to stay the educational course. I had a recent opportunity to hear a presentation by an Educational Psychologist who predicted that all levels of education would feel long term consequences of Covid.

If education feels it, business will too.

Hamilton’s enjoy work culture at T2B

With the challenges of business often poisoning the work environment, it’s unusually refreshing to know that there are some local companies that aren’t having difficulty staying upbeat. One of those is T2B Commercial Interiors in Altoona.

“A sign that you have a positive culture is laughter,” acknowledged T2B’s Vice-President Steve Hamilton. “You can work hard and still laugh. It allows you to enjoy your workday more.”

It’s likely that another reason for that positivity is that T2B features so many familiar faces. Steve has the good fortune of working with both his father Denny and his son Casey.

“We’re a family business with a family-like atmosphere,” Steve pointed out. “Some of our employees have known one another for more than thirty years. They are extremely dedicated. Working with my dad and my son has been an added bonus.”

T2B was incorporated in 2006 and has built an outstanding reputation.

“We started with two folding tables and a couple

Working Together

folding chairs,” Steve remembers. “We are now proud to say that we are the leading commercial interior design company in Central Pennsylvania. We create exceptional workspaces using the top design flooring, furniture and window treatments.”

While Steve and the company’s Managing Partner Brian Himes have been responsible for the recent growth of T2B, there’s little doubt that they direct much of the credit for overall success to President/CEO Denny Hamilton.

“My dad still relies on some old-school ways of thinking and those ways continue to be successful,” according to Steve. “He usually calls on potential clients in person and it’s been his relationships that have made things much easier for the rest of us. I’ve learned everything about business from my dad”

Denny is reluctant to take too much of the credit.

“Our real growth has



Three generations of the Hamilton family have combined talents to make T2B Commercial Interiors a successful business. Left to right are: Steve, his son Casey and his father Denny. T2B has locations in both Altoona and State College.

been the result of Steve taking the baton and running with it,” he disclosed. “He partnered with Brian Himes in developing and growing T2B. If I contributed anything it was to help him understand that teamwork is always better to be successful. His ability to incorporate that concept has allowed me to move into semi-retirement.”

And then there’s Casey, who has had the good fortune of learning the business under some pretty good teachers.

“I’ve been lucky enough to benefit from and admire my father and grandfather through my life as a young man as well as in business,” he admitted. “They taught me that hard work, leadership and knowledge are what

it takes to be successful.”

T2B’s office in Altoona has helped to spawn a State College location.

“It’s been great to be in Altoona and we’ve built a strong customer base here,” Steve stated. “We’re hoping to have a similar experience in State College.”

(T2B has been a Blair County Chamber member since 2007.)

Impressive opportunities emerge as MailPro embraces client needs



Aaron Makowiecki, Vice-President at MailPro, checks the quality and color for Sheetz Veteran Cards that MailPro was mailing out. MailPro has been a Chamber member for 25 years.

As the Chamber acknowledges the important contributions of small businesses to the local economy by designating November as “Small Business Month,” a Duncansville company has become a prototype of how the willingness to adapt, adjust and, when necessary, completely change direction has been a recipe for success.

MailPro, Inc. was founded by Thomas and Ann Makowiecki in 1988. The company has a wealth of experience in automated mailing services for direct mail campaigns and delivers a full range of fulfillment services. As client needs have changed during the past three decades, so too have MailPro’s flexibility in meeting those needs.

“Our business model for

sustainable growth is a belief in diversification of our services,” explained Aaron Makowiecki, the company’s vice-president. “We focus on potential new services that are related to current client needs. So far, that model has been practical and effective.”

To grow a business that stands the test of time requires both an understanding and an appreciation of where it has been and where it is going. At MailPro, the company history is intact and the priorities are on solid footing, according to Aaron.

“My brother Sean and I worked alongside our parents building MailPro from the ground-up,” he pointed out. “We learned the value of a good work ethic, appreciation of employees and unconditional client satis-

faction. We witnessed growing pains and lessons learned in building a good business and reputation.”

The evolution of the company started with mail services, moved to personalized printing-on-demand and then to graphic design. From there came shredding and ultimately fulfillment. While Covid-19 has resulted in a decline in mail volumes, Aaron predicts that 2021 will be much kinder in how it impacts all aspects of the industry.

“Covid gave us an opportunity to strengthen and build better relationships with our existing clients, vendors and employees,” he disclosed. “Even in challenging times, good things can happen.”

(MailPro has been a Blair County Chamber member since 1995.)

Public Policy Committee setting priorities for 2021



Chris Michelone (left), a member of the Chamber’s Public Policy Committee, makes a point at a recent meeting. At right is committee member John Eichelberger.

The advocacy arm of the Blair County Chamber, the Public Policy Committee oversees all efforts that pertain to federal, state and local government. As the committee prepares to set its priorities for 2021, it admittedly will focus on issues that challenge the business community’s ability to regain some of the momentum that was taking place prior to Covid-19.

“Lots of things have happened to businesses in the past nine months and very little of it has been positive,” admitted committee member Brian Durbin. “We need to continue to work with our elected officials and identify those strategies that will actually help make a difference.”

The committee remains convinced that its focus should be on state and local concerns rather than anything at the federal

level. So it’s unlikely that a change in administration will require much re-prioritizing.

“We’ve got more specific challenges that impact businesses that are related to Covid,” explained Donna Gority, another member of the committee. “It may make sense for us to set up subcommittees to deal with those issues individually.”

To begin the process of examining what is impacting municipalities, the committee has invited Altoona City Manager Ken Decker to attend its next meeting on December 3rd.

“The City has been dealing with some budget-related decisions that also have a lot to do with the smooth functioning of business,” pointed out committee member Richard Fiore, Jr. “It will be good to discuss with Ken on how we might be able to help.”

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