



A Smile, a Coke and More

Local Company Reaches Out to the Community

By Tom Schuman

“We want to help organizations that are in a position to help a lot of people ... where we can do the most good for the most people.” A sentiment expressed by many individuals and exemplary corporate citizens. When Craig Severns, general manager of the Coca-Cola Bottling Company in Kokomo, utters those words, however, one can hear and feel the sincerity.

Coca-Cola is an Atlanta-based conglomerate that does business on a worldwide basis. The Kokomo company is a family-owned business that traces its roots back to 1935. E.P. Severns, Craig's father, has been associated with the company since 1950. The 75-year-old Severns is still at the facility at 7:30 every morning. Craig has been part of the business for 30 years.

In January 2005, the company shut down its production operation. It had reached the point where the investment in new equipment could not be justified economically. The product could be purchased from another manufacturer at a lower cost than on-site production.

“I tell people that emotionally it was a pretty significant change,” Craig Severns relates. “From the standpoint of being practical, it wasn't that big a change. We were only producing about 21% of what we were selling. The best thing was no one lost their job. We beefed up sales, and added to the repair shop and other areas.”

The company serves an approximate 40-mile radius from Kokomo. There are about 340,000 people in that territory, with 1.9 million cases a year distributed. Although the product line has varied greatly in recent years with a number of new additions, the big four of Coke, Diet Coke, caffeine free Diet Coke and Sprite still account for more than 80% of the total volume, according to Severns.

At one time, he adds, there were 39 different Coca-Cola plants throughout Indiana. Only two production facilities remain. Ownership groups that totaled 1,200 nationally have dwindled to 77.

Going to school

The business climate has changed, but the commitment to the community is unwavering.

Education and athletics are among the primary areas for company involvement. Three employees are high school referees or officials, and a number of others are involved as coaches at various levels. Coca-Cola has been a frequent sponsor of youth leagues and teams.

“We want to partner with schools as much as possible,” Severns notes. “We do a lot with athletic facilities; that's usually where they want the help. We've purchased scoreboards, timing devices for swimming pools, hurdles, wrestling mats – just about anything you can think of for high schools and middle schools.”

The fitness focus extends to community trails and greenways. Significant financial gifts from the company have helped develop Kokomo's Walk of Excellence, which connects major areas within the community.

The effort goes to the classroom as well. Severns is a longtime participant in the Partners in Education program involving education and business leaders. One aspect of that brings teachers into the workplace during the summer to help them craft real-life curriculum for their students.

"Businesses are enthusiastic about it, and it builds nice, long-lasting relationships," he offers. "One time we had a teacher here who said, 'That lesson I taught them about what I learned at the plant; that was the most excited I saw them the whole year.' That certainly makes you feel good."

Assisting those in need

We Care is a community charity that originated with the purchase of Christmas gifts for the needy. Its outreach has expanded, with as much as \$857,000 raised in a single year. A weekend telethon/auction is the signature event, with other fund-raisers taking place throughout the year.

"That's something I've personally been involved with for many years. A lot of our employees work the event, manning phones or picking up items in the community," he says. "We probably provide product for about a dozen other things that help We Care."

Severns is a member of the United Way board of directors. The company is a key contributor, while also working individually with many of the agencies that United Way serves.

The number of requests for assistance can be staggering, especially when you have a product like Coca-Cola at your disposal. In addition to the 70 employees in Kokomo, 21 more are at the Plymouth location. The company works to assist schools and communities throughout its territory. Severns and the organization do their best to help the most people.

"It's a difficult thing to do at times. We get approached by a lot of good causes, and we're not in a position to take care of all of them," he explains. "We ask people to submit requests in writing, and I have a committee I go to."

"I want to be as visible as I can when we have special events around Kokomo. It creates opportunities for me to see a lot of familiar faces," Severns continues. "At events like the Taste of Kokomo (a fund-raiser for United Way), we're there making sure our equipment is functioning properly and that people have enough drink product and ice."

It's a long way from Severns' early days when he was hand-sorting the returnable bottles or sweeping in the warehouse. Despite the changes, the family and company maintain a commitment to Kokomo and the surrounding area.



Coca-Cola Bottling Company of Kokomo distributes nearly two million cases of product a year.



Craig Severns shows one of the company's glass bottle products from its early years.



The company has a special emphasis on helping schools and community partners with the purchase of athletic equipment and supplies.

INFORMATION LINK

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