

# SPIRIT OF SERVICE

## Elkhart-Based Lithotone Has Broad Impact

By Anthony Schoettle

The printing business isn't for the faint of heart. It's an industry where only the most agile, quick-thinking and hardest-charging companies survive. Firms also must be willing to continually expand offerings and pivot – often on short notice.

Founded in 1962 by Ken Priebe and Jim Powell, Elkhart-based Lithotone is such a business.

In years past, Lithotone primarily put ink on paper, but that has changed, explains Ken Priebe's son, Jim, who is currently the majority owner of the firm as well as its CEO. "We now put ink on multiple products; paper, metal, plastic, glass and more," he says. "And we do a whole lot more."

"Sure, our customers come to us for the industry standard brochures, postcards, catalogs, labels, business cards and the like," Priebe offers. "But our customers also bring us the concept, the brainstorming ideas and the vision for taking their brand to the next level. That's where our value added services – creative, large format, mailing, e-commerce and fulfillment – can reach beyond the printed page."

### Growing with it

Priebe began job shadowing at Lithotone when he was 10 years old. He gradually increased his work and responsibilities in the company. After college, he came in with the intent to ditch antiquated methods at the print shop and modernize to keep pace in the fast-changing industry.

"When I got out of college, my whole mentality was to make sure that we were moving and changing," Priebe expresses. "The first thing I wanted to do was make changes in areas that I thought were antiquated. So, like I said, we used to be a printing company and now we're an imaging company. My grandfather was in this business for many, many years and the amount of change that he saw in his entire lifetime, I'll see every five years now. So, it's just about recognizing trends, recognizing opportunities and moving in the direction that you need to move."

The willingness to change and expand has allowed the firm to extend its customer base nationwide and grow its annual revenue to \$9 million.

"During the pandemic, we were in a ridiculous growth mode," Priebe relates. "Now we're back in a more normal growth mode with solid single-digit percentage year-over-year growth."

### It's about the team

Priebe gives all the credit for Lithotone's success to its 36 employees.

"We're a very family-oriented company," he states. "Everyone in this place has worked multiple, multiple years here."

"While it can be a high pressure situation, everyone knows their job and does their job. But people here also cross over to help in other departments. I think our success is everyone tends to help everyone out."

Priebe admits that wasn't always the case with everyone in Lithotone's workforce, but those days are in the distant past.

"I give this team so much of the credit for setting the tone and the culture here," he extols. "It's been so inspiring to me."

For his part, Priebe says: "I love what I do. I love everything about it." That wasn't always the case.

Priebe not only followed in his father's footsteps, but his

grandfather's as well. Jim's grandfather, George Priebe, worked in the printing industry in Chicago decades ago. George, a semi-pro baseball player, later moved to South Bend, because he didn't want his children playing baseball in the streets as they often did in the part of the Windy City where he lived. Despite the family history, Jim wasn't sure he wanted to follow the same professional path.

"It's one of those situations – my father wanted me to come in the business, and I swore I never would," Priebe recalls. "Then, I found out just how dynamic the printing industry is. There are a lot of things about this industry – from working with the clients, solving their problems and seeing their orders get fulfilled to the creativity of the printing process itself – that I just love. I even love the change most of the time. And we have a good group of people I love working with."

Now he looks forward to the next Priebe generation coming up through the ranks at Lithotone. Jim's nephew, Steven Priebe, is Lithotone's director of administrative operations. Steven's father and Jim's brother, Bob, was a big part of the company. He served as president until 2023 and passed away in November 2024.

### 'Happy to help'

The ultimate key to the firm's success is its workers' "willingness to serve," Priebe believes. "That extends to the customers and to each other."

That servanthood mentality also reaches into the community.

Lithotone does charity and community work for many organizations. "Our employees bring us a lot of charitable causes, and we try to help with each and every one," Priebe relates. "Let's be honest, we wouldn't be here without the community, so all of us here feel it's so very important to give back in any way we can. And as it turns out, a lot of people and causes need printing services."



Lithotone uses its wide array of imaging capabilities to serve many charitable and community causes. Providing messaging wraps for charity golf outings is just one example.

While Lithotone's employees perpetuate the culture of service today, Jim's father laid the foundation of service – and as a youngster, it made a strong impression on Jim.

“My father was always ready to help someone in his personal life, and he carried that into the culture at Lithotone,” Priebe reflects. “We were lucky to have that example to follow.”

One of the firm's big causes, Folds of Honor, is a non-profit organization that provides educational scholarships to the spouses and children of fallen or disabled service members and first responders. Founded in 2007 by Lt. Col. Dan Rooney, the organization has awarded more than 62,000 scholarships totaling more than \$290 million, supporting students from K-12 through postgraduate studies.

“Folds of Honor aims to honor their sacrifice and give hope to their families, and a significant portion of its funding directly supports its scholarship programs,” Priebe says. “We feel it's a very worthy cause.”

It's hardly the only cause Lithotone has championed. Just in the past year, Lithotone has helped with charitable and community projects for Elkhart Conventions and Visitors Bureau, Elkhart Chamber of Commerce,



Lithotone has survived and grown by constantly updating, improving and varying its imaging services.

Goshen Chamber of Commerce, Elkhart Jazz Festival, Elkhart Symphony Orchestra, South Bend Civic Theatre, Community Foundation of Elkhart County, the Boys and Girls Club and Elkhart County Child and Parent Services.

The company also provides signage, branding and additional support to area schools, youth sports and other programs, local non-profit health services and more. What's provided for

free varies widely, from banners, posters, brochures and even adorning golf carts in branded wrappers for local charity golf outings.

“We never grow weary of the requests,” Priebe emphasizes. “Being an imaging company, there's an awful lot of things we can do, and we're just so happy to help and be a part of so many important projects that help the people in our community.”

**RESOURCE:** Jim Priebe, Lithotone, at [www.lithotone.com](http://www.lithotone.com)

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