

UC Irvine

UC Irvine Previously Published Works

Title

Reviewed Work: AVERY INTERNATIONAL CORPORATION 50-YEAR HISTORY, 1935- 1985. By David L. Clark (Pasadena: Avery International Corporation, 1988.

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8hr0c7n7>

Journal

Southern California Quarterly, 75(3-4)

ISSN

0038-3929

Author

Thorne, Tanis C

Publication Date

1993-10-01

DOI

10.2307/41171692

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

Peer reviewed

EVERY INTERNATIONAL CORPORATION 50-YEAR HISTORY, 1935-1985. By David L. Clark (Pasadena: Avery International Corporation, 1988. 195 pp. No price stated.) Reviewed by Tanis C. Thorne.

This is an engaging narrative about Avery International Corporation, pioneer and leader in the manufacture of self-adhesive labels. Based primarily on oral history interviews with the founder and other principal officers of the multinational firm, the focus of this laudatory account is on key personalities and the philosophies they embraced. The unifying theme of the book is that this corporate philosophy shaped the company's phenomenal achievements. What the book lacks in terms of scholarly objectivity, it more than compensates for in the candor, freshness and intimacy of its anecdotal style. Even the firm's mistakes and setbacks are recalled in candid and almost affectionate detail; only the occasional personnel problems are remembered with discomfort. This is in keeping with the tone of the book, which places much significance upon cooperative effort in the adventure and excitement of innovation which made Avery a business success.

Stan Avery, a graduate of Pomona College with a degree in "Cultural Synthesis," had few qualifications for business when he began manufacturing self-adhesive labels in 1935 over a flower shop in Chinatown with \$100 in capital borrowed from his fiancée. Stan Avery revealed his philosophical bent with a heartening comment: "The best time for a person with no money, no training, and no background to start a new business is in the depth of a depression." (p. 11)

Avery was an inventive individual, who built the fledgling company's first machines out of spare parts and experimented with improved methods of die-cutting. Early on, he made the decision to specialize in self-adhesives, and by World War II, he had made significant strides in creating consumer demand for the new products and in improving labels, including developing synthetic-based adhesives and effective release coatings. As Stan Avery later reflected, openness to new ideas combined with the vision to see the technological potential for self-adhesives were the keys to the firm's business success. He also insisted on high quality and assiduously cultivated a reputation for integrity, replacing at company cost any products which were sub-standard. When the materials Avery needed for the manufacture of labels were cut off due to the shortage of rubber and petroleum during World War II, Stan regeared the company's business for government contracts; he found new uses for Avery labels, for example, using labels for identifying parts in aircraft assembly lines to aid inexperienced workers.

Following the war, Russ Smith—a man whose organization and financial skills complemented Stan's creativity and technological inventiveness—joined the company, and the two guided the firm through the following thirty years of sustained growth. Both were men of unflinching honesty and integrity. Stan had already established his firm as the leader in the self-adhesive label industry by solving the major problems in producing self-adhesives, and now with Russ's help, he moved into large-scale production. A milestone was the construction of a plant in Monrovia in 1948; larger and faster machines were developed, and Avery kept ahead of potential competitors with new products, such as permanent adhesives for home appliances. Avery enjoyed an important advantage as plastics came into broader use, for self-adhesives were compatible with this surface.

A major set-back became an economic boon when Avery lost a court battle for a self-adhesive patent in 1952. Many competitors soon entered the self-adhesive industry, but as Stan said: "It gave us missionaries for our product." (p. 126) In one of its wisest moves, the corporation opened a new division, Fasson, which produced and sold the self-adhesive base materials which Avery had successfully developed. By the end of the 1960s, the revenue from base materials exceeded the sales from labels. Ever the pacesetter, Avery poured much money and energy into research and development, while simultaneously maintaining quality control and integrity in business practices. As the business continued to develop, breakthroughs were made in technology, new industrial uses were developed, and more plants were opened. Franchises were awarded to self-adhesive companies overseas. Persistently, the company followed a policy of decentralization, thus maintaining the immediacy and intimacy of local businesses in dealing with customers while enjoying the financial resources of a multinational corporation.

In the mid-1970s, after three decades of growth, the revenues of the corporation stretched towards \$300 million, and Avery Corporation became one of the Fortune 500 businesses in 1974. Potential seemed unlimited. However, the energy crisis of the mid-1970s and the subsequent recession brought the sobering realization that Avery was vulnerable to financial reverses. Earnings dropped 70% in 1975 and stock prices declined. This stimulated some important reforms, specifically the introduction of a new management as Russ and Stan gracefully retired and Chuck Miller assumed command. Thereafter, Russ and Stan donated their time to numerous worthy community activities. This change of guard signified a shift from an entrepreneurial style to a managerial style by professionals exercising tight financial controls and utilizing sophisticated computerized information systems. It also represented a change

from emphasizing growth to emphasizing profits. By 1987 Avery Corporation was a one and one-half billion dollar a year business with 11,000 employees in 150 facilities in 25 countries (p. 158).

David Clark is to be commended for writing an eminently readable historical narrative about Avery Corporation, which identifies the business strategies and philosophies which contributed to its success. The book contains many photographs of early machines, buildings, corporate officers, and self-adhesive labels; these enhance the work though these could have been presented in a much more aesthetically-pleasing manner. Illustrations could have been used more effectively to match the text and to explain technical processes or innovations for the lay reader.

Professor Thorne is on the faculty of the University of California, Irvine, and is a specialist in business history.