

MAIN STREET

ICON, lighting designer sells custom systems across the country

By Chris Barrett
PBN Staff Writer

Thomas Edison likely never envisioned a light fixture like this. Besides holding a light bulb, this fixture contains a video camera, speaker and motion detectors. Meet the Technolux Multi-Media Lighting System developed by North Kingstown-based ICON.

Once a manufacturer of mundane strip lights, ICON now bills itself as a designer of custom lighting systems that can boost sales, slash electricity bills and – in the case of the multimedia system – keep an eye on priceless artwork or school hallways.

“I like to say that we bring profit solutions to companies and we use lighting as the vehicle to do that,” ICON President Michael Goeller said.

Whether customers realize it or not, lighting sets an ambiance that, if done properly, can put them in a spending mood. Retailers take their lighting systems so seriously that they demand systems developed by ICON specifically for them never turn up anywhere else. And, in many cases, Goeller must agree to forbid discussing the systems publicly or even acknowledging the store as a client.

But Goeller can say that one of the largest discount retailers in the world sports lights designed by ICON. And customers who look up in a Dave’s Marketplace will see his handiwork.

The systems received their start at the company’s offices at Quonset Business Park. There a team with a background in design, engineering, marketing and construction assembles proposals for companies shopping for new lights. If a company bites, ICON can produce a prototype typically within 10 days. If ICON wins the job, it contracts with plants in China to produce the systems under the watchful eye of its Hong Kong office that opened in October.

In December alone, the company expected to deliver systems to 84 stores. This year, ICON expects to outfit 400 stores just for one customer.

Goeller says the company produces enough systems annually that would, if lined up end-to-end, stretch some 94 miles; almost twice the length of Rhode Island. And the company is readying to boost that.



PBN PHOTO/DAVID LEVESQUE

BRIGHT IDEA: Michael J. Goeller, ICON president, foreground, in the assembly area of the company’s North Kingstown facility. The company delivered lighting systems to 84 stores in December alone.

By the second quarter, ICON hopes to break into the consumer market with energy-efficient LEED lighting. Goeller expects business to grow 20 percent next year, to about \$20 million, after a 33 percent spurt last year.

“We’re really on the offensive,” Goeller said.

The attitude marks a shift for a company that received its start as Illuminated Concepts in the Olneyville section of Providence in 1947. The business then manufactured simple strip lights that have been a staple of offices for decades. For years, ICON ambled along. But the rise of cheap manufacturing in China undercut its prices and the company struggled to reinvent itself as a lighting designer, as opposed to manufacturer. About 15 years ago the company exited the manufacturing business altogether.

In 2008, owner Edward Shore decided the company needed an outside perspective. He put out a call for a new chief operating officer and found Goeller, a business-turnaround consultant looking for a new challenge. Goeller joined ICON in April 2008 as its chief operating officer and later became president, relieving Shore of daily operations.

In his time with the company, Goeller has overseen a pruning of the staff and then its expansion as he realigned resources in an effort to enhance the business’ reputation.

Today, Goeller says ICON strives to respond to customer concerns. He sent staff to far-flung American Greetings stores to troubleshoot installation problems even though ICON is not responsible for installation. When a New York City museum installing the first multimedia system erected a wall at the last minute, ICON redesigned the whole system in two days in time for an important event.

When Dave’s Marketplace needed a few more track lights, ICON took them off its own ceiling rather than wait for new ones to be made.

And the company is happy to redesign. Goeller said that after testing systems at stores, some retailers want tweaks before rolling out the system to its other locations. And while the tweaks may be minor, they may require ICON to develop – at significant cost – new manufacturing tools.

“We’re focused on a very innovative product and incredible customer service,” Goeller said. “When you put those things together, it’s a winning formula.” •

COMPANY PROFILE

ICON

OWNER: Edward Shore

TYPE OF BUSINESS: Lighting-system designer

LOCATION: 500 Callahan Road,

North Kingstown

EMPLOYEES: 37 (including in Hong Kong)

YEAR ESTABLISHED: 1947 (as Illuminated Concepts)

ANNUAL SALES: WND