

103 years later, Foley Engines of Worcester shows staying power

By Anissa Gardizy, Special to the Telegram & Gazette

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WORCESTER — The bright red “Foley” sign that faces Interstate 290 is as rickety and old-fashioned as it looks — and it almost perfectly sums up President Jay Foley’s business philosophy at Foley Engines.

“We don’t spend foolishly and we do things with flair,” he said about the company, whose old-time flair also means stocking parts in coffee cans and working on milk carton step stools.

So when Mr. Foley was told that a rooftop Foley Engines sign would cost around \$20,000, he naturally made his own.

“We bought 10 pieces of plywood and built it ourselves,” he said. “It was easy — F-O-L-E-Y north, F-O-L-E-Y south — every year I go up there and repaint it.”



The Foley Engines sign is visible from Interstate 290. [T&G Staff/Rick Cinclair]



This vintage photo shows what the 20,000 square-foot Foley Engines warehouse looked like in 1958 at 200 Summer St. in Worcester. [Courtesy of Foley Engines]

North America’s oldest engine distributor turns 103 years old this year under its third generation of family leadership in Worcester. Mr. Foley said the city has been an ideal location, better than a suburb or industrial park, because of its inexpensive natural gas, high voltage power, city sewers and proximity to major highways.

“That story isn’t being told as much as it should be — Worcester is a great place to be doing business,” Mr. Foley said. “The people that work here live in Worcester, so it’s good for the labor force too.”

Foley Engines began business in 1916 under William Foley, and his son, John Foley, led the company starting in 1945. Since its birth, the company has seen 18 different U.S presidents, two world wars and the Great Depression.

Each generation of leadership steered the company in different directions, which is the reason the century-old manufacturing business remains relevant and successful, Mr. Foley said.

“[My grandfather] started off as a Goodyear tire distributor, and my father began in 1945 as an industrial engine rebuilder,” Mr. Foley said. “At that time, there were no toll-free numbers, and there was no internet.”

Jay Foley took over the business in the 1980s after his father was planning to retire. Although Foley was then a professor teaching economics and sociology at the University of South Carolina with a Ph.D. from Cornell University, he didn’t want to see the family business close its doors.

When he stepped into the leadership role, he adapted the company with deregulations in the 1980s and 1990s, as well as the technology that followed, in order to expand Foley Engines’ service.

For example, deregulation of telecommunications led to lower prices for phone calls, and deregulation of trucking led to lower shipping rates, he said. With the rise of the internet and search engines, Foley Engines began advertising nationally.



Before focusing on industrial engines, Foley Engines repaired car engines directly in its warehouse on Summer Street. [Courtesy of Foley Engines]



Ask Dr. Diesel is the company help line, which is printed on Foley Engines boxes. [T&G Staff/Rick Cinclair]

“It was a big boom for us,” Mr. Foley said. “With deregulation of telecommunications and shipping, we could advertise and ship cheaply and nationally.”

The 20,000 square-foot warehouse is located off of Interstate 290 on 200 Summer St. A U.S Postal Center and a regional UPS center are close by, allowing for same-day shipping on most orders, Mr. Foley said.

“We have a slogan which is ‘no one leaves until the last order is shipped,’” Mr. Foley

said. “If you call us at 4:15 p.m. and you need a part in a hurry, we will lay down in front of the UPS truck to stall it. We’ll talk to the driver and say ‘oh did you hear about the Red Sox last night?’ — meantime we are busy [preparing] a package.”

Employees ship about 30 packages a day, and several of the company’s 12 to 15 employees have been working at Foley Engines for more than 10 years, Mr. Foley said.

Because of the proximity to major airports, Service Manager Philip George said Foley Engines can make engine repairs quickly on airplane pushbacks, which are low-profile vehicles used to move planes on the tarmac, and luggage loading equipment.

“We get regular inquiries from Worcester, JFK, Logan, and LaGuardia, and oftentimes we can fix engines on the same day, if not, within 24 hours,” he said. “I’ve personally got into the company truck to hot-shot engines to Logan on a rush basis.”



Jay Foley, president of Foley Engines, holds a diesel exhaust scrubber. [T&G Staff/Rick Cinclair]

Today, Foley Engines most notably sells exhaust scrubbers, woodchip clutches and industrial engines. With recent focus on air quality regulations nationally, the scrubbers are in high demand because they mitigate carbon monoxide emissions, scrubber specialist Jessica Manos said.

“They work similarly to a catalytic converter for a car, the chemicals convert the carbon monoxide to carbon dioxide and water,” she said.

States like California, Massachusetts and New York require scrubbers to be used on construction equipment, Mr. Foley said.

“People love these things and some states mandate them,” Mr. Foley said. “Smith College doesn’t want to have any construction equipment on its campus that doesn’t have a scrubber on it.”

The scrubbers made their debut during the Big Dig, allowing workers to safely build underground transportation systems in Boston starting in the early 1990s.

“[Contractors] didn’t want workers to get headaches from breathing dangerous air, so we pioneered the use of scrubbers in the Big Dig,” Mr. Foley said. “In some ways, the Big Dig wouldn’t have survived without using scrubbers because you couldn’t have worked in a tunnel.”

More recently, scrubbers were used by every contractor that worked on the Ground Zero Memorial in New York and by companies such as SpaceX, Yoplait and Hallmark, two employees said.

In addition to scrubbers, the Worcester facility stores about 600 engines in their stock — such as Deutz, Perkins and Ford — that are packaged and ready to ship.



An industrial engine is ready to be shipped at Foley Engines. [T&G Staff/Rick Cinclair]

“Our unique advantage is that if someone’s airport tug is down or other industrial equipment is down, we have an engine on the shelf and can ship it out to them,” Mr. Foley said.

The engines are all painted with Foley Engines’ signature yellow shade, and the company’s logo is always stenciled on boxes in red (the same paint that adorns the rooftop sign).

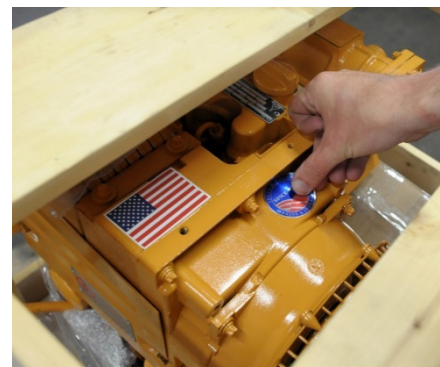
“Our brand is important to us, we put our brand on everything,” Mr. Foley said.

Because of the brand, some aspects of the company stay the same — such as the yellow and red paint. But the business isn’t afraid to ditch old school methods that are not working.

When it comes to marketing, Foley Engines stands out among others who tend to focus on being the cheapest shop, Mr. Foley said. Instead, Foley Engines markets themselves as having the most value, and they assist customers free of charge — with the help of a friend.

“Dr. Diesel” joined the Foley Engine team about 10 years ago to provide customer service support — the cartoon persona picks up the phone and responds to emails.

“People would call us to ask questions, and sometimes we were busy and couldn’t answer right away, so we decided to have Dr. Diesel call them back,” Mr. Foley said laughing. “People call and say ‘let me talk to the doc,’ they like talking to him.”



A worker places stickers on a Foley Engines engine ready to be shipped. [T&G Staff/Rick Cinclair]



Service manager Phil George loads a PTO clutch for a wood chipper into a truck to be shipped at Foley Engines. [T&G Staff/Rick Cinclair]

Dr. Diesel uses his own email address and answers about 15 to 20 questions a day, Mr. Foley said. Dr. Diesel often refers clients to specific “Tech Tips” on the Foley Engines website or Youtube videos published by the company.

“In this day and age, very little customer service exists anymore, just by the nature of the times,” Frederick DiRisio, then superintendent of public works in the Village of Jordan, New York, said in a testimonial. “I would like to commend [Mr. George] and Foley Engines for a job well done and look forward to doing more business with Foley Engines

in the future.”

Employees sense that the 103-year-old Worcester company — and Dr. Diesel — will be around for years to come.

“It feels like a very stable place,” Ms. Manos said.

Foley Engines upgraded their website last year to feature an online store that currently offers manuals and parts. The site receives about two to three orders per day, Ms. Manos said.

Mr. George said it is easier to sell products over the phone, so the company does not plan to replace their hands-on approach with online services.

“We are never going to stop answering the phones — our online sales are incremental,” Mr. George said. “With the way some buyers are tending to only buy online, those buyers can go on the website now, and that customer might never want to call us.”

Mr. George said the company’s extensive client base — estimated at about 20,000 clients — speaks to Foley Engines’ modern business model.



Jay Foley, president of Foley Engines, gives a tour of his Summer Street location. [T&G Staff/Rick Cinclair]

“An old school business model is that you have a lot of dealer and distribution deals set up, and we market better than that,” he said. “We are able to find the end user on our own, and then retain that customer.”

For Mr. George, retaining customers is not an elaborate process.

“It’s just good customer service and stocking the right parts,” he said. “We build one client at a time.”

The company keeps abreast with industry news and trends by attending trade shows and reading about the market. Mr. George said over the past few years, he can sense that clients are becoming more familiar with the Worcester area because of the company’s presence.

“Ten years ago, I had to help a lot of our clients spell Worcester, but now when I mention Worcester, they know where it is,” he said. “They still can’t spell it or say it, but they know where it is — we are on the map.”

While clients may never be able to spell Worcester, they can probably spell F-O-L-E-Y, thanks to the eye-catching red sign off of I-290, annually repainted by Mr. Foley himself.

“We are thrilled to be in Worcester,” he said.