

Area company's effect on retail, grocery industries extends worldwide

CIP Retail creates interior decor and architecture.

By [Eric Schwartzberg](#), Staff Writer

Updated 1:00 PM Monday, June 11, 2012

FAIRFIELD — Shop at a retail or grocery store and there's a good chance the work of a Butler County company may be on display.

CEO Tom Huff and plant manager Mark Elmlinger started CIP Retail in 1975 after seeing a need for supplying fixtures and interior décor to the supermarket industry, according to Kathy Huff, Tom's wife and the company's president.

To get business rolling, CIP started working with many independent store owners on flooring, interior walls to new lighting and signage that would provide direction and help customers feel comfortable in their environment.

CIP, which moved from Cleves to Butler County in 1985, now creates unique interior decor and architecture for retail industry clients nationwide and worldwide, Kathy Huff said.

Stateside clients include Kroger, Rite Aid, Winn Dixie, Buy Low Market, Supervalu, and Sprouts Farmer Market. International clients hail from Latin America, the Caribbean, Asia and the Middle East.

Having such an extensive reach gives CIP "a lot of credibility," Huff said.

"The diversity of clients has made us more aware of the world around us," she said. "No matter what country your in, the signage and the graphic (design) kind of all speak to the same inner part of the person. They all want the same shopping experience.

CIP employs 85 people at its facility at 9575 Le Saint Drive. Yearly revenue for 2012 is projected to be \$18 million, Huff said.

Q: What are the major goals the company is currently working on?

KH: "I would say expand our client base, certainly fulfill the ongoing needs of our existing clients and take care of our current employees. That's pretty comprehensive and what everybody wants to see."

Q: What are the biggest challenges facing the business today and why?

KH: "With the whole health care issue, keeping control over expenses, taking care of our employees. We have many employees who have been with us more than 25 to 30 years. You feel a big responsibility for them, for sure. Keeping up with technology is an ongoing issue, (as well). It moves very quickly."

Q: What's the biggest lesson the company learned from the recent recession and how is it being applied?

KH: "I think the biggest lesson is to learn to be lean and mean. You have to learn what your base is and be efficient with everything you're doing. Do it right the first time. Shipping internationally, you have to get it right the first time. It's very difficult to miss something on a shipment sending it on your own time. (Sending something) two weeks later by air is very costly. One of the many good things our employees do is we work well together and take care of our clients and appreciate the ones we have, for sure."

Q: Where do you see the company in five years?

KH: "Obviously the goal is to expand the company. In this economic climate ... I would hope for maybe 10 percent growth. That would be something to strive for, for sure. Our business is based on the changing climate of resale. It does follow the economy."

Q: What tip would you give to those starting out in business?

KH: "You have to be a micromanager. You have to know what your goals are and stay focused. It is a 24/7 responsibility that doesn't go away for any reason. When you're the small business owner, it's there all the time."

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