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Company Profile

featured by **Boston Business Journal**

December 28, 2007-January 3, 2008

Full-court press

Webster Printing Co. Inc.

Printing/mailing services outfit goes for growth by going green, diversifying

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JOURNAL STAFF

HANSON — Ernie Foster's commercial printing and direct-mail services firm, Webster Printing Co. Inc., has been promoting environmentally friendly purchasing and operations. But when it comes to strategizing the growth of his business, Foster is hardly what you'd call "green."

This year was a pivotal one for the 52-year-old, Hanson-based company, including the expansion of its physical operations into a second facility in West Boylston and the purchase of new printing equipment.

"We had a companywide meeting, where we decided, 'Let's just go for it,'" says the 47-year-old Foster. "When you get major contributions from the majority of the people (working here), great things have happened."

Webster, which produces everything from business cards to annual reports, has watched its fortunes rise along with its "no-job-is-too-small" philosophy: Gross revenue has grown from \$5.2 million in 2005 to \$6.3 million in 2006 and projections of \$7.2 million for this year.

Another key differentiator for the company, Foster hopes, lies in its pursuit of certification from the Forest Stewardship Council, an international organization that promotes responsible forest management; the certifica-



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Ernie Foster, president of Webster Printing, has seen growth for his commercial printing business over the last several years by diversifying into mailing and fulfillment.

FAST FACTS

Ernie Foster became sole owner of Webster Printing Co. Inc., which was established in 1955, in 2001.

The company provides commercial printing, as well as bindery, fulfillment, online print and complete direct-mail services.

This year, the company expanded into an additional 30,000-square-foot facility in West Boylston that houses its Webster Fulfillment division.

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tion fee is \$3,500.

Webster is currently in the process of being assessed by The Rainforest Alliance's SmartWood program (an accredited certifying body of FSC), and hopes to achieve FSC's "chain-of-custody" certification in February. In so doing, Webster will make the commitment to purchase the majority of its paper stock from environmentally friendly, FSC-certified merchants.

Going green also means that Webster, which has 45 full-time employees, will continue to make environmentally conscious modifications in its own operations — from conserving heat and electricity to recycling paper scrap to using soy ink.

Says Foster, "This is a feel-good expenditure that hopefully ignites some of our customers to understand that being (environmentally) aware and following through only benefits us all in the end."

Foster became sole owner of Webster on Sept. 11, 2001, when he bought out his partner since 1997, Brad Smith Jr. (son of one of the company's original founders), for an undisclosed amount.

Shortly after the ink was dry, Foster experienced what he calls "a baptism by fire" as an entrepreneur in

the midst of an economic slowdown: He recalls running two printing shifts prior to the recession, but had trouble filling up a single shift until mid-2003.

Not only was the company's sales volume down, but its profit margin was nonexistent, he says.

The company downsized its operations by eight people between 2001 and 2002.

Foster himself declined to take a salary during this time, while his remaining staffers took pay cuts of 10 percent.

"The business would not have survived if my key employees did not accept the pay cuts and work to minimize manufacturing mistakes," says Foster. "Looking back, I feel very fortunate to have such professional and understanding people working with me."

Since that time, Webster has pressed on by positioning itself as a one-stop shop for diversified direct-marketing services that extend beyond printing.

"You have to be able to do the fulfillment, the mailing — all those services — in order to be considered a quality printer nowadays," Foster says.

This year, the company expanded the capacity of its Webster Fulfill-

ment division, which provides distribution and "on-demand" warehousing of its clients' marketing materials, by leasing an additional 30,000-square-foot warehouse facility in West Boylston. The total investment for the new operation, covering labor and build-out, was more than \$250,000, says Foster.

John Scibelli, director of communications at Southborough-based Printing Industries of New England, says, "Most progressive-minded companies (nowadays) have expanded the range of services that they offer for lots of reasons — such as to create new revenue streams; many people want to capture as much of the job as they can."

Tom Schier, executive vice president of Weston Communications in Rockland, a Webster customer, says, "Ernie is the kind of guy who is always looking for the next best way to service his clients."

Reinvestment in its operations remains a key business strategy for Webster, which has spent in excess of \$3.5 million on new offset and digital printing presses since 2004.

Says Foster, "As an entrepreneur, you recognize that you have a choice between having a short-term quick profit or creating a sustainable business providing long-term employment. ... Ink is in our blood."

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