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Career & Workplace

Siblings are keeping the rubber stamp game alive in Denver



Chris Hansen assembles a self-inking stamp in the production room at Ace Kauffman on June 30.
SETH MCCONNELL | DENVER BUSINESS JOURNAL



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Story Highlights

- Ace Kauffman Rubber Stamp and Seal Co. has operated for 154 years under four owners.
- Chris and Linda Hansen, the company's last two employees, adapted to pandemic shifts in client demand.
- Denver's minimum wage increases and work-from-home trends reduced orders for the downtown stamp business.

Both in their 60s, Chris and Linda Hansen are still working their first and only job.

The siblings are the last two employees at Ace Kauffman Rubber Stamp and Seal Co.'s building at Welton Street and Lincoln Street in downtown Denver. They like it that way.

“It sounds crazy, because we’ve always had employees, but since it’s just us two, there’s zero stress,” Linda said. “Chris and I, we get along great. I mean, we’ve never ever had any argument or anything.”

Surrounded by high-rises and nearly empty parking lots, the company's two-story building is a relic of a downtown economy that no longer exists. Downtown, where the company delivered by bike to their clients in bustling office towers, is now quieter.

But while the city and industry have changed around them, the Hansens have adapted to keep their family's stamp business going. Its survival has been

somewhat of a surprise to their mother, Darlene, who at 93 still manages their books.

“Even after all these years, she still reminds us, ‘We're probably going to be going out of business this year,’” Linda said.

The business opened in 1872 as Denver Novelty Works and has gone through just four owners since. It became Ace Kauffman in 1946, when the word "Ace" was added to jump the business to the front of the alphabetical listings in the phone book, Linda said.



Linda Hansen and her brother, Chris Hansen, on June 30.

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At different points in its history, the business sold flashlights, vacuums, police badges and provided locksmithing. But since the Hansens' father, Neil, bought the company in 1968, its most consistent products have been in the name: rubber stamps and seal embossers.

Their stamps can range from computer-made graphic designs to changeable date stamps. Embossers squeeze a piece of paper against a metal stencil to create a three-dimensional impression – a visual seal – without using any ink.

Some of their oldest clients have included law firms and city and state agencies.

Darlene's first proclamation that the business would go under came with the popularization of the internet. The company at one point employed 12 to 14 people, with most handling phone orders. Now, most of their orders come in via email.

Computers also slowly took away half of that namesake. Chris said seals have slowly phased out because one of their biggest uses, stock certificates, has become digital. The company still makes seal embossers, but name badges, door signs and stamps are most of Ace Kauffman's business today.

"It's funny, stamps have always been like a niche item," Chris said. "As long as I've worked in this business, they'd always say, 'well, stamps aren't going to be around ... there's not going to be paper anymore.'"



Image: Denver Business Journal

Older examples of stamps produced by the company hang on a stamp tree.

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As late as 2016, the company was making 6,000 to 7,000 stamps a month. Employees often had to stay and work evenings and weekends to meet demand, Chris said.

Then, like the rest of the downtown Denver economy, 2020 shook up the business.

In the early stages of the pandemic, their longtime clients, like law offices and government agencies, were replaced by the needs of restaurants.

"Because nobody could go into restaurants, everyone was picking up stuff, and so everybody was trying to brand their bags," Linda said.

But the shift to working from home since the pandemic has shown up in the company's orders. Before Covid-19, a common Ace Kauffman service was making name plates that went on office desks. That work has largely disappeared.

"If you work from home, you're not gonna have one sitting on your desk," Chris said.

On top of the decline in orders, a 2020 change in Denver's minimum wage that tied raises in the hourly rate to inflation hit the company's bottom line. Darlene said that after the third minimum wage hike, they let the business's last employee go.

"It was the kind of job that just wasn't worth that money, you know," she said.

The cut to its labor costs and ownership of the company's building have given Ace Kauffman incredibly low overhead, the siblings say. It has helped the Hansens weather the jumps in material costs from inflation and tariffs. All of their

suppliers are in Austria or China because no American companies make their materials anymore, they said.

“Those companies are struggling, the suppliers, so they probably have a price increase every six months, like five to 10 percent,” Chris said.



Image: Denver Business Journal

A die cast for a rubber stamp sits on a shelf at Ace Kauffman.

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But business has remained steady the last few years despite all the setbacks, Linda said. The Hansens wish they were busier, but they recognize that the demand is not what it once was.

They experimented with selling on Amazon to get new sales, but to compete with the low prices from other retailers on the site, the company was making less than 50 cents per sale, Chris said. They decided the hassle wasn't worth it

Last year, they reduced their business hours to Monday through Thursday.

With work-from-home making downtown offices largely empty on Fridays, the number of people coming in isn't worth it, Linda said. They also just saw it as an opportunity to skip Interstate 25 traffic.

With no current plans to pass Ace Kauffman down to their children, the Hansens' retirement could be the end for the 154-year-old business, according to Chris.

But as long as the two still want to work and the business is making money, they have no plans to retire.

"I was just telling my neighbor, I said, 'me going to work is as good as me being on my days off, because I enjoy it so much down here,'" Linda said.