

# brushware

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Profile: WAGMAN PRIMUS  
First Half Statistics: January through June

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# WAGMAN PRIMUS -

## SUPPLIERS, OUTSOURCERS, CONSULTANTS TO THE BRUSH INDUSTRY

“We think of ourselves as the preferred outsourcing resource for the brush industry,” said Wagman Primus president Richard C. Sheerr in a July interview. The conversation took place at the company’s Levittown, Pa. headquarters, between Philadelphia and Trenton, within sight of the Pennsylvania Turnpike bridge to New Jersey.

Sheerr would like customers to regard Wagman Primus as “a service business rather than a product business. We deliver the best value to our customers when they include us in their planning.” In addition, for those who just want to place an order, the company continues to offer and stock a wide range of components and finished goods, and can obtain just about anything else.

“We want people to think that when they want to import a component or finished product, they should contact us,” Sheerr said.

Wagman Primus sources products and systems in China and the rest of Asia as well as in Europe and Latin America. None of the merchandise the company offers comes from the United States or Canada. Almost all customers are North American original-equipment manufacturers.

Besides Wagman’s broad range and selection, the firm has “pre-qualified” a significant number of factories that make components and finished products.

“In China, you pretty much get what you demand if you know how

to pick the factory,” Sheerr said. “You can find a price factory, quality factory, consistency factory, or mix. Whatever, we can find factories that can meet a customer’s need.”

Neil Dolinger, Senior Manager, noted that for Wagman Primus, this can involve “a lot of visits to factories that have nothing to do with current, specific business.”

Sheerr said, “We don’t see ourselves as traders. We see ourselves as service-providers. We articulate requirements and specifications. We arrange for transportation, or ‘logistics.’ We break down containers and ship parts all over the place. We extend terms to people who are creditworthy.

“What we want people to derive from doing business with us is, first, profit, and second, peace of mind.”

### THE SCOPE

“Our business has three parts,” he explained. “One is bristle and hair for the paintbrush industry, including artists’ brushes.

“The second is paintbrushes, paint applicators, and other tools. This includes chip brushes, roller frames, mini-rollers, bucket grids, scrapers, wire brushes, art supplies and materials, and artists’ brushes.” He is currently expanding his paintbrush selection into multiple, specific, programs designed to fit into customers’ own product lines.”



Richard Sheerr *in command at Wagman Primus*

A major development in paintbrushes is chemically tapered polyester filament. This is a post-production process using untapered filament. It tapers-off part of the filament by dipping it in a chemical “bath.”

The company is also expanding its line of non-paint applicators—spinners, scraping tools, etc. Customer requests drive diversification.

Paintbrushes and handles are growing lines. Wagman Primus represents the Italian company Dalle Crode, “the world’s premier manufacturer of plastic paintbrush handles.” They also offer wooden paintbrush handles on a modest scale.

BRUSHWARE asked Sheerr about an old axiom: that the Chinese and Indonesians should dominate lower price ranges of paint brushes in U.S. markets, but old-line U.S. producers would retain their hold on high-quality, professional, bristle paintbrushes.

“The Chinese are clearly moving up, although they are not yet at the professional level” he said, citing increasing awareness of the importance of brush performance. Dolinger added, “Some factories understand the need better than others.”

The third part of the business is animal hair that does not go to the brush industry, including horsehair for violin bows, and human hair. Some of these materials are sold in small quantities to hobbyists and crafters. They can buy hair by the hank.

Yak hair is used for theatrical costumes. Wagman Primus hair products have adorned the Grinch that stole Christmas, and King Kong in his most recent revival. Dolinger recalled that movie stars have worn “hair extensions” made of Wagman Primus hair, interwoven with their own hair to produce a longer-haired look.

While the hair business may furnish chitchat for star-struck reporters, Sheerr emphasized that Wagman Primus “overwhelmingly ca-

ters to the brush industry.” That excludes broom and mop makers. Sheerr continued, “Our role is to match customers’ needs. It’s not just about price, but it’s how the product performs, what it’s supposed to look like, what the packaging is supposed to look like, and so on. Once these criteria are agreed to, then price becomes the issue.”

Sheerr observed that his customers varied in their concern about packaging. Wagman Primus has designed it, even when it involved artwork. In these circumstances, the artwork has been outsourced, either in the U.S. or Asia. They prefer that customers at least make suggestions.

“If you are an outsourcer,” Sheerr expanded, “you bring things to people, but you really engage in a dialogue with them. Where do they want to go? What do they want to do? What should the products look like? What should the packaging look like?”

“We don’t push the same lines or items to everybody. If we did, we would be traders. Each customer comes to us and says, ‘This is the program we want to do, and this is what it will take to be successful. Can you do this for us? The criteria are quality, appearance, quality, and price.’”

“We can give you multiple choices. It’s not just price, it’s meeting your needs. It’s what you want out of the deal. That’s why people do business with us.”

Dolinger commented that by asking questions, Wagman Primus helps to make what starts out as a fuzzy concept become more concrete. “When people come to us,” he said, “we ask questions that they hadn’t considered or hadn’t planned to discuss.”

To summarize the obvious, the company can act as a consultant for companies in the brush industry, and is eager to do so.

“Where we create the most value, we are in the middle, matching needs and capabilities,” Sheerr said. Dolinger added, “The more businesses can partner with us, the better we’re able to serve them.”

## BUSINESS TRENDS

Like many other businesses, Wagman Primus saw a decline in the wake of the Twin Towers attacks, but in January 2002 “somebody flipped a switch.” There was a definite revival. Business has continued to be good since then.

Sheerr is not certain that North American manufacturing is declining, despite the conventional wisdom. If it is, however, flagging consumer demand was not the reason, he said.

Nor has there been any long-run fall-off in the bristle business to illustrate the usual pessimistic assumptions about North American manufacturing. He said that bristle has been quantitatively stable during his six years of owning the business.

BRUSHWARE asked about bristle supply problems. He said that there currently are few, though it is sometimes difficult to obtain particular lengths, especially longer ones.

“In China, you pretty much get what you demand if you know how to pick the factory,” Sheerr said. “You can find a price factory, quality factory, consistency factory, or mix. Whatever, we can find factories that can meet a customer’s need.”

## HISTORY

Like many other firms in the industry, Wagman Primus honors a long history. Its advertisements show this, with the famous panoramic photo of delegates to an early American Brush Manufacturers Association convention. The original hangs on the wall in a conference room. It reminds customers not only of the firm's longevity, but also its support of associations in the industry.

Many of the other walls at the firm's unpretentious offices feature artwork, incidentally. Open space features a variety of hog art.

The brothers Nathan and Oscar Wagman went into the hair and bristle business in 1919 in Philadelphia. They opened a factory in Tianjin to process animal hair very early on. (Today Tianjin, by various spellings, is a sister city of Philadelphia.) The company continued to operate there, even through World War II when there was an embargo on Chinese bristle. It sourced from other parts of the world. It finally closed down its Chinese operations when the Japanese took over.

After the war, the company returned to China. It stayed in business there until the Communists took over in 1949.

When President Richard M. Nixon announced the resumption of trade relations with China in 1972, the company was among the first to be invited back. It became a pioneer provider of Chinese imports to the U.S.

In the mid-70s, then-CEO Howard Wagman began a business to import tools. He established headquarters for all his company's operations in the Old City section of Philadelphia. He located its warehouse in Edison, New Jersey, near New Brunswick.

Sheerr joined the company in 1995, intending a trial run prior to purchasing it. He bought it in 1996. He decided to consolidate domestic operations in its current industrial park in Levittown. The location has worked out "extremely well," he enthused.

A more detailed history and more complete description of available goods and services appear on the company's encyclopedic website (<http://www.wagmanprimus.com/>).

## COMPUTERIZATION

Sheerr has redesigned his business processes around increased data-processing capacity. This first paid off in warehouse management. "Everything is bar-coded to a specific location," Sheerr explained; "warehouse people can go right to it, find the product, and ship it with alacrity and accuracy."

Information technology has delivered other benefits. "Because of it we're much better buyers," with more analytical data to support buying decisions and capacity to handle a broader range of goods.



Resultant diversification has helped the company to weather geopolitical or economic blips affecting particular lines of business.

Enhanced information and broad product involvement have augmented Sheerr's view of his company as a service-provider as well as a product source.

"We want to be part of our customers' planning process as well as recipient of their orders. That doesn't mean we're not happy to take their orders. When people tell us, 'Please ship this, please ship that,' we're ready! That's a very important part of our business. But we think we bring the best value to our customers when we're part of their planning."

Computerization has also brought some problems to the industry, as Sheerr sees it. "What the web has done," he observed, "is to make it easy to broadcast e-mails and claim to have certain products. In an idyllic world, that might be fine. You wouldn't need intermediaries. To do business in China, though, you really need to invest in bridging two cultures, two business environments.

"Our customers on a product-by-product basis have come to the conclusion that one of the ways to do this is to do business with us or someone like us."

He recommends the former.



Senior Manager Neil Dolinger and familiar ABMA pioneers