

Winona Lighting

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WEB SITE: www.winonalighting.com

HOURS: Monday-Thursday, 7 a.m.-5 p.m.;
Friday 7 a.m.-Noon

EMPLOYEES: 185 (full- and part-time)

ESTABLISHED: 1960

Left to right: Steve Biesanz, President and CEO; Ted Biesanz, Executive Vice President; Matt Biesanz, Regional Sales Manager; Jake Biesanz, Regional Sales Manager; (Not Pictured: Chris Biesanz, Regional Sales Manager)

shedding light on

by Linda Duffy, photography by Bruce Defries

bright ideas

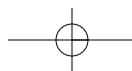
Businessman and author Jack Welch said, "If the rate of change outside your organization is greater than the rate of change inside your organization, the end is in sight." With the way that technology is constantly evolving, this sentiment may be truer than ever. Businesses must be constantly adapting, and those that do not—or cannot—keep up quickly become obsolete. One local company that has successfully embraced the advancements offered by technology—and thereby managed to best some of its competition—is Winona Lighting, an industry leader in custom, decorative, architectural and outdoor lighting.

In 1960, founder Phil Conway, whose family had roots in the stained glass business, began to see the opportunities available in the field of custom lighting design and manufacturing. Eventually, Conway decided to break away to start his own business—and Winona Lighting was born.

Finding a niche

For the first 20 to 25 years, Winona Lighting specialized in custom work. In the mid-1970s, the company landed a national contract and ended up supplying the lighting fixtures for 500 stores in the Kentucky Fried Chicken chain—just one of many recognizable customers Winona Lighting would eventually add to its résumé. In fact, Winona Lighting's custom pendants, wall mounts, and ceiling mounts can be found in an impressive array of national monuments, corporate headquarters, shopping malls, and even some private residences—including the Bank of Boston, Hearst Tower, Central Chicago Police Headquarters, the South Carolina State House, the Chicago Board of Trade, the Puerto Rico Convention Center, and more.

By the mid-1980s, Winona Lighting had begun to firmly establish itself as a serious competitor in the field of custom lighting. But company leaders recognized the inherent limitations posed by custom projects. The



lengthy design, manufacturing, and installation process was time intensive and limiting. So in 1985, Winona lighting introduced a standard line of fixtures—a move that took the company to the next level by making it stand out from its competitors. Architects, designers and contractors could scan a catalog and select the types of lighting needed for any given project, request modifications (if needed), and come up with something called a “modified standard product.” The result? Unique lighting fixtures that cost less than a custom fixture and could be manufactured more quickly. “By combining our roots in custom design with a standard product line, Winona Lighting created a niche,” says Regional Sales Manager Jake Biesanz. “We set ourselves apart from the competition.”

In 1987, Steve Biesanz joined Conway at Winona Lighting, and in 1989, the pair brought on Steve’s brother, Ted, Jr., who had a background in sales and marketing. One of the first things Ted Jr. noticed, he says, was the way the “day-to-day operations interfered with the ability to devote time to developing standard product.” As a result, the company hired a director of design so that the others could devote more time to sales and marketing.

By 1994, Steve and Ted Jr. had purchased the company from Conway (who stayed on as national sales manager until he retired in 2004). Though the company had experienced explosive growth after the introduction of its standard product line, the three quickly recognized the value of staying active in new product development and investing in state-of-the-art machinery to improve productivity.

Embracing new technologies

The next product line expansion occurred in 1995 when a new division was introduced called Windirect, dedicated to High Performance Asymmetric Lighting. The product was developed for the McCormick Convention Center in Chicago and later introduced as a standard product. The Windirect line offers a variety of indirect lighting options, and since its launch, the luminaries have shed light on structures as local as the stadium at Winona State University and as far away as the Lincoln and Jefferson Memorials, and King Abdullah University in Saudi Arabia.

Four years later, in 1999, Winona Lighting introduced the Winscape line of exterior landscape lighting. In addition to lighting up the landscapes and pools of many high-end residences throughout the country, Winscape lighting is showcased at the Casino del Sol in Tucson, Arizona; Mitchell Park’s Dome Conservatory in Milwaukee, Wisconsin; and the Historical Society in Tulsa, Oklahoma (just to name a few).

As a testament to its commitment to staying on the cutting edge, Winona Lighting launched its latest product line called Winona LED, in 2003—one that is widely considered the future of the company. LED stands for Light Emitting Diode—a technology that has been around for decades but has only recently become advanced enough to have practical applications for commercial and residential spaces. Today’s LEDs are

smaller, brighter, and longer lasting than incandescent or fluorescent sources, which makes this technology perfect for a variety of indoor and outdoor projects, including those fixtures for which “changing a bulb” would be difficult.

For example, in 2008 Winona Lighting created a pendant light for Absolut Vodka’s corporate office. The pendant, which measures 54-inches tall and 33.5 inches in diameter, features 100 Absolut bottles, each with a cool white LED light inside, resulting in a truly unique fixture. The company also created a signature piece for the Hard Rock Café in Prague in 2009. Designed in the shape of guitar, the piece is 6 feet wide x 17.5 feet long. At 850 pounds, the piece is substantial, but because of the 9,500 cut glass beads hanging from 1,450 cables—accented with 84 warm white LEDs—the suspended fixture seems to float ethereally between the floors of the restaurant.



Absolut Vodka’s corporate office, New York City

An eye toward the future

Today, Winona Lighting is truly a family business. Steve’s sons, Jake, Matt, and Chris, have all joined the company, working their way up to Regional Sales Managers. United by a shared trust in the company vision and a passion for bringing that vision to fruition, the key to future success is remaining committed to new product development—and to surrounding themselves with employees who share their passion. “We employ a lot of people who care a lot about the company—people who are talented and have a good Midwestern work ethic,” says Ted. “Winona Lighting is really just a large family of artisans,” adds Jake.

And there is perhaps no greater affirmation that the company’s past dedication to embracing technology will be the blueprint for future success than the state of the company right now. In the midst of an economic downturn when many of its competitors are going out of business, Winona Lighting is more than holding its own. “Right now, there is less commercial construction going on—less demand for the kind of large custom products that, in the past, represented our bread and butter,” says Jake. “But because of our newer product lines like Windirect and Winona LED, we continue to grow.”

