

Supplier *Profile*

Innovative and Durable Products

Horizons Inc.

BY K. SCHIPPER

STATS

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Specialty: Horizons Imaging Systems Group (ISG) is an internationally known manufacturer of printable aluminum sheeting.

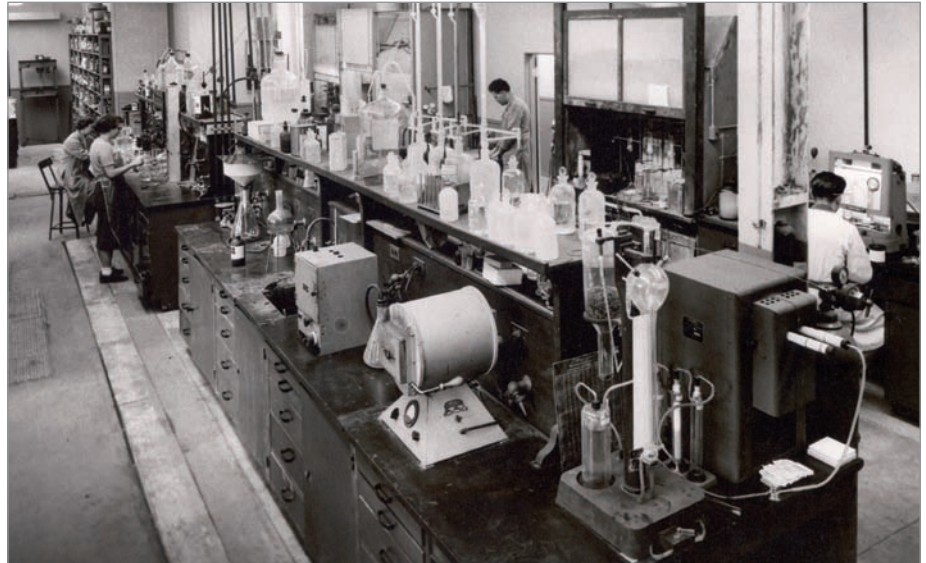
Biggest-Selling Product: Metalphoto®, a photosensitive anodized aluminum that's been described as "the most-durable of aluminum identification plates" by the National Association of Graphic and Product Identification Manufacturers.

Philosophy: We focus on high-value, high-quality materials that provide unique value to our customers and differentiate them within their respective markets. In addition, our adherence to high ethical standards and integrity in business dealings has earned us very long term relationships with customers, dealers and business partners.

Five-Year Business Goal: To develop new, high-value durable printable aluminum technologies which grow the profitability of our customers' businesses while continuing to provide outstanding service and product availability.

What ARA Has Done for Us: ARA helps bring us closer to customers of our products, ultimately providing the direction for new product innovations.

Business Tip: Focus on applications, products and/or services that others don't (i.e. where there is limited direct competition). Even if your product is similar to a competitor's, find a way to differentiate yourself through additional services such as free delivery, better customer service or even on-site installation if appropriate.



▲ Some 65 years and 150 employees later, Horizons, Inc., may still be about as anonymous as its first team of researchers working to develop various technological products—including imaging systems—for the U.S. government.

Getting to the end of World War II was not easy. Even as the war was winding down, the U.S. government still had huge technological needs to make it easier to account for its men and materials spread around the world.

Enter a small contract research company working to develop various technological products—including imaging systems. It took a few years after the war ended for the team to develop its first big invention—Metalphoto®—and to turn a strictly research firm into a manufacturing one.

Today, some 65 years and 150 employees later, that manufacturing company, Horizons, Inc., may still be about as anonymous as that first team of researchers, but people in the recognition industry definitely know its product line, which has grown to include AlumaJet® and AlumaMark®, in addition to Metalphoto.

Perhaps because of its start as a research-and-development operation,

it's also a firm that's always pushing, well...its horizons. The company is now poised to introduce a new product—AlumaMark® COLOR—to its AlumaMark line of laser engravable substrates at the 2011 ARA show in Las Vegas.

Firm Roots

Just as mighty oaks spring up from small acorns, the success of Horizons Inc. initially started with a single product: Metalphoto. But what a product it is.

The company's website describes it as a photosensitive anodized aluminum, but those few words hardly do it justice. The aluminum sheet is exposed and developed similar to a black-and-white photographic film, and then the anodizing process is completed. The result is a sealed image within the metal itself.

"It has applications potential in the award and plaque arena, however, for industrial items like nameplates, data

plates and bar code labels, it can't be beat," says Sam Wainer, product manager for new product development for Horizons Imaging Systems Group (ISG), the division that handles raw materials for the company. "Anywhere there's a design that needs to have a precise dark image that will last in a difficult environment, that's what Metalphoto is for."

After all these years, Metalphoto remains the company's leading product, in large part because of its versatility and durability. Because of the anodized finish, an image on Metalphoto is virtually impervious to chemicals, heat, abrasion, salt spray and ultraviolet light (UV). "Metalphoto is widely used for outdoor applications," says Scott Lehner, director of sales for ISG. "For instance where a plaque would have to be outdoors, Metalphoto could easily be used."

However, he adds that it also has plenty of indoor applications, as well, where an attractive look that incorporates a lot of fine-line marking is involved. "The appearance offers great value for recognition applications," Lehner says. "It really can be used for both showcase applications, and the industrial tough stuff. It's a little unusual to find something that will handle that kind of double duty."

Its meat-and-potatoes market runs well beyond recognition. Because the material is available in four different finishes and a range of sizes and thicknesses, it's highly popular for many different industrial uses, from signs to labels to switch plates.

A large customer for Horizon's Metalphoto is the U.S. Department of Defense, which has legal requirements to supply much of its equipment with what are called unique item identification, or UID labels. "We also sell our products to hundreds of other converters and OEMs (original equipment manufacturers)," says Lehner. "They add value to our raw material by converting it into finished product that is of use to their customers."

It's for that reason that many people in the awards industry might not immediately recognize the Horizons Imaging Systems Group by name, even though they regularly use its products, which are sold by many of the most well-known industrial and

awards distributors. A complete list is available at www.HorizonsISG.com.

Rich, Dark, and in Color

While Metalphoto might not be a product familiar to those who don't typically do a lot of plaques used outdoors, ISG's other two major lines—AlumaJet and AlumaMark—are likely staples for anyone looking for creative

ways to mark aluminum plates.

Wainer says both products had their genesis approximately 10 years ago, at about the time the Horizons R&D department noticed that customers' needs for marking systems were changing.

"We started thinking about the whole Metalphoto process as things started to move toward digital," he



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says. "We noticed that people were thinking about print-on-demand, and using lasers for both printing and imaging. The R&D department started thinking about what they could develop that put a digital image on metal."

AlumaJet, which Wainer says is properly described as an inkjet-printable aluminum, has a lot of appeal to those in the recognition industry because it lets users put spot color designs, or even full-color images on real aluminum sheets. And, unlike screen printing, it's quick, as well as practical for doing short runs or even a single plate.

AlumaMark fills much the same niche for those who operate CO₂ laser engravers in their shops. Again, the emphasis is on a method that can create a one-of-a-kind piece quickly.

"The important thing is that it's actually aluminum; it's not metalized plastic or an anodized aluminum where you ablate the material and leave a natural metal image," says Wainer. "When AlumaMark is heated with the CO₂ laser, it creates a dark image, so you're actually printing a black image within the metal."

Color continues to be a hot item in the recognition industry, and the niche filled by AlumaJet isn't the best answer for every project. With that in mind, ISG will be bringing a new AlumaMark line to market with the 2011 ARA show: AlumaMark Color.

"For the first time, people can have a plaque that has the rich, dark marks created by the CO₂ laser, but on a plate that's done in a school color, or shows the color of a corporate logo," says Wainer.

Adds Lehner, "We have a lot of good, supportive

customers who operate in the recognition industry, and we're placing new emphasis on the awards market with AlumaMark Color."

In fact, the company asked 2010 ARA show attendees what colors they wanted, and based on the responses of more than 100 shop owners, the first colors to hit the market will be red, yellow, orange, green and blue.

Guiding Light

If it sounds like ISG is putting a lot of emphasis on AlumaMark Color for the recognition market, it is.

"The recognition market is one piece of what we do," says Lehner. "But, it's very important to us in terms of this new product."

The other market where Lehner believes the new product will be strongest is one in which a lot of awards dealers work to some degree: Signage.

"We see this having a great application in terms of indoor signage where you have a building or a space that has a certain color theme," he says. "That colored metal sign will add a lot of value not just in terms of the color, but also through the metal look. There will also be a lot of demand for it with nameplates and name badges. In fact, those are where we see many uses for our existing AlumaMark line with the bronze and brass," he adds. "I think the addition of these new colors is a twist that will get a lot of play."

ISG is particularly proud of the brilliance of its colors, which Lehner notes aren't the dull pastels one often sees. Wainer adds that the company anticipates optimizing the color offering once interest in AlumaMark COLOR begins to build. Company



▲ Consisting of five operating divisions, Horizons Inc., is a manufacturer of a diversified family of materials and product identification items. Selling in markets around the world and with corporate offices in Cleveland, OH, these divisions include Horizons Imaging Systems Group, MPC, Camcode, Pannam Imaging and Lasting Commemoratives.

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officials are waiting for customer feedback to determine which additional colors will best meet their customers' needs. ISG would also consider doing a custom color for a large-enough order but, "this is not a substrate solution where we're going to have all the Pantone® colors," says Wainer.

The other attractive thing about AlumaMark Color, both men say, is that it's similar to the original AlumaMark Satin Silver, so shop owners will have a short learning curve for processing the new colors.

"Anyone who runs AlumaMark today will be able to easily mark AlumaMark Color," says Lehner. "This just fills a space in the original family of AlumaMark and they really won't have to do anything new."

As with the original AlumaMark, AlumaMark Color will be marketed through ISG's distributors, who were given an early look and an opportunity to provide feedback on the new material in late fall. The product started shipping in early 2011, and is being sold in 12 x 20-in. sheets at a .020-in. thickness.

As for ISG's next step, Wainer says the company is developing a new CO₂-laser-markable product with good exterior durability that will be directed more at manufacturing and military markets, "although it should be of interest to certain ARA members."

That is, after all, in line with Horizons Inc.'s, and ISG's business philosophy. "Our goal is to create innovative materials that add value to end-use applications," Wainer concludes. "That's what's driven us to create products with outdoor durability and that's what drove us to create the colors. That's our guiding light." ▲

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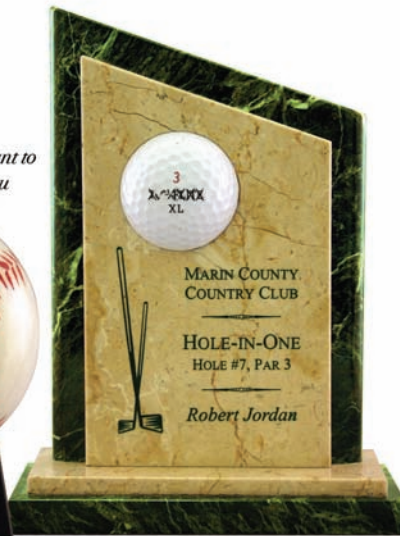
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