

RETAILER PROFILE



BOB AND AMY HASKIN
ZIP SPECIALTIES

A Strong Foundation Supports Family Business's Evolution

Zip Specialties, Crystal Lake, IL

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Things are changing quickly at Zip Specialties.

Owners Bob and Karen Haskin moved into a consulting role in July 2015, allowing their son and daughter-in-law Bob and Amy Haskin to take control of the business. Just four months later, the younger couple consolidated the company's locations into one retail location in Crystal Lake.

How are the senior Haskins, who operated the company for more than 40 years, handling all of the changes? "They've really trusted us," Bob said. "Amy joined the business 16 years ago, and I've always been in the business in some respect."

The long-time owners knew that the next generation might have big changes in mind, changes that have been easier to swallow with a move to Florida.

A FAMILY BUSINESS

When the elder Bob Haskin was hired to work at the company, then Zip Trophy in Morton Grove, IL, he was looking for part-time work. "He was at the right place at the right time. The owner was ready to retire, and Dad took over full-time in 1974," Bob explained. "Dad had a partner for about two years, then bought the guy out."

When Bob and his sisters were in school, mom Karen had time on her hands. "She was looking to work, and my dad needed a lot of help," Bob said. "It was part-time for a short time, then full-time all the time."

Formerly a nurse, Karen Haskin took to the business so well that she eventually became the owner. (Amy Haskin expects to do the same thing when ownership is officially

transferred, keeping Zip Specialties' status as a woman-owned business.)

The couple changed the name of the business from Zip Trophy to Zip Specialties to demonstrate to their customers that they offered much more than trophies. "Dad kept being asked for different things. He felt 'Trophy' limited his company," Bob explained.

Like so many industry families, the Haskins called upon their children to step in when help was needed, so Bob and his sisters grew up in their parents' business. Bob didn't plan to join the family business. Instead, he worked in a telecommunications corporate job. Fifteen years ago, the senior Haskins knew they needed to add laser engraving services, but neither was ready to learn to use a laser. They planned to hire someone. Bob stepped up, returning to the family business. "As I got older, I realized that corporations can be great, but my family was more interested in me instead of treating me like a number. That's what spurred me to come work for my family."

Amy was firmly entrenched in the industry by the time her husband returned to Zip Specialties. In 1999, our association—then the Awards and Recognition Association—was seeking a product locator who would source suppliers for member retailers who called seeking specific products.

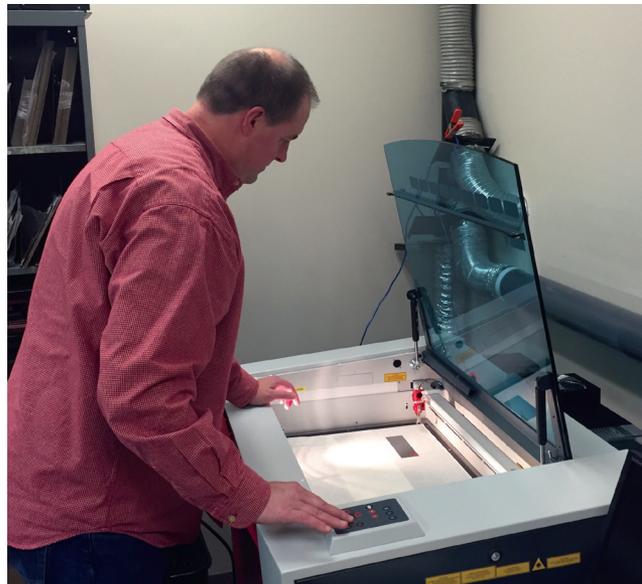
"My family was in this business. My father-in-law said, 'She'd be perfect.' I was able to do it from home, still help with the business and raise my kids," Amy said. "I had no background in it. My background was hotels, sales, and planning parties in hotels. It was a great way to learn about the products."

Her resources: 600 catalogs and 5 years' worth of Buyer's Guides. She also could turn to board members and, of course, her family. "My dad and I would get calls. We were her first line of defense," Bob said.

Ideally, Amy would find the exact product a retailer wanted. If it couldn't be found, she'd offer similar options. Amy was our product locator for about 10 years, finally being displaced by the Internet, electronic catalogs, and our Member2Member Forum. Then, Amy put her sales experience and industry knowledge to work at Zip Specialties.

ZIP'S EVOLUTION

Now that the senior Haskins have moved into "consulting roles" for their son and daughter-in-law, the business consists of Bob and Amy Haskin and their sales representative, who has 45 years of industry experience. Amy also functions as an outside sales rep.



Bob Haskin works at one of the company's laserengravers.

Previously, the business was located in Wheeling, IL, with a sales office in Crystal Lake. Bob and Amy consolidated the two into one big retail location in Crystal Lake. The move brings their work closer to their home and community.

Being closer to home also makes it easier for family to help out. When there is too much work, Bob and Amy can count on their sales rep and their children to roll up their sleeves. Even Bob and Karen Haskin lend a hand if they are in town. "It's truly a family business," Amy said.

They have two CO₂ lasers, a rotary engraver, a sublimation system and TheMagicTouch transfer system. They've even kept an old pantograph. "We still get people who come in and need it," forcing Bob to call on the pantograph expertise he'd developed as a 9-year-old helping out in his family business.

Most of Zip Specialties' clients are corporations or organizations that purchase products similar to those wanted by businesses. Awards make up about 55%–65% of Zip Specialties' business, with ad specialties accounting for 20–25% and apparel at 15–20%. Much of the apparel work, which includes corporate, uniforms, T-shirts, and fundraisers, like school spiritwear—is outsourced, though the Haskins are able to do smaller jobs in-house.

That ability to share work among competitors is something Bob loves. "We have a very good relationship with other awards companies the area. We don't necessarily view someone as competition all the time. You can help each

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Zip Specialties' new office advertises the company from all sides.

other. If I don't do something, he'll help me, and if he can't do something, I'll help him," he said. "That's the great thing about our industry. It's not as cutthroat as other industries. It's a very kind industry."

'THE EXTRA MILE'

Zip Specialties focuses on local customers and hasn't actively sought out Internet-based business from across the country or around the globe. That doesn't mean that Internet orders don't matter.

Bob and Amy set up areas on their site, at www.zipspecialties.com, for specific clients who aren't a products' end users. An association can send members to the website to order branded products, and schools can send students and parents to the website to order spiritwear. The products shown are those approved by the association or school, but that client doesn't have to collect money, organize orders, or fill out forms. Instead, the orders go to the Haskins, and the end users pay directly for their purchase.

This is convenient for Zip Specialties, for the client, and the end users. The Haskins take it a step further, boxing or bagging individual orders, each with a label. In the case of spiritwear, for instance, the school or boosters group can open each box and hand each completed order to the right person—no digging through multiple boxes to find each item, no checking forms to see what each person ordered.

As the parents of young athletes, Bob and Amy drew upon their own experience in establishing this procedure. "We've been that type of customer for years, and we don't want to show up with two boxes of shirts and sort it," Bob said. "We want to take the time to make sure the order is right and label each bag or box for each individual order."

For Bob and Amy, it also means no uncertainty about whether all of the orders were completed and picked up. "We go that extra mile with that because we want to make sure what we're giving them is all accurate," Amy explained.

That's one example of the customer service the Haskins cite as crucial to Zip Specialties' success. "We have a lot of repeat business," Amy said "and if there's ever an issue with an order, we correct it."

ALWAYS GROWING

As the Haskins take over from the previous generation, they have a lot of plans centered around growing the business. That, of course, hinges on sales. In addition to their experienced external sales rep, Amy sells for Zip Specialties, and even Bob isn't off the hook.

"We're always on duty," Bob joked.

"It's not aggressive," Amy clarified. "People know what we do," she explained. Whether it's a friend or the parent of one of her children's classmates, people who might be in the market for one of their products will stop Bob or Amy to ask for information. The Haskins don't let the opportunity pass them by.

"We do whatever we can to grab that relationship and hope it grows into something bigger," Amy said.

Waiting in the shop for orders won't cut it. "You need to pick up the phone," Amy said. "You have to take a risk in order to get the reward."

Zip Specialties' new location has given Amy a host of new risks—err, leads—for sales as well. "We're in a business complex, so we're looking at all the businesses surrounding

us now. I pinpointed the top 10 in the county," she explained. "I go and stop in with a gift with our logo and business card and try to get in contact with the person who is doing the order. I send e-mail and make phone calls."

When seeking prospects, she goes online to look for the specific type of company or industry she's targeting. Then, she searches out an e-mail address for someone who might be the purchasers. "Personalize the e-mail. Don't send a standard one. I highlight that we're a family-run business in the community. That catches people's attention."

Having a local family behind the company creates accountability that can matter to prospects. "You might be able to get the best price online, but you have no way of any type of help if there's an issue with your order," Amy said.

Still, the Haskins would like to have more of an online presence, and to do more with their lasers, including selling personalized gifts. "Our business is not just awards anymore," Amy said. "It's more personalization. That's what people are paying for. That's what people want."

Adding personalized gifts would help even out the business's profit stream. Historically, the fourth quarter was the least busy time for Zip Specialties. This was hard for Amy to swallow given the sheer amount of money spent on holiday gifts with other retailers. There are so many applications for personalization equipment that there doesn't need to be a slow time, she said. "If you have a laser, you should be able to run it 365 days a year," Amy said. "For 2016, we're really going to focus on that."

Their three children will continue to help out, gaining valuable skills and knowledge about the business world. Though the children don't plan to take over Zip Specialties when Amy and Bob are ready to retire, the couple has perspective. After all, Bob hadn't planned to do so either. In the future, either the next generation or an excited buyer will write the next chapter of Zip Specialties success.

To get there, Amy and Bob need to continue to grow the business. With the senior Haskins safely in Florida, the couple can experiment with Zip Specialties' markets, products, and more. They can rely on the stability of the company's past while figuring out the best options for the future.

"There have been ups and downs in our industry for sure," Amy said. "We're not this billion-dollar company. I think the fact that it has sustained through ups and downs for 40-plus years—and is being transferred to another generation—shows hope and a good sustainable business for future generations."



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