





# Great Western Containers

Container company focuses on employees to achieve excellence

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BY GLORIA TAYLOR

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A commitment to work/life balance, company-paid training opportunities and flexible work hours. If that sounds like a recipe for a dream job, at Great Western Containers, the private company is busy turning dreams into reality for employees every day.

Annual sales have increased steadily for the 27-year-old, Calgary-based manufacturer and wholesaler of a wide variety of quality containers. What some business watchers may find unique is while the award-winning \$45-million firm has focused on providing a quality product to its clients, it has also propelled itself to a position as one of Western Canada's premier providers of industrial packaging by focusing on its internal client: its employees.

"We focus on our great people, our internal customers first, and they take care of our external customers," says Ken Chisholm, Vice President of Sales and Marketing. In fact, the focus refers to a well-thought-out company wide strategy involving about 200 management and staff at six of the company plants located in British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba.

Great Western Containers manufactures, repairs and recycles steel drums and acts as wholesaler for many of its containers, which it buys from some of the best manufacturers in the business. The plastic pails, steel pails, drums, paint cans and bottles come in a variety of sizes and go to the food, petrochemical, paint and coatings sectors, among many others, here and in the United States.

Throughout, employees are encouraged to strive for a work-life balance and practise the firm's core values. The values include excellence in relationships; high ethical behaviour; continuous improvement and learning; working hard, working smart; having fun and exceptional service.

While other companies espouse similar values, the difference with GWC is that the values are focused on daily, says Alanna Deis, Vice President, Great People (the equivalent to a Vice President of human resources at many other companies).

"We walk the talk. A lot of companies say the customer is number one, here at Great Western Containers, we say the employees are number one. If we do a great job with the employees, they will take care of the customers."

"Great People, Great Products, Great Service" is the company's 'brand promise' to live by, while "Building Great, Delivering Excellence" is the stated purpose.

Great Western Containers was founded 27 years ago by Nils and Sylvia Bodtker. Entrepreneurial determination and personal integrity was behind the company right from the beginning. The owners believed they could grow the company successfully through great products and empowering the employees. Work-life balance became a key theme.

Nils Bodtker has said that managing a work-life balance for employees in the company has not been without its challenges, but the rewards have been there, measured in the happiness of the employees. He pledged to continue to recruit executives who share the same deep commitment to the personnel and their families.

That philosophy has helped to keep the company growing

during a time when many family-owned enterprises have been gobbled up by major conglomerates.

Recognition has been forthcoming. In 1993, the founder and president was named Alberta Entrepreneur of the Year by the Alberta Opportunity Company. In 1995, GWC was cited as one of Canada's 50 Best Managed Private Companies by the Arthur Andersen Enterprise Group, a Chicago-based organization that specializes in helping owner-managed, mid-sized businesses increase their competitiveness.

In 1996 and 1997, GWC re-qualified as one of Canada's 50 Best Managed Private Companies.

In 2006, there were more kudos when the manufacturer/wholesaler was selected as the Canadian Professional Sales Association's 2006 Corporate Ambassador for Sales Excellence. All of GWC's relationship managers (outside sales representatives) are required to obtain CSP designations through the association. The letters stand for Certified Sales Professional and speak to ethical conduct and professional skills.

Quality standards are also evident through the ISO 9000 registrations at four of the company's plants.

### 'More Fun Approach'

"We are modelling the culture on companies that take a more fun and light approach to operating a business; this involves openness and recognition for employees," says Chisholm, adding the company has just completed an extensive re-branding process. "We want an environment where people can come to work and enjoy themselves."



Executive Team, from left:  
Marc Proulx VP Operations, Gary Yamada VP Finance and Chief Financial Officer, Ken Chisholm VP Sales and Marketing, Alanna Deis VP, Great People

Employees have become the new face of the company and many can now be seen on the company's marketing materials and website found at [www.gwcontainers.com](http://www.gwcontainers.com). "We're serious about the business and we're equally serious about having fun on the job! If people have fun at work, they will be more productive and they will treat our customers better which all leads to positive financial and business results. I heard the saying that if people love what they do, they never have to work again... for some of us, life at GWC is fun and it is not at all like work" says Gary Yamada, GWC Vice President of Finance and CFO.

"Some of the events we stage throughout the year to contribute to the fun atmosphere are our annual Halloween costume contest, the GWC Olympics, divisional golf tournaments and staff barbecues."

Managers are accessible and have been known to be the butt



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of good-natured humour. One manager returned from holidays to find the interior of his office wrapped in plastic wrap, including his computer and keyboard.

Marc Proulx is Great Western Containers' new Vice President of Operations. Having joined the company in March, Proulx offers a newcomer's perspective.

He said he and other executives do model the eight-hour day and practise the core values, all with the expectation that employees will put in a great effort during the working hours. He notes that the attitude of support and respect has paid off through a very good attendance rate.

**Work-life Balance**

Maintaining a work-life balance is one of the company's most valued principles. "That comes right from the top," says Chisholm. "We try very hard to lead by example; to make sure that we're home for dinner; home every weekend although we do have some travel commitments.

"We really, really promote an eight-hour work day and try to get the work done in eight hours and challenge people who are working longer hours than that," says Proulx. Employees would be asked why they are working longer hours and why they aren't home with their families if they were working overtime, he says.

"We certainly don't have hero worship here for those who are working 16-hour days, and in fact, we will advise that is not acceptable practice here," he adds.

In order to encourage that balance, the company will soon be piloting a four-day work week at its head office. The move



Shop floor

is good for the environment (less cars on the road) and some workers enjoy the idea of an extra day for R&R, family or running errands, say the officers. The company also offers flexible starting times for the convenience of workers.

Yamada says all the managers support the concept of work-life balance in word and deed. "We don't condone overtime." He expects the business philosophy to pay off in "more discretionary effort" by staff and notes the attendance record is good.

Deis says the managers are also required to model the behaviour in order to reinforce the practice. "We know that work-life balance enables wellness, but once again, what sometimes happens from the executive ranks or from the management ranks is they say 'We have a work-life balance, so please go home on time,'



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then the executive will sit there and do 12 hour days.

“So, it is not modelled. And when something is not modelled, it is actually unconsciously enabled.”

### Excellence in Relationships

If there is one over-arching core value, Chisholm says it is excellence in relationships. “Our business is really built on relationships. We sell a commodity, so we have to do things better and differently from our competition, because for some of our products we’re a distributor, not a manufacturer, and we’re competing against manufacturers,” he says.

“The emphasis on relationships with our external partners is developing the relationships beyond the customer/supplier and

we’re very proud of our sales people who can turn customers into personal friendships and loyalties.”

The company is also proud of the favourable relationships with the three unions that represent employees and promotes fairness in negotiations. As a result, it has managed to stay free of major labour disputes such as strikes.

### Ethical Behaviour

Ethical behaviour pertains to company responsibilities as well as personal behaviour. In the manufacturing realm, GWC is strict about compliance with environmental requirements.

It manufactures drums for companies that often return them for recycling. Some of the drums that have held toxic substances require special handling, and the company complies.

“We have very strict environmental guidelines because we are dealing with drums that may have a little bit of product in them that we have to treat before they can be discharged into the sewage system or collected by a disposal firm, and we make sure we are on the leading edge of compliance and not just do the minimum,” says Proulx.

### Continuous Improvement and Learning

To encourage employees to better themselves, the company provides financial help to those who want to take a wide variety of programs. “If we are not looking for continuous improvement in all areas, we are dying,” says Chisholm.

“We have a very liberal paid training policy. Broadly stated, anything that’s going to improve you as an employee or you as a person is of value to Great Western Containers, and we’d be




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happy to pay for that course or seminar or whatever the individual chooses. We encourage them to take advantage of that, and it is very rare that we turn down anybody," adds Deis.

One man in the firm's Delta office began as a worker in the warehouse, then was promoted to Customer Service and currently is taking courses toward a management diploma.

Carrie Lane, Supervisor, Great Service, at the Delta office, took a nine-week paid public speaking program, which she says left her with lasting skills. Even before she completed the program, Lane made a presentation at a company-sponsored training program.

### Exceptional Service

"We firmly believe that our employees are only going to treat our customers well if we treat our employees well," reiterates Chisholm.

"For the customers, we have a policy that if we don't have it, we'll find it for you. We always try to provide a service of getting them what they want, even if it is not us that can provide it," he adds. "We also provide delivery from every location within 24 hours for most items. That's above industry standards for the industrial packaging industry."

Relationship Managers (sales people) are required to obtain their CSP designation from the Canadian Professional Sales Association.

"This involves training, professional selling experience, and a fairly rigorous testing process which includes a written exam and a one day oral exam where they role play and demonstrate their competency," says Yamada. "This ensures that our customers are being served by trained, dedicated, accredited professionals."

Yamada stresses the "high sense of ethics" the credentials represent.

All the effort behind the scenes can only bode well for the future. Increasing revenues is a top priority, but the company also boasts a Big Hairy Audacious Goal: to become the most revered company in the industrial container industry by the year 2020.

It is all in line with the company's mission: to provide the highest quality and service with the most comprehensive array of industrial container-related products and services in the region and continuously improve the value of the relationships it shares with customers, suppliers, employees and the community.

To get there, the company will continue to focus on its people, customer satisfaction ratings and environmental efforts.

### Expansion

Going into its 28<sup>th</sup> year, Great Western Containers continues to grow and expand. On Sept. 28, 2007, the company signed an agreement to acquire the assets of Greif Inc., a steel, plastic and fibre drum manufacturing plant in Lloydminster, Alberta. It was scheduled to take over the operations of Greif in early October.

"This transaction enables GWC to immediately offer better People, Products and Services to our customers and should help open the door to an even broader array of product and service offerings in the future," says Bodtker. "We are very pleased to be able to grow our business with the addition of a proven winner in our industry."

Given the company's rapid growth, it is headed to even greater success in the next 28. 

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# They Said It...

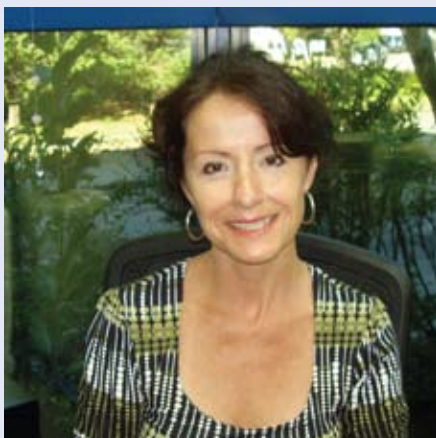
**Tim Anderson**  
Warehouse Foreman,  
Delta Division  
in Delta, B.C.



**Off the cuff:** “I look forward to coming to work. I’m of the opinion that every day is a great day, some are just better than others.”

**On Great Western Containers:**  
“Very open minded, willing to listen to new ideas.”

**Carrie Lane**  
Supervisor, Great Service  
Delta Division, B.C.



**Off the cuff:** “Relationships with customers and other employees are great. A lot of us are family.”

**On Great Western Containers:**  
Q. What might some readers be most surprised to know about Great Western Containers?

A. The number of products we carry.

**Genele McGaughey**  
Customer Service  
Representative, Edmonton  
Manufacturing Division, Alberta.



**Off the cuff:** “Best part of the job is the customers. We have a lot of loyal repeat customers and a pretty in depth relationship with the larger clients.”

**On Great Western Containers:**

Q. One word to describe your company?

A. Great!

**James McLaren**  
Yard Foreman  
Calgary, Alberta.



**Off the cuff:**

Q. What do you most enjoy about your job?

A. The corporate values mirror so closely my own.

**On Great Western Containers:**

Q. If you had to choose a few words to describe your company, what would they be?

A. Customer service oriented, Ethical.

**Dave L’Heureux**  
Relationship Manager,  
Edmonton Reconditioning  
Division, Alberta



**Off the cuff:**

Q. What would you like readers to know that they might not know about your company?

A. Great Western Containers instills the need to build relationships. I took a sales course a few years ago, and the instructor said ‘People buy from people they like.’ We focus on our relationships.

**On Great Western Containers:**

Q. What do you most like about your job?

A. There is something new every day. It is not routine. We have the freedom to run our own territory.



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