

Argraph Corp. — 50 Years of Serving Photo Specialty Dealers

It was 50 years ago that Argraph Corp. founder Irving Roth got his start as a photo distributor by selling camera bags, tripods and assorted photo accessories from the cramped closet of his Manhattan apartment. A devoted shutterbug who studied photography at the New York Institute of Photography, Roth had previously worked as a salesman at a camera store in the city after returning from Europe, where he served in the Air Force during World War II.

As the now 86-year old Roth remembers it, post-war New York City was an exciting time and place for the photo industry.

“After the war, people began discovering all the cameras that the Japanese were making,” Roth recalls. “With companies like Nikon, Pentax and Olympus bringing out Single Lens Reflex cameras, it gave us an opportunity to get into the market, especially once the

accessories began to grow. So while the

principle [of photography] was still the same,

the tools had changed and that created the whole camera industry.”

The entrepreneurial-minded Roth saw opportunity in this surplus of photo accessories hitting the U.S. shores. Like



Argraph president Mark Roth stands in front of boxes of photo supplies at the company's warehouse in Carlstadt, New Jersey.

(Photos by Dan Havlik)

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his father before him, who opened and operated a string of grocery stores, Roth knew he wanted to break out on his own while he was still young.

"There was a phrase that stuck in my mind at the time," he remembers. "If you get past 33 and you haven't done it already, you'll never go into business on your own. So I decided I'd become a sales rep. And I was the first [photography] sales rep who had several different lines."

Through repping, Roth began to amass a variety of products and accessories, everything from ball heads to contact adapters for flashbulbs. "Little odds and ends," as he puts it. Without a warehouse or storeroom to put everything, he settled on what was the only alternative at the time—the closet of his apartment in the Stuyvesant Town section of the city.

"It's hard to believe I started from a closet in my home," Roth says with a chuckle.

Considering that today, Argraph is one of the top imaging distributors in the country with a 15,000-square-foot warehouse in New Jersey and another 7,000-square foot facility in California, it is hard to believe it all began in such close quarters.

As the business grew though—particularly when Roth decided to start distributing enlargers—he found places to grow with it, moving to larger facilities in the city and

then eventually settling in Carlstadt, New Jersey where Argraph is based today.

Father to Son

While the company is now run by his son Mark—who serves as president—the senior Roth is still very much involved in the business. And even though the focus of the company has changed dramatically from distributing flashbulb contact adapters to distributing flash memory cards (among other things), the concept is the same.

"As the industry changes, there's always a demand for something that makes it easier to enjoy photography," Irving Roth says. "And that's why I always made trips to Japan, Germany and other countries, looking for the latest products."

It's being alert to spot the latest trends that has helped Argraph flourish today. On a recent visit to Argraph's facility in Carlstadt, Mark Roth told *PTN* about the time eight years ago when the company decided to take a chance on something called "digital."

"It was right about this time of year in 1995 that we introduced the Chinon ES 3000 (digital camera)," Mark says, leaning back in his chair. "Everybody was afraid of it. The dealers were afraid they were not going to have any processing and it was going to destroy it. We jumped in. Part of it was being in the right place at the right time,

part of it was relationships. We had an old relationship with the people at Chinon. They basically had backed out of the U.S. camera market at the time, they were primarily doing computer peripherals, and they had no way of bringing this camera to market, so they came to us."

The decision would prove to be fortuitous.

"My sense at the time was that digital photography was inevitable," Mark recalls. "This was just part of what had to happen, one way or another. The debate at the time was 'Is digital going to take over?' Our feel-

Argraph National Sales Manager Marty Lipton with the "Internet Photo Studio," marketed under Argraph's Samigon brand.



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ing was not ‘Will it?’ but ‘When will it?’ And it has.”

During a tour of Argraph’s warehouse it became clear just how much of an effect digital has had on the industry. Along with being the primary distributor for Fuji digital (and traditional) cameras on the East Coast, Argraph’s shelves are packed with media cards, jump drives, card readers, digital photo viewers and other digital peripherals from most of the major

brands in the industry. Furthermore, Argraph has also found success with such niche “digital” items as the new “Internet Photo Studio” lighting system marketed under Argraph’s own Samigon brand. Argraph also sells Fujifilm’s PrintPix kiosks and its digital Pictography printers.

“When we first started selling digital, we put it right in the middle of our catalog because we thought we could separate it out, but it’s become such an integral part of the market, we now put it right in front,” Mark says.

That’s not to say, though, that Argraph’s become an all-digital distributor. Far from it, actually, with a major portion of the company’s products classified in the traditional vein. In fact, one of Mark Roth’s favorite products is the Pana-Vue slide viewer, a brand Argraph took over that could hardly be described as “cutting edge.” It is, however, profitable.

“When I purchased Pana-Vue, I structured it so I’d have a three-year payback because I figured that after three years there wasn’t going to be

much happening. But, after four years, it’s still going strong,” he says.

“There’s still business out there in the darkroom as well. My key indicator of darkroom business is the dial thermometer. We happen to have the best dial thermometer on the market at the best price. So if I go to the computer and look at it...” Mark types a few

things into the terminal on his desk.

“You’d think we’d be running way behind from last year, but we’re running about even. So the business is still there.”



Maintaining Relationships

It’s the Roth family’s attention to suppliers and customers that’s helped it maintain many strong relationships in the industry. On the manufacturer’s end, having another voice in the field to spread the word about the latest technology or product is always a plus.

“We don’t have enough sales people to get to every one of our customers so we go through Argraph,” says Tom Cuffari, VP of Marketing, Commercial Products for Fuji Photo

From the cramped closet of a Manhattan apartment 50 years ago, to one of the top imaging distributors in the country today.



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Argraph’s Customer Service Manager Cindy Fiore (r.) and Customer Service Rep. Stacy Nikolovski.

Film U.S.A.'s Photo Imaging Division. "They're just another part of our sales force, as far as we're concerned."

Cuffari said Argraph's been able to survive because of the superior service they provide to their customers and the speed with which they process their orders.

"They know the business. I wish them another 50 years of continued success. It's a family business and I hope it stays a family business and they can pass it on to the next generation."

It's a sentiment that's shared by Argraph's customers—the photo specialty dealers—as well.

"They provide great service," says Jim Cycyk, owner of Cameras Etc. in Wilmington, DE. "Argraph makes it really easy for us to do special orders. In today's climate where people want things right away, Argraph always has the products in stock, no matter how esoteric. They've also got a great return policy, a price protection policy that's as good as anyone's, and they're really easy to work with."

Cycyk notes that it's not uncommon for Argraph National Sales Manager Marty Lipton to drive the products down from New Jersey himself.

"I'll call him up and say 'What do you have from Fuji?' And he'll drive down and he'll meet me in the parking lot to deliver the stuff. And that's why I love Argraph. No other distributor does that."

Glenn Graham, owner of The Camera Center in Modesto, CA, says he appreciates Argraph's thorough knowledge of the business.

"Mark [Roth] always seems to have an instinct about where the industry is going," Graham notes. "They are able to predict what's happening and line up the accessories we need and bring them to us. It's really like they've set the mark, and everybody's trying to catch up."

The speed of delivery is also something Graham notices about Argraph. "The people who work in [Argraph's] Hayward, CA office are very flexible. I've ordered stuff at four in the afternoon and they've been able to get it to me the next day."

It's perhaps because Argraph understands the photo specialty dealer so well that the relationship is strong.

"There is definitely a solid place for photo specialty dealers. Best Buy is not going to handle this stuff," Mark Roth says, standing amidst aisles of lens filters, loupes and stainless steel reels and tanks. "They wouldn't know what to do with it. They don't have the knowledge and they don't have the expertise. There is something very special about the photo specialty dealer. Most of us came into the photography business because we love photography. And you've got to have a love for the product to understand it."

For Irving Roth, who got into the business 50 years ago also because he loved photography and had an instinct for the way the industry was going, there's no other way to be successful.

"The people who don't adapt and

change their skills will fall by the wayside," the senior Roth says, as much about himself as about the industry as a whole. "You've got to be on top of it and move with the changes. Try to learn everything you can. Stay educated."

Roth pauses to consider the many lessons he's learned since those early days in New York.

"Looking back it seems like a long time ago," he says wistfully. "But it went by very quickly." *ptn*

Ken Dupey is Argraph's webmaster and graphic artist.



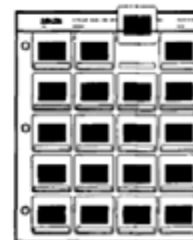
M-ROCK salutes M-ROTH and everyone at Argraph for 50 years of leadership in the Photo Industry.



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