50 Years of Woman Leadership

A celebration of style and grace in management
A mother and daughter team whose leadership took their struggling family business and turned it into a global industry leader with more than three thousand employees worldwide. The success of these women is a testimony to their ability to inspire and empower others and their desire to give back to their communities and to their Smead family of employees.
It has been said that women often succeed in business because they manage a company much like they would nurture a family. They tend to be team players who want to empower people rather than manage with a “command-and-control” style. Ebba Hoffman and Sharon Avent have demonstrated this paradigm through their trusted relationships with their employees, suppliers and customers. Their loyalty is returned to them by their employees, many of whom stay with the company their entire careers. It is not uncommon for employees at all levels, from factory workers to top management, to have been with Smead thirty, forty or more years.

David Fasbender, Senior Vice President of Sales and Marketing, attributes Smead’s success directly to Ebba Hoffman and Sharon Avent. “One of the biggest assets Smead has had over the years is that we’ve been family-owned and all woman-owned. They’re modest people who have focused on one thing—this company and making it successful.” Fasbender, who began his career with Smead as an inside sales representative forty-five years ago, continues, “I think if you ask anybody who works for Smead why it is that you feel so much a part of this company, it is the woman’s touch. She [Ebba] had a genuine concern, as Sharon does today, for the employees. You feel that. It permeates through the whole organization.”

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Those who have known Ebba Hoffman and Sharon Avent attribute their success to the relationships they have cultivated over the years. According to Leo Hart, a forty-year Smead salesman, “If there was a quality she [Ebba Hoffman] had, it would be loyalty. She was very loyal to her people and she placed an awful lot of trust in them and vice versa. She considered the Smead Manufacturing Company an extension of her own family.” Jim Holmes, retired interplant coordinator for Smead, concurs. “At Smead Manufacturing Company there was no ‘me.’ Everything we did was ‘we.’”
Perhaps it was Ebba Hoffman’s background that gave her the personal strength, strong work ethic and courageous vision to become such a successful leader. Born on a farm near Cannon Falls, Minnesota, she began her education in a one-room schoolhouse before moving to town. After eighth grade, young Ebba went to work at her mother’s restaurant. At age eighteen, just before the Great Depression, she moved to Minneapolis to work at Land O’Lakes Company and later for Honeywell. After the United States entered World War II, Honeywell promoted Ebba to a supervisory position and put her in charge of a department that made prisms for guns. It was here that she demonstrated her penchant for maintaining quality. According to Ebba, the prisms, which had to be “absolutely spotless,” often were coated with a smoky film. She told the foreman that coal-burning trains running below the storage room caused the problem, but he didn’t believe her. Undaunted, Ebba informed the head of the department of the problem and the department was moved.

In 1942, a Honeywell party reunited Ebba Benson with Harold Hoffman, a businessman from Hastings, Minnesota she had dated several years earlier. Harold had proposed marriage back then, but Ebba turned him down believing that she was too young. She began seeing Harold again and soon married him, becoming a member of the Hoffman family, which had owned the Smead Manufacturing Company since 1916.
ike many other women of the time, Ebba Hoffman quit her job when she got married. Her new job included caring for her home, her husband and raising a family. Harold Hoffman had run Smead since his father had suffered a stroke in 1928. Gus Heinold, former purchasing director who retired after forty-three years at Smead, recalled that Harold was very “futuristic,” especially when it came to long-range planning. “A lot of people said that Harold was so advanced in his thinking that he overextended himself with equipment, and tended to operate on credit.” Ebba Hoffman rarely came into the office, but often accompanied her husband to dealer conventions and trade shows.

In many ways, Smead Manufacturing Company was a family affair. The Hoffmans enjoyed personal relationships with many of their employees, often inviting them out to their farm for social events. When their son John Peter was born in 1948, it was Joe Podner, the plant engineer, who became his godfather. Sharon, two years older than her brother, remembers going to the office with her father and brother. “The company was on Second Street in old buildings. They were a child’s dream—little old stairways and lots of dark places where we could play hide-and-seek while my father worked in the office.”

In August 1955, while Harold was in New York, Ebba took the children to their cabin in Wisconsin. When the phone rang, no one expected to hear that Harold had died from a heart attack. Sharon recalls, “First there were tears. Very seldom do I remember that my mother cried. We knew that something horrible must have happened. Finally my mother told us. I remember it being a very long ride home.”

Although she did not have involvement with Smead operations, Ebba traveled with her husband and P. A. Hoffman on many business trips. During these trips she met many of Smead’s key dealers, which would prove invaluable after she assumed the presidency following Harold’s sudden death, just 14 months after his father died.
ebba Hoffman now had her hands full. The previous year Harold’s father also had died suddenly. Widowed with two young children to raise, two will-less estates to settle and a debt-burdened company, many thought Ebba would have to sell Smead. Yet, Ebba Benson Hoffman never had been one to shirk responsibility. Moreover, she knew that she had to support her family.

“You’ve got to work someplace. Go down there and start learning.”

*Millett O’Connell, longtime business and family attorney*

On November 15, 1955, Ebba Hoffman walked into Smead and took her place in the president’s chair. Office worker Loretta Sieben, now retired after forty-nine years with Smead, remembers that first day. “She was very pleasant. She came and greeted all of us. We were happy to meet her and had a lot of respect for the fact that she took over leadership and that we would continue.” Ebba Hoffman also remembered that first day —“I didn’t think I would ever make it!” She wasn’t the only one. One executive at Smead, upon seeing her sorting through her husband’s desk, asked her when she would be leaving so he could move into the office. Her clear and confident reply; “Never!”

Every year since 1962 Smead has purchased the winning entry in the Sister Kenny International Art Show by Artists with Disabilities. The artwork is reproduced on the annual Smead Christmas card.

**1982** – Smead Week celebrated in Hastings, MN. Tenth Street is renamed “Smead Boulevard”

**1987** – Smead named Business of the Year by the Hastings Area Chamber of Commerce and Tourism Bureau


**1989** – Veterans of Foreign Wars honors Ebba Hoffman with Distinguished Service Award

**1989, 1990** – Smead named Manufacturer of the Year by United Stationers

**1989** – Smead named Vendor of the Year by Boise Cascade

**1991** – Smead receives first annual Supplier of the Year Award from BT/Miller Business Systems

**1991, 1992, 1993** – Smead named Vendor of the Year by Independent Stationers

**1991** – Smead named Vendor of the Year by Basicnet
An unlikely leader in 1955, Ebba Hoffman was one of the few women in the world to head a company the size of Smead. Shown here with her salesmen at a national sales meeting in 1961, she was often the only woman at industry events.
Her decision to stay was the best thing that could happen to Smead. According to Gus Heinold, “Mrs. Hoffman took a company that was financially overextended, salvaged it, made it the most successful company in the industry.” Leo Hart believes that, “Her skill was good basic common sense.” Determined to save the company, Ebba Hoffman dug right in and got to know her employees, customers and dealers. Everyone who was involved with Smead felt her presence. She read all daily correspondence and reviewed all invoices. To make operations more cost-effective, she closed two smaller plants and consolidated their operations in Hastings.

Although it was necessary to watch expenses carefully, Ebba Hoffman also had a flair for making smart decisions to grow the business. In 1958, she purchased Yale Filing Supplies in Los Angeles, California, adding new products and new territories to Smead’s operations. To meet the filing needs of America’s largest companies, Smead invented the end tab filing method, a new, efficient way to organize vast numbers of records using color-coded folders on shelves.

In 1963, salesman George Lazier, Ebba Hoffman and Jim Holmes accept Vendor of the Year and Distinguished Salesman of the Year from Wholesale Stationers.

1992, 1993 – Smead named Vendor of the Year by Philadelphia Stationers

1993 – Smead earns Biggest Dollar Volume Increase from OPNNA

1994 – Smead named Vendor of the Year by NOB

1994 – Ebba Hoffman and Sharon Avent are #22 on Working Women’s Magazine Top 50 Women Business Owners list

1994 – Ebba Hoffman receives VFW State Employment Distinguished Service Award

1994 – Smead awarded Best Supporting Vendor by Office Network

1994 – Sharon Avent honored with the first Distinguished Service Award presented by Shattuck-St. Mary’s School

1995 – Ebba Hoffman and Sharon Avent are #28 of Working Women’s Magazine Top 50 Women Business Owners
By 1960, Ebba Hoffman had turned the company around. In recognition of her achievement, the U.S. Junior Chamber of Commerce presented her with the Distinguished Service Award that year. It was the first time in the prestigious award’s history that it was given to a woman. Breaking new ground suited Ebba Hoffman well. Under her direction, Smead built a new 140,000 square foot facility in Hastings consisting of administrative offices and a manufacturing plant that opened in 1961. Shortly after, two new manufacturing plants also were completed in Los Angeles, California, and Logan, Ohio.

Ebba Hoffman’s vision for the future of Smead inspired the opening of a new corporate headquarters in Hastings, Minnesota, and several new manufacturing plants.
Little more than a year after moving into the new corporate headquarters, Ebba Hoffman faced one of her greatest management challenges. On August 27, 1962, Smead employees walked out on strike. For years, workers belonged to an unaffiliated, in-house company union which addressed employee issues. Now, the Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers Union, which was strong in the Hastings area, was pressuring employees to organize and require them to join their national union. If the OCAW thought Smead was an easy victory because the woman who owned it would simply surrender to their demands, they grossly underestimated Ebba Hoffman. She refused to turn against the independent union workers who had been loyal to her.

For four months, Smead was a house divided. The strike affected nearly every family in Hastings, tearing at the relationships that Ebba Hoffman had worked so hard to build. But Ebba stood her ground, crossing the picket line with administrative employees who worked in the factory to fill customer orders. When the strike ended, Loretta Sieben admits that there was some bitterness for a while, but most employees felt relieved when it was over. David Fasbender believes the strike had its positive side, too. “What this brought about was a better line of communication.” Ironically, some of the workers who stood on the picket line later moved into management positions at Smead.
Within the first ten years of her presidency, Ebba Hoffman not only had saved her family's company, but she also had succeeded in making Smead Manufacturing one of the leading office product suppliers in the country. Her achievements were especially significant because at the time the office products industry was almost exclusively a man’s world—at dealer and sales conventions, she often was the only woman. In addition to expanding the product line and territories, Ebba Hoffman also updated and modernized office and production procedures. She pioneered using computers to handle inventory control, order processing and accounts payable and receivable. She set up a department for methods and costs, established quality control standards for materials and production and had diagrams and blueprints prepared for each product.

Occasionally, Ebba Hoffman brought her children to district sales meetings. Sharon Avent feels that her mother probably wanted her children to be a part of Smead, but she never pushed them. Both Sharon and John Peter, however, wanted to work at Smead. Sharon asserts, “I think that I always wanted to work here.” They may have been the president’s children, but they never received special treatment. “Mother had me punch a time clock just like everyone else,” recalls Sharon. According to Jim Holmes, “I can honestly say that I never saw preferential treatment. They were part of the family, and we were all family.”

“Mother had me punch a time clock like everyone else.”
Sharon Avent

After attending Hamline University, Sharon began working at Smead putting together a sales catalog. Often, Sharon filled in where needed, working as a secretary, a receptionist, and in the credit department. In 1969, Sharon became Assistant to the President, a position she held for many years. She shared her family’s tradition of praising employees for their loyalty and their contributions to Smead. In 1970, Sharon initiated the Smead Merit Award Program, honoring employees for their years of service. “Our service is the best of any in the industry” she said firmly. “Your employees are your company. We wouldn’t be here without them.”
At the time, Sharon believed that her brother probably would become president of the company—“He worked here and he loved it here. He probably would have been the one chosen.” Gus Heinold isn’t quite as sure. He thinks that Ebba Hoffman was waiting to see who would step forward. He believes that Sharon had an edge on her brother because she worked in administration while John Peter preferred production. He also believes that Sharon is much like her mother—someone who can take control, evaluate a situation and make a decision. Once, during a Smead anniversary party, John Peter called to say that his car had broken down. Gus and Sharon left the party to help her brother. Despite several inches of snow on the ground and Sharon wearing a party dress and high heels, she got behind the car and helped push. Gus remembers, “I said to myself, now here’s a gal that can run Smead. Nothing can hold her down!”

In 1986, John Peter died suddenly. Everyone at the company was shocked and Ebba Hoffman fell ill for a number of months. While she recuperated, Ebba lived with Sharon. In Ebba’s absence, the Smead family of employees pulled together. They came to Sharon for decisions, who in turn, consulted with her mother. Sharon appreciated the loyalty of the Smead family of employees. “It was wonderful to have their support. I believe that the employees wanted her to stay and keep the company.”

Minnesota Governor Wendell Anderson honors Ebba, Sharon and John Peter Hoffman in the mid-1970s.

1999 – *CityBusiness Magazine* names Smead the 2nd Largest Women-Owned Business in Minnesota

2001 – Smead named Vendor of the Year by Solion, a systems software dealer

2001 – Hastings Public Schools recognizes Sharon Avent with the first Building Bridges, Building Futures Award

2002 – *CityBusiness Magazine* names Smead one of the Top 100 Private Companies in Minnesota

Employees of Record Pro, a Smead dealer, show their appreciation in 1995 with a sign made from Smead file folders.

Ebba Hoffman donated a magnificent Holtkamp pipe organ to their church in memory of John Peter Hoffman.
Under Ebba Hoffman and Sharon Avent’s leadership, Smead continued to grow, building its reputation for innovation and excellence. New manufacturing plants were completed and opened in McGregor, Texas, and Locust Grove, Georgia. The Hastings plant and offices were expanded twice. By the time Smead celebrated its 90th anniversary in 1996, it had started marketing its products in Canada, Mexico and Australia. Ebba and Sharon’s approach to management balanced smart business decisions with a genuine desire to do what’s right. In 1991, demand for recycled paper products prompted competitors to introduce separate product lines with recycled content at higher prices, confusing customers and causing duplicate inventory problems for struggling dealers. Smead simply converted all paper products to include recycled content, without raising prices.

“"I’ll never retire. I love my work."”

Ebba Hoffman at age 87

Ebba and Sharon recognized that industry changes would continue to affect Smead, noting that the distribution channel had gone from an industry of family-owned businesses to an investor and foreign-owned industry, and from American made products to products made outside the United States. As the industry consolidated, Smead’s customer base dwindled from over 1,500 dealers to a few large national office supply companies. Independent office supply stores were replaced by superstores that focused on selling large quantities at discount prices. Brand loyalty fell by the wayside as the superstores introduced their own private-labeled products and waged price wars. To cut production costs, many office supply companies relocated their manufacturing plants in foreign countries. To remain competitive in certain product categories, Smead opened an assembly plant in Mexico. But Ebba and Sharon remained dedicated to keeping production and jobs at home, no additional foreign facilities have been opened.

On July 1, 1998, Sharon Avent became Smead’s President and CEO. After guiding Smead for forty-three years, Ebba Hoffman believed that the time was right to turn over daily operations...
to her daughter. "It seems fitting that I turn the leadership of our company over to Sharon now, while we can continue to work together," she explained in a letter to employees. At 87, however, Ebba Hoffman did not retire. True to her 1995 vow, "I'll never retire. I love my work," she continued to come into the office frequently, working closely with Sharon to ensure a seamless transition. When Ebba Hoffman took over the company in 1955, Smead’s sales were $4 million. In 1995, with revenues of more than $230 million, Ebba proudly stated, "Smead now ships much more product in just one week than it did that first year I assumed control of the company."

In February 1999, after a brief illness, Ebba Hoffman passed away. Her legacy lives on at Smead and in everything and everyone she touched, even those who never knew her.
Shortly after assuming the presidency, Sharon Avent propelled Smead into global operations through the purchase of Atlanta-Hoogezaand B.V., located in The Netherlands. Smead had been looking to partner with a European company that shared its same values, and the family-owned office supplies company was a good fit for Smead. In a letter sent to all Atlanta employees, Sharon welcomed them to the Smead family, acknowledging the energy and excitement each employee demonstrated in their jobs. “Your enthusiasm about your work was an important part of our decision about Atlanta.” With this acquisition, Sharon Avent increased Smead’s revenue to more than $400 million.

Wearing traditional Dutch shoes, Sharon Avent steps into the European market with the acquisition of Atlanta Group.

According to David Fasbender, Sharon’s management style is much like her mother’s. “Their greatest interest is in their employees.” Yet, Fasbender also points out that changes in the office products industry dictate that Sharon play a different role in the industry. To compete in the emerging new marketplace, and to remain a leader in the office products industry, Sharon Avent led the Senior Management team in a corporate-wide strategic planning process in 1994. Internal office procedures and customer order processes were streamlined to be more efficient. Plans were developed to diversify the company’s products and customer base. The Atlanta acquisition in 1998 not only opened new global markets for Smead, but it also retained business with existing customers who had moved into the international market. In 2002, Atlanta’s name was changed to Smead-Europe. Then, in March 2003, Smead expanded its European presence when it acquired subsidiaries of The Lindegaard Group, a filing supplies manufacturer based in Norway.

To strengthen and diversify Smead’s domestic business, Sharon Avent acquired S&W Manufacturing, Inc., a company specializing in custom filing products for the legal and medical markets. In response to customers needing better ways to manage their electronic records, she led the initiative in 1999 to acquire Document Control Solutions.
Sharon joins the fun at the employee party celebrating the acquisition of S&W Manufacturing.

With Smead's expanding presence in the world market, and its broadening product line, Sharon knew it was time to update the company's identity and unveil a new corporate logo. Launched during Smead's 95th Anniversary Celebration in 2001, the new mark better captured the essence of the Smead family of companies as the global leader in records management. The bold look signals a new era of growth and success under Sharon Avent's caring leadership.

Sixty-year employee Janet Fox joins Sharon Avent as the new corporate logo is unveiled at the Smead world headquarters in Hastings, Minnesota.

2003 – City of Hope awards Sharon Avent with the Spirit of Life Award; she is the first woman ever to receive the honor.

2004 – Business Journal names Smead one of the Top 100 Private Companies in Minnesota

2004 – Smead Software named to 100 Companies that Matter in Knowledge Management by KM World Magazine

2004 – Smead receives Business Partner of the Year Award from Corporate Express

2004 – Sharon Avent recognized as a Woman Changemaker by Business Journal

2004 – Corporate Express selects Smead as a 2004 Business Partner of the Year

2005 – Sharon Avent honored by Hastings Area Chamber of Commerce with the Spirit of Hastings Award

2005 – Sharon Avent is presented with the Applause Award from the Women’s Business Enterprise Council
Although Smead’s products have traditionally only been available through office products dealers, Smead reaches out to consumers through its website, smead.com. In addition to complete product information, the site also includes Smead Organizing University, an interactive learning center to help professionals and consumers learn how to get organized. Expanding into new channels of distribution in 2004, Smead launched Retrospect, a new line of organizational products designed to answer the needs of the booming scrapbooking and paper crafting trend. Smead also partnered with a team of women designers to introduce M.O., a stylish line of office products that appeal to the growing small office/home office market.

Sharon remains committed to helping others and is active in numerous roles that support a variety of causes. Her donations and fundraising leadership in the office products industry for The City of Hope, a lifesaving scientific research organization, earned her their prestigious Spirit of Life Award from City of Hope, a national research center for chronic illnesses that is supported by the office products industry.
Award in 2003. Her involvement in the advancement of woman-owned businesses was rewarded in 2005 with the Applause Award from the Women’s Business Enterprise National Council (WBENC). According to Alta Baker, President and CEO of Safe Haven Enterprises, “Her constant enthusiasm and willingness to help women business owners is evident in everything she does. Sharon is truly a living example of everything the WBENC Applause Award stands for.” Under Sharon Avent’s leadership, Smead’s revenue today exceeds $500 million. The company now markets over 5,000 products designed to suit a wide variety of organizational needs for both corporate and individual customers alike.

Looking ahead to the future, Sharon Avent believes that it is important to stay focused on the core business—keeping people organized and being a one-source solution for every filing and records management need. She feels that her biggest challenge in today’s environment will be to keep the family feeling alive at Smead. She knows that the company’s success is linked directly to remaining flexible in an ever-changing market, but also believes that it’s the trusted and loyal relationships she shares with Smead’s employees and business partners that holds this fine family together.

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Alta Baker, President and CEO, Safe Haven Enterprises