

# NiceBadge makes sure it lives up to its name

By Cara Denney  
of the Daily Courier

The next time you're at an Albertsons or Safeway anywhere in the country and notice an employee's name badge — it came from Grants Pass.

NiceBadge isn't just the name of a home-grown thriving Grants Pass business, it's what Lowell Gibson wants you to know about not only the quality of his product, but the corporate culture that produces those nice badges as well.

"I just grabbed the name and said, 'The world's nicest name badges, that's what we're going to be' — and we've made it ours," Gibson said.

The company makes around 5,000 badges a day.

Beyond badges for retail stores and services businesses, NiceBadge has had custom orders for high-end badges made from mother-of-pearl or adorned with Swarovski crystals for top-sales reps in luxury real estate or other industries that can cost up to \$5,000 a badge.

Even though badges are 80% of their business — for Albertsons alone they produce 13 different logos — NiceBadge is more than, well, nice badges.

The company also makes award and recognition plaques and trophies along with custom banners.

"For a few years we've donated an award for the Grants Pass Our Foster Kids group," Gibson said, showing a gold and blue glass sculpture on a wooden base. The sculpture was custom-made by a distributor the company works with, but NiceBadge have also used those produced by local glass blowers at the Glass Forge in Grants Pass.

NiceBadge is one of the hidden gems that Gibson feels Grants Pass has more of than people might realize.

"A lot of businesses around here are just quietly doing their thing," Gibson said.

Gibson sees NiceBadge as just one of many small businesses in Grants Pass that are providing a living for the individuals and families that work for them and adding to the economy, even if you've never heard of them.

Being what is known as a traded sector business, Gibson is happy that the money from his customers comes in from all over the world and then he and his employees can spread it back out into the Rogue Valley community.

Gibson was born in Grants Pass but grew up in Japan with his family when his parents were missionaries. The family didn't return to the Rogue Valley until Gibson was in high school, but even before being back in the U.S., Gibson had seen himself as one day being a successful person, not just the "poor missionary boy."

It wasn't that he didn't enjoy his time in Japan, but he always saw himself as a kind of Horatio Alger figure, the famous author of the iconic "rags to riches" story that changed the thinking of a generation.

But although he was and is ambitious, it might not show at first glance.

The little blue building at 1710 Harbeck Road that houses NiceBadge has only in the past few years had a sign put up so that it looked like something other than a residential home.

But maybe that's by design. After all, in 2016 NiceBadge won the Oregon State Excellence in Family Business award for generational development. Also, many of the employees squeezed into this small space have made NiceBadge their home.

Along with employees who have worked for the company for years, there are a number of "two-timers" employees who left the company to further their education or care for their family and now have returned to again work in this family atmosphere. Gibson's son, Matthew Gibson, is senior vice president, and at one time his daughter-in-law, Angel, also worked at NiceBadge. Gibson's daughter, Christie Cook, has worked for the company for 15 years doing payroll, and continues to work remotely.

Christie's husband, Tyler, also worked at NiceBadge for many years. "One of my best friends stole him — with my blessings," Gibson said with a laugh.

Nicole Guthrie worked with NiceBadge 20 years ago and just recently was rehired and is the account manager.

"I've never worked somewhere I've had more respect shown than here," Guthrie said. Gibson deferred the praise, and said it was the whole company that deserves that accolade.

"It takes everybody to be polite, be respectful for everybody," Gibson said.



Photos by JULIE ANDERSON / Daily Courier

These Safeway employee name badges produced by NiceBadge have gone through a doming process. Doming is the application of a soft clear finish that results in rounded edges and adds a layer of protection.



Seth Musillo, a production lead at NiceBadge, lines up a sheet of plastic to be cut into multiple badges. The Grants Pass-based company makes around 5,000 badges a day.

Respect for others is not just for NiceBadge, but all the small businesses in Grants Pass that are almost as important to Gibson as is his own.

"I care about my hometown. I want startups to continue to thrive. I want to make Grants Pass a place where small businesses can thrive," he said.

Gibson has been involved with small business since he was 25, when he bought and ran a family-style restaurant in the Portland area.

Gibson's mom was already the owner of NiceBadge, running the company out of half of a garage with one part-time employee. At one point she was able to convince Gibson to take over the badge business.

In 1993 it moved into the location on Harbeck, an old print shop, and by 1996 it had 13 employees and sales of half a million dollars a year.

"After 20 years we were doing 10 times the volume as when we started out," Gibson said.

Gibson refers to his company as a "high-performance, lean manufacturer."

The company has learned to shift from labor intensive manual production to automated and "smarter and younger people," Gibson said.

Even simply going paperless with orders, accounting and processing, has been a huge savings in hours worked by employees.

"I would rather pay more to less people," Gibson said, explaining how they make and ship about 5,000 badges a day with a skilled team of 13 people.

"I'm really proud of the culture here," Gibson said.

Gibson explained how each department of the company has specifically advanced over the years and had praise for each employee working on each step of production.

"Everybody has to always be thinking — 'How do we do it quicker and better?' That culture permeates throughout. Everyone is encouraged to think of a better way," Gibson said, adding "that way we don't have to depend on tribal knowledge."

Will Malsberger has been with the company for 18 years, starting in the shipping department, and is now head of IT.

"He stays on top of everything," Gibson said of the self-taught Malsberger. For a company that has jumped on the tech automated train, that is no small task, to keep making sure the company stays in step with changing technology.

Jesse Wells, who has been with the company for two years, explained the process of doming, or producing badges

with a raised poly layer rather than the previously standard flat badges. Doming gives the badges no sharp edges, has a more appealing look, and they last longer.

The machine Jesse works on



NiceBadge president Lowell Gibson (center), joined by account managers Laura Buchanan (left) and Nicole Guthrie, refers to his company as a "high-performance, lean manufacturer."

is state of the art and cost \$49,000, "more than my first home," Gibson quipped.

Zina Barahona, who has been with the company for seven years, said the company still does some "old-school

sublimation," such as the badges for the local Charlie Brown Squares square-dancing group in Grants Pass, but also showed off the laser engraver that works with metal, plastic and acrylic.

"I care about my hometown. I want startups to thrive. I want to make Grants Pass a place where small businesses can thrive."

**LOWELL GIBSON**

NiceBadge  
president

It's not just in manufacturing methods that NiceBadge has learned to pivot and adjust. After a stretch of tremendous growth, they had a fire three years ago that took out half the manufacturing area. At almost the same time, during the pandemic, the company made a huge shift in production to be able to have all hands on deck to produce plexiglass sneeze guards that were put in place at businesses everywhere to prevent spreading the COVID virus.

Gibson said every day, all day, the company's small back parking area was filled with 48-foot-long FedEx delivery trucks, either dropping off supplies or picking up orders.

"We were doing sneeze guards 24/7 and sold \$1.5 million of them," Gibson said.

The parking lot was stacked 6-foot-high with pallets of orders and materials.

Since then orders for sneeze guards have practically ground to a halt but business keeps growing and NiceBadge keeps adjusting to the times.

In December 2023 Gibson handed off the day-to-day running of the business to Jason Saelens, who has been with the company for 20 years.

Gibson is still CEO, involved in the company and currently musing on expansion.

NiceBadge has another 2½ undeveloped acres next to their current operations that make expansion possible. But Gibson is cautious.

"I guess where we are is comfortable, like an old pair of jeans," he said.

Or a really nice badge.

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