



Three generations embracing high principles, transformational ideas
Risky choices, fortunate flukes, and an unquenchable entrepreneurial spirit: three things that helped make Principle Business Enterprises Inc. (PBE) an industry leader in incontinence care and acute care products.

For Co-CEO Charles (Chuck) Stocking, though, there's something even more fundamental to PBE's success. As much as he relishes sharing the ups and downs of the company that today sprawls on a campus-size facility near Bowling Green, Chuck never loses sight of the mission. "Our niche products uplift and enrich the lives of those they serve," he says. "That's our daily focus."

There's plenty of agreement from the caregivers and care receivers who utilize PBE's products, which include the Tranquility line of incontinence absorbents. "Miracle pants," more than one user has called them. As for PBE's footwear, it was a Texas hospital who also used the word "miracle" to describe how much the product reduced the number of patient falls — incidentally giving PBE its first marketing slogan.

Yet the road to success was long and bumpy. Founders Jim and Lee Mitchell were a husband-and-wife team, both "innovators and visionaries," Chuck says. It was Lee whose entrepreneurial flair produced a foam slipper for housewives — and whose talent for selling came to the fore when she convinced her husband Jim to switch out his pipeline-construction job. "She got him to leave that he-man construction stuff to make ladies' slippers" is how Chuck puts it. "That's an A-plus for salesmanship."

The slippers, however, weren't the smash success the Mitchells envisioned, languishing on sales racks until they became unintentionally found a niche in the travel industry. Bus-touring senior citizens discovered the slippers and bought them en masse at highway rest stops. Even more of a fluke was when a nurse saw the slippers and wondered if there was a hospital application. Turns out there was.

"Nurses loved them because of the colors they came in and for the hygiene protection," Chuck says. "But Pillow Paws slippers dramatically reduced hospital slips and falls. A hospital in Corpus Christi called the slippers a miracle in fall prevention."

By then a part of the company and married to the Mitchells' daughter Carol, Chuck asked the hospital, "Can you put it in writing and can we use it for marketing?"

"That was the start," he says now. "The company found its place, or niche, and its mission."

Chuck created the slogan "For the security, comfort and dignity of hospital patients." As he notes, it was all about "getting patients up on their feet and back home!"

With a successful product in hand, the company received a request from healthcare professionals in Belgium, where the Mitchells had established a satellite sales branch. "They told us, 'If you really want to address dignity, do something about adult incontinence,'" says Chuck.

"We didn't know anything about the condition, but learned how miserable it is and how poorly products that existed then addressed it. People with the condition experienced skin breakdown, urinary tract infections, incontinence-related falls and constant wetness — not to mention the unpleasant odor. In the end, no one wants to visit them; life seems over." The technology of the time delivered very low performance levels.

Through collaborations with Bowling Green State University and the University of Michigan, PBE became innovators in creating a breakthrough in the field of absorbent technology and what the company calls "stigma-free product" design. Chuck adds, "The objective was to provide users and caregivers with the peace of mind they so desperately desired. The Tranquility products were literally transformational for people challenged by incontinence. And the breakthrough set the stage for articulating the company's sense of mission: uplifting, enlightening and enriching the lives of those we serve."

What didn't change, though, was the initial commitment to running the business according to ethical principles. As Chuck says, "Sometimes doing the right thing ethically costs more on the bottom line, but it's the right thing to do."

"I was attracted to the company because of its name and emphasis on bring a principled venture. I became even more committed with the refinement of our mission." Family business, of course, comes with inborn challenges — "especially working for your mother-in-law," Chuck interjects, adding, "in the end we were all in perfect agreement about the objective of our business."

Today PBE employs more than 300 associates and manufactures a family of products. Tranquility, Select, and Comfort Care products address incontinence, while Pillow Paws is the footwear division. PBE products are found in the food industry as well, reducing the moisture bacteria loves, and extending food shelf life. Wound care and biohazard transport also utilize PBE technology. There are super-

absorbent bed pads, Swim Mates for children — and inserts for baby diapers that give new moms and dads an extra hour of sleep or two. “A big hit!” Chuck says.

He’s excited about PBE playing an equally transformational role in health care: “I will bet the keys to the company that our products can save Ohio at least a billion dollars, maybe three or four times that, by lengthening the time an Alzheimer’s patient can stay at home with a family caregiver.”

Chuck and Carol are readying the company for long-term growth. Their son Andrew, president and COO, is now at the helm after several years in leadership positions. “He’s building his team to take things to the next level,” Chuck says. “That team brings a whole new set of skills for all the future’s new challenges and opportunities.”

One of those challenges is obtaining hard proof of product effectiveness. Chuck explains: “Anecdotally, just one facility using our products reduced bedding and clothing changes by 90 percent, and reduced bedsores reduced by 50 percent. But we want irrefutable evidence, which is where data comes in — and Andy is strong on data.”

He’ll remain strong on the community engagement that’s given PBE so many successes, from educational and medical collaborations to supporting local urban vegetable gardens to reducing PBE’s waste stream via recycling and global redistribution. “A high level of social accountability is a present reality,” Chuck says. “We want to be consistent with what is good for the environment as well as for our users.”

Chuck’s not planning to slow down once he’s no longer at the PBE helm: “My focus going forward will be in outreach, including building relationships with our business region and other companies. I haven’t had much of a chance before, but I’m really looking forward to working with the Family Business Center!”