

# CEO groomed to lead global company

**Dawn Smith leads Sodus-based Pace Electronics, a contract manufacturer**

By **ANDREA DECKERT**

**D**awn Smith owes her business success to hard work and perseverance. Smith, 39, is CEO of Pace Electronics Corp., a contract manufacturer based in Sodus, Wayne County.

The company has 22 employees in Sodus but employs 1,200 to 1,400 people worldwide. The majority work at Pace's manufacturing plant, which has been in China since 1999. It has four regional sales managers in the United States.

"I have never wanted to do just an average job," Smith says. "I have to do the absolute best I can."

She has been with the firm since 1997, working her way up the ranks from an entry-level position to lead the company. She was named CEO in late 2012, succeeding company founder Patrick Kehoe.

Kehoe, who died in July 2012, had approached Smith several years ago about taking over the business someday.

"I had always dreamed of being my own boss and making the important decisions," Smith says.

The company, which began in 1969 as a component distributor for Panasonic Corp., serves makers of security and safety products, lighting and other consumer products. Pace provides original equipment manufacturers with electronic components and subassemblies; turnkey manufacturing; packaging and logistics; state-side buffer warehousing; and U.S. project management, service and support.

It has annual sales of about \$50 million.

Smith grew up in Cayuga County and says she has always had a strong work ethic, holding jobs since she was 14 years old.

Originally interested in nursing, she worked as a certified nursing assistant in Rochester before deciding it was not the right career for her. Instead she took a job at a nursing home as a scheduling clerk. After that, she landed a job at Pace.

**Path at pace**

Her first job at Pace as a sales clerk included preparing quotations for new customers. Within three years, she was named Kehoe's executive assistant.

The job—working alongside Kehoe—gave her thorough knowledge of Pace's policies and procedures but also an invaluable insight into Pace's customers and niche market, she says.

"He was an amazing mentor and would spend hours teaching me everything I know about sales," she says.

Smith was promoted to vice president of sales and marketing in 2009. In that role, she regularly traveled across the United States to meet customers and to the firm's China operation. During that time she also tackled her fear of public speaking.

When Kehoe decided a succession plan was needed, he approached Smith. He then spent a few years grooming her to take over.

Pace chairman Karen Kehoe, Patrick Kehoe's widow, says Smith learned from the best and her husband would be proud of Smith's accomplishments.

"Dawn's business acumen and common-sense approach bode well for the future" of the company, Karen Kehoe says.



Photo by Kimberly McKinzie

Smith has continued to work on her education. She received an associate degree in business from the University of Phoenix's online program in 2011 and is working toward a bachelor of science degree in business management through the university.

In her role as CEO, Smith is involved in all aspects of manufacturing, including vendor selection and qualification, the startup of new manufacturing programs and customer audits. She also acts as

Pace's lead salesperson for the majority of its top customers.

Smith is focused on expanding the company and developing partnerships in new markets, she says.

A typical day is from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. She first reviews correspondence from Pace's China staff, received the night before. It typically involves a response to questions asked on the previous day. Depending on the urgency, a follow-up phone

call may be required.

She also focuses on areas such as responding to customers' requests for pricing, assistance with more aggressive deliveries and negotiations for better pricing. Smith meets with the sales staff to review and resolve pending issues and answer questions.

"If they don't receive the response they were expecting from the factory, I will get involved to help get them the details they

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require," she says.

Smith also reviews possible new business, bills for materials to find areas where pricing could be more competitive, inventory and financials.

She describes herself as a coaching leader. "I want to provide the staff with all the necessary tools to be as productive and successful as they desire," she says. "I want to provide them with the same opportunities that Pat Kehoe provided to me."

That includes traveling to meet major customers and auditing the China facility, both of which give a better understanding of what the firm does and what services it can provide for customers.

There is also a focus on fun and company bonding. A pool table in the office came from Kehoe's home. The staff gets together to use it on Friday afternoons.

**Customer focus**

Smith stresses the importance of customer relationships and works to build long-term ties with them.

Chad Kirschner, director of product development at Chicago-based iLight Technologies Inc., has done business with Smith since 2009.

He recalled several late-night conference calls with Smith and other Pace employees. Smith understands his firm's needs, Kirschner says, noting that she has taken steps to support his company's growth, such as increasing capabilities at Pace's plant and making herself available on short notice.

"Because of her strong qualities and character, we've built up a great deal of trust in Dawn and Pace Electronics," Kirschner says.

Bob Kling, a senior buyer/planner with Pennsylvania-based Simkar Corp., has known Smith for about five years. Smith is detail-oriented and focused on customer service, he says.

"Many executives are good at focusing on big-picture agreements and then must hand off details to others," Kling says. "Dawn Smith can handle all aspects of projects small and large, short-term and long-term."

Patrick Pajor, a Pace representative with Illinois-based Abbey Sales Corp. who has known Smith for more than seven years, agrees. He describes her as a consummate professional who takes action.

"There is not a lot of back and forth; Dawn is willing to get things done," Pajor says.

Smith says the best parts of her job are winning a new account and working with customers to develop and manufacture their goods. The worst part is having to turn down opportunities that are outside of Pace's capabilities.

Pace recently restructured its sales force and expanded it by two people. The restructuring has helped the firm be more

competitive and gives customers better service by working directly with employees, Smith says. There are also plans to enhance its engineering staff by adding a design and software engineer.

Pace is seeking new suppliers with additional capabilities and plans to expand by acquisition to add U.S.-based manufac-

**"I had always dreamed of being my own boss and making the important decisions."**

turing, Smith says.

She also has focused on expanding the contract manufacturing side of the business. The company has added a 10,000-square-foot expansion at its Sodus facility. The space is being used for labeling, packaging and assembly as well as storage.

Smith said the expansion allows Pace to

broaden its offerings in the United States. The assembly lines meet growing customer demand for products assembled in the United States, and the storage gives Pace more room for customers' inventory.

One of the biggest challenges is dealing with constant pricing pressures on both the customer and supplier ends.

"We have constant communications with our customers to provide advance warnings on material fluctuations," Smith says. "We have had to improve manufacturing technology to help offset the costs and improve efficiency."

The goal is to keep the customer satisfied by finding the best solutions for the situation, Smith says.

**Off the job**

Smith lives in Fair Haven, Cayuga County, with her husband, Jeffrey, and daughter Courtney, 15.

When not working, Smith enjoys camp-

ing, kayaking, snowmobiling and snowboarding with her family.

She also loves traveling, especially to new destinations. As one of seven siblings, she had not traveled outside the United States until she joined Pace.

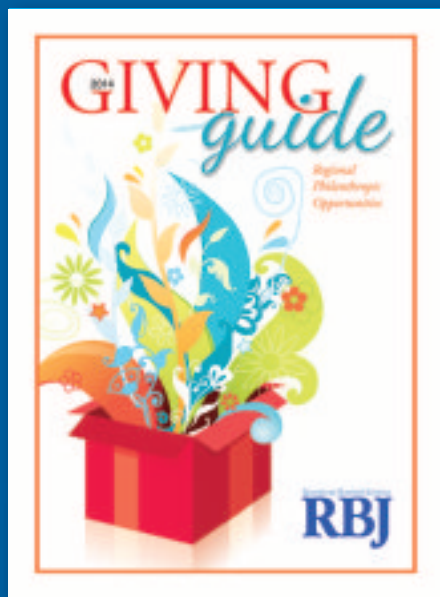
Last year, she took her daughter to Asia on a business trip, and the two spent a few days in Beijing and toured the Great Wall.

Professionally, Smith is committed to continuing the growth at Pace. Those who know her believe she is up to the job.

Robert Reece, Pace's regional sales manager for the Southeast and Southwest, says Smith is not afraid to take calculated risks to bring in new business. He notes that she is at ease with all types of people, from CEOs to those who work in the warehouse.

"Dawn can be tough when she needs to be but always treats people fairly—as people," Reece says.

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—Albert Camus

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**Dawn Smith**

**Position:** CEO, Pace Electronics Corp.

**Age:** 39

**Education:** A.A.S. in business, University of Phoenix, 2011; working toward B.S. in business management, University of Phoenix

**Family:** Husband, Jeffrey; daughter, Courtney, 15

**Residence:** Fair Haven, Cayuga County

**Activities:** Camping, kayaking, snowmobiling, snowboarding, traveling

**Quote:** "I have never wanted to do just an average job. I have to do the absolute best I can."