



# Gordon Brush Producing Ever-Increasing Variety Of Brushes Since 1951

— Gordon Brush President & CEO Kenneth Rakusin

By Harrell Kerkhoff | *Broom, Brush & Mop* Editor

**H**ow many different types of brushes are there in the world? This question may never be answered. **Gordon Brush, of Commerce, CA**, however, has put this question to the test since 1951. The company produces an ever-increasing variety of brushes to meet today's infinite demands.

Brushes produced by the Southern California manufacturer are used in a wide assortment of industries and can be found in over 84 countries. The company's brushes have even ended up on the moon and Mars.

"I continue to be amazed about the breadth of our product range. We have made brushes smaller than the tip of a pencil and those that are 12 feet long," **Gordon Brush President & CEO Kenneth Rakusin** said. "We have made brushes that were so large that special crates had to be created. On the other hand, the smallest brush produced by our company featured a handle with a single strand of 0.003-inch diameter nylon. When I show this brush to people, it often takes them awhile for their eyes to adjust while trying to find that single strand of nylon."

Today, Gordon Brush produces approximately 15,000 different types of brushes and continually adds to this list to satisfy a diversity of customer demands.

"We make brushes for the military, aerospace, electronics, the medical field, forensics and many other segments. Our product lineup includes brushes for painting, janitorial cleaning, artists and cosmetic applications," Rakusin said. "Our brushes have been to different planets, and on the Space Shuttle. They are used for clean room environments, sur-

gical facilities, and the FBI — the list is bigger than I could ever imagine. I can never do it justice when describing all the uses for the brushes that we make."

Helping customers save money through the use of a particular product made by Gordon Brush remains a major goal for the manufacturer. As an example, Rakusin pointed to a brush made for the Abrams tank that he said saves the U.S. Army approximately \$150,000 per tank.

"I'm very proud of that as a taxpayer. We make a lot of brushes for the military as we have been identified as a good source," Rakusin noted. "It helps that we are very integrated and can make every part of a brush in our own facility. Customers know we provide one-stop service and deliver products on time and to exact specifications."

"Our company credo is 'Made in the USA' and we are proud of this fact. Our other two golden rules are: that we can custom make any brush that you can imagine; and that Gordon Brush keeps one of the largest ready-to-ship inventories of standard brushes in the world."

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Along with producing many types of what are considered standard brushes, custom work plays an important role in maintaining product diversity at Gordon Brush. Both current and potential customers often seek out the company to help them with special needs — needs that

only custom brushes can satisfy.

"They tell us their problem and we find, or make, the right type of brush to resolve the issue. Sometimes a customer will have a drawing





*Marcelo Hernandez, a machine operator, is preparing cylinder brushes for shipping.*

in hand and will simply ask us to produce whatever is on that drawing," Rakusin said. "Other times, however, a current or potential customer has no idea what type of brush will fill their need. In this case, we will conduct the engineering and create the drawing in order to make the right brush."

#### Storing A Vast Array Of Brush Materials

**G**ordon Brush can produce brushes made from virtually any fiber material. This includes brass, titanium, carbon fiber, nylon and a wide assortment of natural bristles.

"We are capable of making brushes with material that is very cheap, to extremely expensive, such as rhodium — in which case we collect all the leftover post-production scrap and return it to the customer for reuse," Rakusin said.

Natural bristles used by Gordon Brush, meanwhile, are kept in a large on-site refrigerated locker to ensure freshness and the absence of insects.

"When we ship products to customers, we don't want to ship bugs as well. It does get warm in Southern California and bugs can be a problem if not controlled," Rakusin said. "There is fiber in our refrigerated room for such items as artist brushes, cosmetic brushes, industrial brushes — and all can be easily located through our computer system. For instance, through the use of our computer, if an employee is looking for brown ox hair that is 40 mm in length, that person will be directed to the right location. The employee will be able to find the ox hair within a three-foot section on a shelf rather than having to go through the entire building.

"There are bar codes in place and computers throughout our whole factory. Everything we have is part of a bar code system, which tells where each product is, what it's made from, etc."

#### A Sea Of Machines

**W**hile walking through the 51,600-square-foot facility at Gordon Brush, it quickly becomes evident how the company can produce such a wide variety of brush products.

The manufacturing side of the facility is full of a diverse range of

both new and older machinery, with a lot of the equipment being manned by employees overseeing the operation of each unit. Other machines being used by Gordon Brush, meanwhile, are fully automatic and require no constant attention by the work force. In the name of good old-fashioned craftsmanship, there are also steps to the production process for certain types of brushes that are done completely by hand.

Over the years, Gordon Brush personnel have placed a strong emphasis on researching and purchasing the right kind of machinery so that the vast majority of brush production at the company can be done in-house.

"The only work we don't do in house are those brushes that must be plated or anodized. We leave those chemical processes to somebody else," Rakusin said. "Very seldom do we turn away business since we have such diverse equipment. Our company also has a full machine shop where employees can make virtually anything that will aid in the brush making process. This includes tooling and fixtures."

Equipment reinvestment remains an important part of business for Gordon Brush. Rakusin pointed out that the company is always seeking ways to find greater productivity from both equipment as well as the employees who operate this machinery.

"We work to give our employees the right tools. It's a never-ending battle of spending money on equipment, but the end result is very positive. Every time we've added a new machine, we've added employees as our productivity grows and demand is high," Rakusin stated. "It's important that we pay attention to what equipment is available on the market. Since Gordon Brush has such a diverse product offering, we are constantly looking for ways to make our manufacturing processes better, increasing productivity and eliminating waste."

Although expensive, he added the right new machine will often pay for itself in a short period of time.

"I sometimes hate to discontinue an older machine that is still in good working order, but we need the added productivity that a new machine can often provide," Rakusin noted.

He added that Gordon Brush purchases its brush making equipment from a wide variety of suppliers.

"It's important to seek the best available equipment for each particular brush we are making," Rakusin said.

After the equipment purchase is made, both the machine builder and Gordon Brush concentrate

on the process of getting that equipment, which often is very large, to the brush maker's facility. Machine set up and employee training on the new equipment are also essential.

"We will often send our own people over to the factory where the machine is made. They will then spend a great deal of time learning how to program, repair and modify that new piece of equipment. They will also learn the different set-up changes that can be made, and how to achieve maximum production," commented Rakusin. "Then, depending on the machine and the company that made it, we either have one of their technicians come to our facility to help with the installation or we will do that ourselves."

#### The Art Of Brush Making

**J**ust as there are wide assortment of products produced at Gordon Brush, there are also many different steps that often must take place when making these brushes.

This includes machinery used to produce handles made from different metals, such as aluminum. These handles must be properly

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*Guadalupe Limas is shown filling a stainless steel tube with horsehair material, while William Diaz is filling a steel tube with carbon steel material. Both materials are used for applicator brushes.*

machined, drilled and sandblasted. They also can be sent off to be anodized.

"The goal is to always provide the customer with a product that looks perfect," Rakusin said. "There is a lot of automation involved here, but we also do work and inspection by hand."

This includes the production of Gordon Brush's highest quality paintbrushes. It is here that hands-on precision is required from employees well versed in craftsmanship.

"There is no margin for error. An experienced employee will make sure the bristles for each paintbrush are all smooth, weighed and that the (fiber) stragglers are taken out," Rakusin pointed out. "The precise amount of material must be used for these paintbrushes, otherwise the painter will receive a brush that is too stiff or loose. It's also vital that no bristles come out during the painting process. There is nothing more aggravating than using a new paintbrush that leaves bristles on a freshly painted wall."

Most products produced by Gordon Brush, however, are made with high-tech machinery. With such equipment, a strong focus on safety for both the worker, and facility, must be at the forefront of importance.

Rakusin said OSHA standards require that full operating manuals, for employees who are certified to operate a particular machine, be located at all machine stations or in a log.

"Employees must be properly trained on all machines that they are assigned. The operating manuals are created in both English and Spanish," Rakusin said. "If an employee's name is not on a particular list, he/she can't work at that machine. We have each machine named and numbered and show when training was completed for each employee."

"These steps allow our company to guarantee that every employee using each piece of equipment has learned the

proper safety procedures. It's important that every person knows what he/she is doing."

Fire suppression equipment is also in place for the machinery used at Gordon Brush. This is particularly important for those machines that run non-stop.

"With the fire suppression system, we might lose a machine if it catches on fire, but at least we won't lose the entire building," Rakusin said.

Another important section of the Gordon Brush facility is the company's warehouse, which Rakusin calls, "The money room." This is due to the large amount of inventory on-site — whether it's raw materials coming in or finished goods ready to be shipped.

"If it's in our warehouse, we are either going to make something out of it or send it out as a finished product," he said.

### A History Of Innovation And Growth

**A**lthough it's hard to determine how long man has used brushes, the history of Gordon Brush dates to 1951 thanks to the entrepreneurial spirit, innovative mind and determination of the company's founder, **Don Gordon**. As with most manufacturers that have been around for over 60 years, the history of Gordon Brush involves a slow beginning, early success stories and eventual expansion.

The company started after Don Gordon watched someone else making brushes, became interested in the industry and then deciding to become a brush maker himself.

"Don was the type of guy who, if he saw a problem, would find a solution. He just kept coming up with ideas on

how to make things," Rakusin said. "In the early years, I've heard that Don would often sleep in his building after becoming so involved with setting up a new machine or designing a

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*— Gordon Brush President & CEO Kenneth Rakusin*



*Francisco Martinez is shown operating a brush making machine which is drilling holes into brush handles.*



new product.

"Back then, he didn't have available today's modern machinery that takes advantage of advanced hydraulics and computers. For example, he used a car jack to press together his plywood handles and he would crank the jack until he felt there was enough pressure. The same concept is used today except we have the advantage of modern equipment."

What Gordon lacked in advanced technology, he made up for with determination and intuition.

"Don was a very creative guy and used to give away brush samples all of the time. He would have these brushes in his car and hand them out to people," Rakusin said. "I think that was one of the ways he felt he could best advertise. Of course, back in the 1950s, a long distance phone call was expensive and there were no fax machines or computers. Everything was done by U.S. mail. A company had to mail out orders as well as literature. It was harder to do business back then, but Don found a way to run a successful company."

Even today, despite a strong focus on modern equipment at Gordon Brush, Don Gordon's influence can still be found on the company's factory floor. This includes a manual twisted-in-wire machine dating to the Don Gordon era still used for small production runs.

In 1973, Don Gordon sold the company to **William Loitz**, who had just retired as an aerospace engineer for McDonnell Douglas. Loitz was involved with the moon landings, after which he decided to retire and look for something else to do.

"While another company was looking at the financial statements of Gordon Brush, (Loitz) bought the business from Don Gordon without ever seeing the numbers. They agreed on a price and William Loitz had himself a company," Rakusin said.

Serving as president, William Loitz was joined in his new venture by his son, **Bill Loitz**, who soon learned the brush trade inside and out.

"Bill learned how to do everything that is needed to make a brush. He now has 39 years of knowledge in this industry, both with machinery and how to solve problems," Rakusin added.

Over the years, Bill Loitz made his mark on the company in several different ways, such as designing special machinery to satisfy particular Gordon Brush needs.

"For example, we were making a 10-foot long cylinder brush, but had no way to trim the product. Bill (Loitz) designed and built a trimming machine himself, as there was no such trimmer available in the marketplace that we could find," Rakusin said.

In 1990, Ken Rakusin left his career with Xerox to join William and

Bill Loitz at Gordon Brush. Rakusin was named company President and CEO while Bill Loitz held the title of Executive Vice President. Eight years later, in 1998, Rakusin and Bill Loitz each purchased half of the business from William Loitz. A week later, the company was moved from a 22,000-square-foot building in downtown Los Angeles to its current 51,600-square-foot facility in Commerce, CA, located just outside of the city.

"We had the facility completely retrofitted to fit our needs. This included adding 50 percent more skylights, and making it meet current earthquake standards. We also bet-

ter insulated the building and painted the interior walls white for better reflection. The goal was to make our facility a great work environment for employees. After we moved into the building in Commerce, it was barely filled with equipment. It seemed like you could roll a bowling ball in any direction and not hit anything but a wall," Rakusin recalled.

As is common with many successful companies, what once was plenty of square footage inside the Gordon Brush facility has since filled with machinery, employees and inventory. Free space is now at a premium.

The company has grown in other ways as well. Since 1998, Gordon Brush has acquired the Marx Brush line of artist and cosmetic brushes; Milwaukee Dustless Brush, a janitorial and sanitation brush manufacturer; JEK Inc., a brush manufacturer for the printed circuit board as well as surface finishing and conditioning industries; Redtree Industries, Inc., a paint applicator and paintbrush manufacturer and distributor for the

marine and hardware trade; Brush Supply Company, with its full line of brushes; and, most recently, The FootWork Corporation, which includes the FootMate™ System.

"I bought 100 percent of Gordon Brush on Dec. 31, 2010, along with Milwaukee Dustless Brush. Bill still has an interest in some of the other companies," Rakusin

said. "He is now semi-retired but plans to work here for three more years before full retirement."

Rakusin said he has greatly enjoyed the past 22 years of serving as



*Marketing services representatives at Gordon Brush include, left to right, Arcie Lockett, Maggie Avellaneda, Sonia Rojas and Stephanie Quick.*

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president and CEO at Gordon Brush. This includes the relationships he has formed with a wide variety of customers and suppliers as well as employees and fellow brush makers within the industry.

Keeping a quality work force in place is one of the ways Gordon Brush has been able to enjoy its current longevity and success, according to Rakusin.

"We have people who have been here for over 35 years. Our work force includes brothers, fathers and sons, sisters, and cousins. We are able to provide steady employment with good pay and benefits," Rakusin said. "I can't go as far as guaranteeing somebody a job for life, but the reality is many people have been able to stay here for their entire work lifetime. It's worked out well for both our company and our employees. There is a good system in place here. It's also good to not have constant turnover in employees."

**A Future Full Of Brushes**

**T**he last time Ken Rakusin said he looked into the matter, products made by Gordon Brush could be found in 84 countries, a statistic that initially surprised him.

"I would have guessed 20 or 30 countries, but not 80-plus," he said. "I feel many customers like us because they know we are capable of providing the type of products they are looking to use and need. We don't really have a marketing arm in Egypt, but we are able to sell brushes into that country and many others. This includes those in Asia, Africa and Eastern Europe."

To help with this success, Rakusin said it's vital that Gordon Brush gets its orders from customer's right the first time.

"We want our customers to receive exactly what they are looking for — without any questions. Our brush products have to be made to the right specifications and with the correct materials," he said. "Our people are trained to make sure all of this happens."

Gordon Brush continues to work on improving its engineering capabilities, along with hiring and training additional employees, so that the company is prepared when new business arrives.

"Our customer service department also does a very good job. They are much attuned to the needs of customers. I sometimes wonder if they work for me or for the customer, as they will bend over backward to help these people with their issues," Rakusin said.

Looking ahead toward the remainder of 2012 and beyond, Rakusin remains optimistic about not only the health of Gordon Brush, but other North American brush producers as well. He said there are some indicators showing that overall manufacturing levels in the United States may be growing.

"The more products made in the United States, the better off everyone

who is involved with the (domestic) brush industry becomes. This is because a lot of products involve brushes," Rakusin said. "I'm assuming that when this year's Interbrush (machinery trade fair held every four years in Freiburg, Germany) takes place in May, there will be more activity from U.S. brush makers. There could be more people interested in taking that next step of buying something new to replace a machine that has become obsolete."

"Attending Interbrush can also help those brush manufacturers who might be looking to purchase machinery two to three years down the road."

Interbrush is billed as a worldwide leading specialized trade fair for machines, materials and accessory equipment of the

broom, brush, paint roller and mop industries.

"The event allows companies to know what is available on the world machinery marketplace," Rakusin said. "Not only is the networking at Interbrush important, but (brush, mop, roller and broom makers) have a chance to meet machinery manufacturers face to face. I look forward to attending Interbrush every four years."

Rakusin is also a strong advocate of the American Brush Manufacturers Association (ABMA). He has been attending ABMA events since joining Gordon Brush in 1990. Rakusin has held various board and committee seats within the organization over the years, including that of ABMA President from 2005 to 2007.

"ABMA is a great tool for me to network with people associated with the brush industry. I learn a lot from my membership," Rakusin said. "I will never forget going to my first ABMA meeting in 1990. There were all

of these people talking to each other about all kinds of topics. It didn't matter if it was a brush manufacturer talking to another brush manufacturer or a supplier talking to another supplier — everyone was very friendly. It was an amazing thing to experience."

Rakusin added a main goal every year while attending the ABMA Annual Convention is to meet and become friends with somebody new.

"I have called on a lot of people who I have met through ABMA over the years, and have asked them all kinds of questions. I've also been able to return the favor," he said. "There have been times when brush companies refer customers to us when coming across a product that they couldn't make themselves. This is due to the friends I have found within the brush industry through ABMA. These are people I often only see at the convention. It's a great vehicle."

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*Located in Commerce, CA, Gordon Brush produces approximately 15,000 different types of brushes.*

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