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Strength comes in numbers at Porte Brown

By Melanie Kalmar
 Contributing Writer

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As Tom Porte prepared to retire, taking eight years to gradually hand over his clients to partners at the CPA firm his father founded 65 years ago, new hires were learning the standard procedures he and his father established for doing all aspects of accounting work.

It's the processes that are Porte Brown LLC's competitive edge, said Tony Massaro, a tax partner at the Elk Grove Village CPA firm. "The Portes were always organized and had processes in place. We've refined them and changed them, but the core is still there."

The firm likes to hire and train recent college graduates. That way, they are used to the Porte Brown way of doing everything right from the beginning — from reconciling a bank statement to processing a tax return.

After a year of learning their craft, new hires are trained on the etiquette of business networking and sent to join professional organizations. They receive commission on new business they bring to the firm.

To best serve its client base, Porte Brown has established industry-specific practice groups within the company.

Once a month, excluding the tax season of February through April, the company dedicates a full day to train employees in their assigned area of focus, such as food services or manufacturing and distribution.

"Through growth, we've been able to reinvest our profits in getting our people to be experts in certain areas," Massaro said. "We help young people grow and it helps us grow."

Based on a review of employee surveys and interviews by Best Companies Group in Harrisburg, Pa., Porte Brown was named in 2008 among the "Best Places to Work in Illinois."

During the past five years, the firm has made several acquisitions of similar companies and doubled its size to a staff of 70. Porte Brown has been an exit strategy for CPA's who want to retire and sell their businesses as well as for those who want to continue doing accounting work without the hassle of running their own firms, Massaro said.

He credits the company's growth to not holding back on marketing and expansion plans, as he has witnessed many firms do throughout the economic downturn.

Early days

In the early days of desktop computers and accounting software, clients were investing in systems



Mark Welsh/mwelsh@dailyherald.com/File photo Anthony Massaro, CPA for Porte Brown Wealth Management LLC of Elk Grove Village works through a pile of paperwork on his office desk getting ready to do personal and business tax returns.

they didn't know how to use, Massaro said. "We spent more time fixing things than helping clients." It's why more than a decade ago the firm established Porte Brown Technology Solutions. The division assists clients in purchasing appropriate accounting software, setting it up, and learning how to use it.

Tom Porte remembers what it was like in the 1970s and early 1980s when few clients even owned computers. Porte, a recently retired partner and the son of company founder James Porte, said when other firms had clients fill out forms and return the paperwork to be entered into their systems, he continued to do manual accounting because clients were confused by the forms. He didn't switch to computers until they became portable so he could continue doing the work at client sites.

It's a way of business he learned from his father. "You do the accounting work at the client's office so you can have a conversation about it with them afterward," he said. "They know the technical aspects of their business and we handle the technical aspects of their accounting system. We interpret it for them so they know how to apply it to their business."

Years of experience

The wisdom of Tom's father came from decades of experience. It was the Great Depression when recent high school graduate, James Porte worked a factory job to support his family as his father was laid off. James attended college at night and smoked a pipe because he couldn't afford dinner, Tom recalls. Then the war broke out and "you either went to war or you worked." So James took a job with a bus company. "If you worked in the transportation industry, you were exempt from the draft," Tom said.

His early work experiences made him realize the importance of being organized and corporate politics inspired him to become his own boss. He founded the James J. Porte Company in 1946 in a Chicago storefront. Decades later, with the addition of business partner Mike Brown, they changed the company name to Porte Brown LLC. Tom followed as a partner, first gaining several years of experience at other accounting firms, per his father's request.

When the partners noticed customers moving their businesses to the Northwest suburbs in the 1970s, they followed them to Elk Grove Village. Located on Oakton Street, a main thoroughfare, the speed limit is slow enough for the public to take notice of the firm and that was the intention. It was also the intention to work among clients in the industrial park rather than away from them in an office building.

The Enron and WorldCom scandals resulted in CPAs having to keep up on constantly changing tax laws and that made work less enjoyable for Tom Porte. Finally, the time was right to retire. "I had a long career," he said. "I'm lucky that I enjoyed it." Mike Brown also retired. The remaining partners have chosen to keep the company's name because of its fine reputation and that makes Tom Porte feel proud of a career well spent.

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