

Retailer Profile

Retailer of the Year

Joan's Trophy & Plaque Co.

STATS

Joan's Trophy & Plaque Co.,
Peoria, IL

Owners: Don Gustin, CRM, and Diana
Gustin, CRM

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Specialty: Having the technology and space to fulfill our customers' requests quickly, correctly, and profitably.

Philosophy: Provide the best possible solution to each customer's needs, remembering that "the customer is always right."

Five-Year Business Goal: Continue to grow and be profitable while transitioning our two sons into the ownership of the business.

What ARA has done for us: ARA is one of the best organizations an awards retailer can be involved with. We have made wonderful friendships over the years, shared ideas with other owners, and learned so much through education and networking.

Greatest Success: Watching our company grow gradually over the years.

Most Humbling Experience: Receiving the ARA Retailer of the Year award.

Biggest-Selling Product: Plaques, plaques, and more plaques.

Hottest Product: Etched jade and crystal awards.



▲ Diana Gustin, CRM, and Don Gustin, CRM, with the ARA Gold Obelisk they received in Las Vegas recognizing their business as ARA Retailer of the Year.

ARA's 2008 Retailer of the Year, Joan's Trophy & Plaque Co., has been in the awards business for nearly 40 years. Its present owners—Don and Diana Gustin—both ARA Certified Recognition Masters, have owned and operated the company for more than 30 years. The couple took over in 1977 with four employees; today, Joan's proudly boasts a staff of 27. The Gustins say the growth and success of their business has allowed them to expand from their original space—a 900 sq. ft. section of a 3,200 sq. ft. building—to its current 25,000 sq. ft. location, which they purchased in 1988.

RecognitionReview caught up with Don and Diana upon their triumphant return from the 2008 ARA International Awards Market. They gave their views on what it takes to be successful in the



▲ The front entrance to Joan's 25,000 sq. ft. facility—its third location during the past 30 years.

awards and recognition industry and how being a member of ARA has helped them grow their business.

RecognitionReview (RR): How long have you been a member of ARA:

Don and Diana Gustin (D&D): We began as a member of Trophy Dealer and Manufacturing Association (TDMA) more than 25 years ago and remained when it changed to ARA. We find it hard to believe that anyone in the business world would not belong to an association that can contribute so much to the success of their business for such a small price. Joan's Trophy & Plaque Co. has gained so

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much from our affiliation with ARA that we can't imagine what our evolution would have been without it. As a result of our involvement in the association, we have made many great friendships, gained valuable knowledge from educational seminars, and created significant long-term relationships with suppliers and vendors.

We take advantage of every opportunity ARA offers such as attending branch and regional meetings, trade shows, and educational seminars; participating in the ARA certification program; writing for *RecognitionReview*, volunteering on education and trade show committees; introducing speakers; serving as judges and panelists on several panel discussion groups; and serving on the ARA Board of Directors.

RR: What sets your store apart from others?

D&D: We believe the showroom is often the only measure of professionalism customers experience before placing an order. The design and presentation of our showroom is the key element in our sales process for local customers. When we moved into a larger facility 10 years ago, we had the opportunity to expand our sales offices, graphics department, production department, and inventory warehouse. We designed and built a beautiful showroom and reception area to meet our customers' needs. Having a clean, well-lit, well-stocked, and updated showroom makes the sales process easy for both our customers and sales staff.

Our products are displayed in easily defined categories to make finding and choosing an award a simple process. Most showroom items are presented fully engraved with logos, artwork, and sample text, which help



▲ A view of Joan's showroom.



▲ Erica Heid and Christy Getz at Joan's showroom reception counter.



▲ Joan's sales associates Betty Droege and Joe Shragal discuss a crystal bowl order.

customers visualize how their completed awards will look. Our customers often select the exact text that is inscribed on a sample. Display samples are clearly priced and marked with part numbers for ease of sale and control of inventory, allowing a sales associate to assist customers without having to search through catalogs and price sheets. This also helps the sales process go smooth and saves valuable time for both customers and staff.

In addition, we have two computer networking systems (sales and graphics), which give us an edge over the competition. We do 95% of all our

product engraving, production, and assembly in-house. Currently, we have five lasers, 22 citation engravers, and three computer engravers. Other in-house jobs include sublimation, toner transfer, metal photo, and sand carving of glass and marble awards. Having all of these processes on the premises—and the space to stock a large product inventory—enables us to provide quick turnaround service without rush charges for our customers.

We provide our customers with a completion time when their order is placed. Our goal is to have all orders completed prior to that due date. Customers are called immediately when orders are complete. They appreciate getting their orders early (whether it's an hour or several days). Good customer service is essential to our growth and success.

RR: What makes a Joan's Trophy & Plaque Co. employee?

D&D: We have a wonderful and dedicated staff of 27 who work very well with their peers, our customers, and vendors. Our sales and customer service staff has more than 100 years of combined experience working at Joan's. Our production staff is cross-trained on various equipment and responsibilities, preparing them to fill all demands when needed. Our graphics department is constantly updating and training on new programs and computers. From time to time, depending on the work load, our staff may be asked to help in other departments. Teamwork is crucial to our growth.

We value our staff and offer them a host of benefits including health insurance and a retirement plan, paid vacation, personal days, and holidays. We also provide monthly appreciation lunches for all employees,

family outings, tickets to community events, an annual holiday dinner, and a program where we recognize dedication and years of service. We allow company employees to utilize company equipment and facilities to further their commitment to their com-

munities and involvement in not-for-profit activities. In addition, we send our staff to seminars for training and education and to our suppliers and other award companies for training on new equipment and processes.

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▲ Jade and crystal awards are prominently displayed.



▲ Judy Marshall unloads a large acrylic panel from the Trotec Professional Series laser.



▲ Production manager Bryan Collier (left) discusses a work issue with Joan's general manager Brent Gustin.



▲ Production assistant Hoan Le (one of seven 20-year employees) loads one of Joan's 21 citation photo lathes.

RR: What is your customer-service philosophy?

D&D: The customer is always right. We make sure our sales and customer service staff understands and abides by this philosophy. It is the foundation this company was built on and will continue to grow with.

RR: What is your strongest marketing tool?

D&D: Over the years, we have experienced growth by word-of-mouth business. This is a direct result of the first-rate reputation we have developed with our loyal customers. Other marketing strategies include

- putting our name and contact information on every product we produce.
- producing and distributing full-color brochures and catalogues to promote sales (these have been the single most effective way for us to

sell our core products to our customer base).

- advertising in the Yellow Pages, Internet business directories, and numerous patron ads.
- utilizing both corporate and trophy catalogs developed through associations we belong to (ASI, PPAI, SAGE, and AAA).
- developing and maintaining a full e-commerce and user-friendly Web site that features updated product information. We include our Web address on all business communications and advertisements.

RR: What are your proudest accomplishments as an awards retailer?

D&D: Winning this award has to be the proudest accomplishment for us. Other significant achievements include becoming a Trademark Licensee with Caterpillar Tractor Company, reaching the 30-year mark as a business, and seeing the growth of this company from 1977 until now. We are also proud that our two sons—Brent and Brice—have joined us in business.

RR: What was one of your most challenging experiences as a retailer?

D&D: Applying for a government contract years before they had groups and organizations to assist small businesses. The volume of paperwork and red tape we had to process was overwhelming and stressful. We finally were awarded a GSA contract and kept it for many years. Currently, we no longer utilize a government contract but continue to work with many government agencies.

RR: What is your involvement in your community?

D&D: We are proud of the fact that Joan's has a reputation in the community as an honest and reputable company with an excellent customer service record. We are also very proud



of our good relationships with our employees, customers, and suppliers.

Throughout the years, we've been involved in some capacity with the following community organizations:

- Illinois Jaycees and Washington Jaycees
- Greater Peoria Area Crime Stoppers Organization
- Illinois Crime Stoppers Association
- Peoria Area Chamber of Commerce
- Central Illinois Chapter of National Association of Women Business Owners.

In addition, we assist several not-for-profit groups and organizations throughout the year by donating many products and awards to aid them in reaching their fund-raising goals.

RR: What significant changes have you experienced in the years you've been in the industry?

D&D: The trade show and association activities have changed greatly. In the early years, trade shows were just that—aisles of vendors and nothing more. Since the evolution of TDMA into ARA, these shows now offer education seminars, networking opportunities with fellow retailers, roundtable discussion groups, and gala banquets.

In the 70s and early 80s, we would attend trade shows in late fall, place

orders for most of the products we anticipated needing for the upcoming season, and have it shipped in February. Suppliers back then could not provide inventory during the busy season. Today many retailers depend on suppliers to be their warehouses and ship on demand. I think the majority of retailers don't understand how expensive and time consuming on-demand ordering is and how much it can affect their bottom line.

Award retail businesses have changed from a small section of the local sporting goods store into million-dollar, stand-alone businesses.

In the late 80s, with the advent of computer engravers and sublimation, incorporating logos onto awards became quicker and easier. Joan's Trophy & Plaque Co. had about a 12-year head start over these processes because we used citation photo lathes to engrave graphics for our customers.

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▼ Judy Marshall, Dustin Stratton, Sandy Scoby and Hoan Le are busy at work in Joan's production assembly area.





▲ Bob Selburg sets up a job on one of Joan's four Trotec lasers.



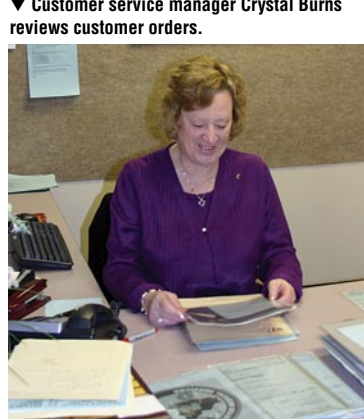
▼ Jenny Millard operates a New Hermes Volume 400 Engraver.



▲ Graphic designers Mike Adams and Nancy Whittington at two of six graphics department work stations.



▲ Bob Selburg and Jenny Millard mask crystal vases ready to be sand etched.



▼ Customer service manager Crystal Burns reviews customer orders.



▲ One of Joan's numerous aisles of clearly marked inventory.

Award retail businesses have changed from a small section of the local sporting goods store into million-dollar, stand-alone businesses. In addition to a full line of awards and trophies, they also offer signage, apparel, and promotional items to their customers.

RR: What are the keys to your success?

D&D: Satisfied customers, dedicated and loyal employees, hard work, and continually putting profit back into the expansion and growth of the business.

RR: What advice do you have for other retailers or newcomers to the awards industry?

D&D: Don't expect to pull a lot of income from a small or new company. Work many and long hours, put your profits back into the company, treat your employees and customers well, and you will see your company gradually grow and achieve the success you deserve.

RR: If you weren't in the awards industry, what would you be doing?

D&D: I started out as an industrial technology teacher, and my wife was an executive secretary. We both believe that if we had not had the opportunity in the awards industry, we would still be running our own companies. We are both achievers and would rather work for ourselves than for someone else. Diana currently is co-owner in two other enterprises in addition to working at Joan's. ▲

2008 ARA Retailer of the Year Finalists

ABC Trophies	Summerville, SC
Action Trophies & Awards	Carrollton, TX
Camellia Trophy Shop Inc.	Mobile, AL
Ichi-Ban Trophy & Engraving	Pasadena, TX
Regal Awards Inc.	Omaha, NE
Richard Reames Trophy Company	Kenner, LA