



PROJECT 24

Executive Interview Series

Fall 2015

Spotlighting: Specialty Materials Chief Executive

John O'Donnell

Employer: Neenah Paper, Inc.

Position: CEO and President



Neenah Paper, founded in 1873 in Neenah, Wisconsin, is a leading manufacturer and marketer of fine paper, packaging, and technical products, with over 1,200 employees in the United States and 800 employees in Germany. The Neenah Paper family of brands is available on six continents, selling directly to customers—many of whom are leading global, blue-chip companies located in more than 70 countries. Neenah Paper's manufacturing facilities are located in the U.S., Germany, and the UK.

John O'Donnell has been the Chief Executive Officer and President of Neenah Paper, Inc., since 2011. Prior to his tenure with Neenah Paper, O'Donnell served at Georgia-Pacific Corporation in the Consumer Products division as President of the North America Retail Business and as President of the North American Commercial Tissue business. O'Donnell held a number of senior leadership positions at Georgia-Pacific in both branded and commercial operations, with managerial roles in sales, marketing, operations, logistics and customer service. John holds a B.S. degree in Psychology from Iowa State University and is a graduate of the Harvard Business School's Advanced Management Program.

“Leading a global organization to over \$1

billion in market capitalization, including responsibility for 2000 employees, requires nothing short of maximum effort, dedication, and round-the-clock commitment. Even with the all-encompassing demands as Chief Executive Officer, John O'Donnell has never shortchanged his family.

In fact, family is priority number one. Married to wife and high school sweetheart Rhonda, whom he met 38 years ago in Des Moines, Iowa, John has successfully navigated the intricate balancing act of career and family. John and Rhonda are recent ‘empty nesters’, having officially moved all four children into college living quarters, apartments, and homes. Daughter Shannon Smith is a University of Mississippi graduate, son Sean is a University of Georgia graduate, daughter Shelby is a senior at the University of Alabama, and daughter Sydney is a sophomore at the University of Georgia. Time together is a treasured commodity for all six O'Donnells including summer weekends at the lake and annual family vacations—the most recent an African safari involving off-roading, helicopters, boats and exotic animals.

31 Years Married

4 Children

Favorite Family
Vacation Spot?

Africa

“Make sure she never feels **second** to what you do for a living, because **she** is what you are **living for.**”

- John O'Donnell



O'Donnell with wife Rhonda

Q: What are the biggest challenges you face in balancing demands at the office and home?

A: John O'Donnell has never let a demanding corporate schedule take his focus off the importance of family. “When the kids were younger, my greatest challenge was making sure I was not traveling on any of their key performance dates (dance, basketball, soccer, etc.). As O'Donnell's children have become grown adults, his priority remains the same—making time to see them. The tables have turned, however, and now it is John who has to be ‘worked’ into the kids’ packed calendars. “I have to recognize that all four of our kids have exciting and busy schedules and, as a result, I have less influence regarding times I can schedule to see them. Rhonda and I try to remain as flexible as possible with our time as we have found many of the opportunities to spend time with them occur when they need our help (moving apartments, showing them how to ‘do it yourself,’ etc.). There is joy in being needed, so I am fine with turning those opportunities into shared time and memories. ”

Q: With so many different demands for your time in both your personal and professional life, how do you prioritize everything? Are there tips, techniques or habits you've developed to manage how you spend your time?

A: “Family first. There will always be work emergencies that cannot be avoided, but family always comes first.” O'Donnell encourages executives to take time off—regularly—particularly on weekends. “Don't practice a seven-day work week and don't opt-out of planned vacation time. Your family needs the vacation and so do you—and you will be a better person for it.” Surprisingly, even as CEO of a multinational business, O'Donnell has learned to welcome interruptions during his packed workday. “If my wife or children call the office, I've made it a point to treat the call as a blessing and never as an intrusion (my office staff does the same).” Additionally, O'Donnell has made family dinner a priority throughout his career. “That is the magic hour where you learn all about your kids and they learn all about life (without even knowing it!).”

Q: What secrets can you share that have helped you both protect and grow your marriage while balancing career demands?

A: O'Donnell shares three principles that have guided his 31-year marriage to Rhonda:

1. “Be kind, patient, respectful, and always open to saying you're sorry.”
2. “Make sure she never feels second to what you do for a living, because she is what you are living for.”
3. “Talk about what is happening at work and although she doesn't work there, listen to her opinion. I have been incredibly surprised by how ‘spot-on’ my wife has been about character and integrity watch-outs.”

“I have always told my children, ‘your first name is for you alone. Your last name, however, is shared with others. Handle both with care as some things can never be unsaid or undone.’”

- John O'Donnell



O'Donnell family African Safari, 2014

Q: How would you define your mission as a parent?

A: “It’s my job as a father to not only protect my children’s well-being (physically, mentally, and spiritually), but also to be the clear and ever-present example of what a good person should be. Additionally, it’s critical that I am present and engaged in their lives, while being clear in what I expect from them and modeling the same. It’s my responsibility to always have high beliefs and expectations which challenge them to enjoy the feeling of accomplishment. Lastly, and maybe most importantly, it’s my role to tell them often they are loved.”

Q: What is the greatest challenge in parenting today’s youth?

A: O’Donnell notes the marked impact technology has had on today’s youth. “Social media generates a sense of immediacy—which is often, in turn, expected and demanded by today’s youth. Parents used to be the primary source in shaping and influencing children’s opinions and development. That is no longer true. Drive-up windows, overnight delivery, and while-you-wait beverages—everything is about ‘now.’ The most valuable lessons I learned in my youth were ones I had to wait for. Patience is learned and a critically important life skill.”

Q: If there's one "life lesson" you can choose to pass on to your children, what would it be and why?

A: “God, self, and family. There is room for all three in your life, even though there may be an occasion to leave one of them out every once in a while. You have to love all three unconditionally.”

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