

# 2009 Hall of Fame Inductee Bill Boelter

**Incorporating a servant-leader philosophy, Bill Boelter created a dealership that has greatly influenced the foodservice industry.**

**By Joseph Carbonara, Editor in Chief and Lisa White, Contributing Editor --  
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There are not many in the foodservice industry, or even in the business world today, that have found their calling and stayed with the same company through-out their career.

Chairman [Bill Boelter](#) was gifted [The Boelter Companies](#) by his father, Fred, but much of what the company has become can be attributed to Bill's unique leadership. His tremendous passion for the industry and determination to do right by his customers and employees are amongst the many attributes that set apart *FE&S'* 2009 Hall of Fame recipient from other business leaders.

Boelter has strong ties to the industry, serving as [FEDA's](#) youngest president from 1976 to 1978 and as president of the ABC buying group in the early 1980s.

The company also has received much recognition over the years. *FE&S* honored The Boelter Companies as a [Dealer All-Star in 2004](#) and Dealer of the Year in 1990 and [2005](#), as well as the 2007 Wisconsin Family Business of the Year Award.

As the Waukesha, Wis.-based company's more than 300 employees celebrate the organization's 80th anniversary, Boelter can be credited for instituting a forward-thinking business model that helped shape the company into one of the most successful of its kind.



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**Bill Boelter and tabletop specialist Diana Dean take extra care in selecting flatware for a table setting.**  
Photography by Marc Berlow.

Boelter became involved in the company driving trucks and working in the warehouse as a teenager during summer vacation, but didn't join the business full-time until after college. After graduating from Indiana's Valparaiso University in 1961, Boelter received an MBA from Wharton School of Finance at the University of Pennsylvania in 1963.

During this time, his father, Fred, patiently waited for Boelter to join the family business. "In many ways, my father let me know that he couldn't wait for me to get out of college," Boelter says. "He was a little let down when I went to graduate school."

The standing joke is that as a teen, Boelter had a leadership role in the firm. "At that time, I didn't really know anything about the business. My father needed me, because there was no leadership team during that period. The timing was right," Boelter says.

Following graduation, Boelter's work in purchasing taught him important principals of the business. He traveled with salespeople, personally working with six accounts at a time. "These were typically people that wanted to do business with us," he says.

In 1970, Boelter oversaw the installation of the company's first computer system. From there, his leadership role in running the business grew.

Boelter describes his father as one of a kind. "He was a person of faith and conviction. I remember how much attention he paid to detail," he says.



SuperStore photos courtesy of Greg Gent Studios



**Focus on Flatware:**  
Each flatware pattern is displayed under glass as well as on top, allowing customers to touch and feel the product. Additional

pieces are stored in the drawers below. This clean visual display makes this section customer-friendly.

Boelter's father devised a system to stay on top of what was happening in all aspects of the business.

“He had so many words of wisdom, and even today they're almost like eternal truths. My father's philosophy was, 'do the right thing and the rewards will follow,’” Boelter says. “He never thought further than one year ahead, and I tend to think that way, too.”

## A Business Evolution

The Boelter Companies' transformation began in the 1970s, when the company started a beverage group, which handles the distribution of branded glassware and other items for various organizations.

One of the biggest changes occurred in 1986, when Boelter sought to reorganize the company's internal structure. It almost happened by accident, when the company moved from its original south side of Milwaukee location to a former General Electric distribution center on the city's northwest side.

At that time, the company culture had Boelter setting the pace and making almost all decisions. “It was a very top down style,” he says.

As the business began to grow rapidly, Boelter, along with his employees, became overwhelmed. The realization hit that a change was necessary. “We assembled our leaders together, actually thirty-six associates, to figure out what type of company we wanted this to be. Everyone was asked what type of company they wanted to work for.”

For the next year and a half Boelter and thirty-six other associates immersed themselves in books about building successful businesses. “We shared these findings with this group of associates. It was so interesting looking at other successful companies and learning about how they do things,” Boelter says. “These books introduced us to the servant-leadership concept, which states that a business should serve its frontline people first to ensure that customers get served the best. This concept is basically an upside down triangle, where the company's leaders are serving frontline people and not the other way around.”



**Enchanted Surroundings:** The elegant conference room on the second floor has plenty of ambient light and a beautiful view both day and night. The goal was to incorporate design throughout to send the right message to clients and visitors. Inspiration came from The Design Office of Catherine and James Donnelly.



Before joining the company, Eric Boelter (right) gained valuable professional experience working for businesses outside the foodservice industry.

Boelter's associates came together to write a mission and vision statement. "When they came out with the final product, it was perfect. I don't think I changed a single word," Boelter says.

The challenge was making sure everyone at Boelter understood the concept and its significance. "Our business philosophy was often unfamiliar to the new people we were bringing in, so we did a lot of research and spent extra time hiring the right people who had the attitudes that were consistent with our culture," Boelter says. "Mistakes were made but we stayed the course and are stronger for it."

The company recently hired its first human resources staff member, who will ensure that the corporate culture is instilled in new hires and existing associates. "It's a challenge, but this comes with the territory," Boelter says. "Servant

leadership is not for the faint of heart. It requires a huge ongoing commitment from all leaders."

In Boelter's view, dealerships that don't empower their employees are simply selling commodities and price. He strives to create a culture that shows his frontline people management cares.

"If we provide them with the tools to be successful, then they will have a positive attitude towards customers because they feel good about their company," Boelter says. "We want the message that our business philosophy is different to resonate throughout the industry."

After company leaders established the servant-leadership culture, things began falling into place. Bill became so vested in this philosophy that he wrote an orientation book detailing the process. "It has so many positive aspects. For example, it helps in times like this when all companies are making cut-backs. A servant-leadership environment built on trust and caring about the individual minimizes the difficulties we are all facing," he says.

Boelter credits Dick Campion with starting the company's equipment division and John O'Brien with getting the company involved in disposables. "We have always emphasized a sense of urgency and I think that came from salespeople like Campion and O'Brien. My dad hired these super dynamic people, back in the early fifties, who were adored in the marketplace, but were merciless on their inside support people, including myself. They put a lot of demands on the organization to get things done,"



A View that Thrills: Seen from the mezzanine, which houses the contract design department, spotlights highlight the displays, also complimented by ambient lighting. A 28-foot perimeter ceiling and 14-foot mezzanine offer many interior design options. Also visible are two of three floor treatments: the highly polished black race track aisle and the polished concrete perimeter.

Boelter says. “The sense of urgency is still there but contrary to Campion and O'Brien's style, it comes from an inherent desire to support the front-line people and their customers.”



**Customer Friendly By Design:** The infield area displays china, accessories, linens, flatware and cutlery. In the foreground, custom-made modular displays highlight glassware selections. Note how the banners tend to bring down the ceiling. Signage over the race track highlights images of product categories located on the perimeter.

Despite challenging economic times, Eric and Rick Boelter continue to propel the organization forward. “Eric and Rick are doing excellent in the day-to-day leadership of their areas of responsibility,” Bill Boelter says.

Last year, when its lease ran out, The Boelter Companies moved its headquarters into a state-of-the-art 200,000 sq. ft. building, which doubled its existing space. “We looked for a location that was within 10 minutes of downtown Milwaukee, since the city was being revitalized and there have been many restaurant openings. We also sought to be on a corridor with excellent visibility,” Boelter says. “I am still involved but in a different way.”

“I look for projects which are removed from the day-to-day responsibilities. Examples are looking for cost savings and ways to do things more effectively. The new SuperStore was my new project for 2007-2008. Our showroom had previously been pretty much an afterthought. We now had to make a decision—close it down or make it very special. We had plenty of space and being semi-retired I had the time to make it a success.”

The new site is seven minutes from downtown and located on a major traffic corridor. “I often think whether I would have made the move knowing then what I know now about the economy. But then, our lease had expired and calculated risk-taking was something we successfully did in the past,” Boelter says.

The idea of creating a SuperStore quickly took shape with the help of Catherine Donnelly, Boelter's Strategic Brand and Communications Consultant. “What gave me so much confidence going into this was Catherine, who has worked on our strategic marketing concepts for the last 10 years,” Boelter says. “She had contributed a lot of great thoughts on the business in the past, and I knew that a superstore would be magnificent under her direction.”



**Memorable First Impressions:** Upon entering the store from the door on the left, customers first come upon the service area which gives staff the opportunity to welcome visitors. The race track layout enhances customer flow with its infield and perimeter outfield. All merchandise has high visibility with no clutter.



**Creative Combinations:** Two of five “opto” modular display fixtures, at the south end of the infield, are effectively used for glassware samples. There is a mix of modular and custom display fixtures throughout the SuperStore.

The result garnered The Boelter Companies a Gold Award in interior design from the American Society of Interior Designers (ASID), the society's highest honor (see sidebar, p. 19). “When a company can make a statement and set itself apart from others, that's good for business,” Boelter says.

The new facility further inculcates design into the company's culture. It is evident to those walking into the showroom that Boelter knows design. The layout is best described as a race-track concept with an infield and outfield. Items are departmentalized. Perimeter aisles are at 45-degree angles, so customers have a clear view of all products.

“I remember speaking with Fred Singer when his company built their facility. He said if they had to do it all over again, they would have had an owner's representative working with the general contractor. We did that, and it was great advice,” Boelter says.

### **People Who Matter**

Customers vote with their orders, and this is a measurement of success, along with keeping the banks happy, Boelter says. “It's pretty simple. Success can also be measured by what customers say about your people and the organization,” he says. “When people go out of their way to write complimentary letters and e-mails, that's a good sign of success. I always let associates know about the positive comments I receive.”

Boelter credits the late Lee Scruggs, former president of Scruggs Inc., (now a division of Strategic Equipment & Supply). “I knew him well in the last few years of his life and learned about his values. Lee was a terrific person who I have great respect for,” Boelter says.

Robert Halpern, former president of TriMark USA, also provided insight about the industry and the dealer business. “Even though we both went in different directions, we've always kept the lines of communication open.” Boelter says.



**Setting the table for Success:** Private table setting presentations take place conveniently in this functional area that resides across from the flatware, china, and linen displays. Candle and other accessory samples available here enhance creativity.



**Wide Range of Appeal:** Looking from left to right, this infield view shows easy-to-view displays of smallwares, flatware and china.

Boelter says he is indebted to his wife of 45 years, Priscilla, who always reminds him of what is most important in life. She understands the industry, being on a first name basis with many customers and nearly all suppliers and dealers in the industry. Boelter says that in her 35 years with the company, she may have missed only one industry convention.

When Boelter's sons Rick and Eric were coming into the business, Boelter included Priscilla in the discussions. "We talked about that a lot. I can't compartmentalize the business like some people. That's just not me. So I would bring work issues home, and Priscilla would be my sounding board," he says.

Unlike their father, both Rick and Eric did not immediately join the company after college. Following graduation from Indiana University, Rick continued on to receive his MBA in marketing, and spent two years at Kimberly Clark before joining the family business. He now serves as president of Boelter Beverage Group.

After college, Eric found work in Atlanta. When he was considering a one-year assignment with IBM, Bill asked Eric to join the business. "We were looking for someone to conduct statistical process control, measuring different benchmarks, so that's when Eric came on board," Boelter says. Eric later received his MBA at the University of Chicago. He now heads The Boelter Companies' E&S distribution arm.



**Equipment Firepower:** Accentuated by a glass wall, the heavy equipment display gives high visibility to every item. Most items throughout the Boelter SuperStore are displayed at an angle that facilitates easy viewing from the aisle. To the left [not shown] is a large upright and base refrigeration display. Behind the glass wall is an area designated for equipment demonstrations.

Boelter says his sons' exposure to different companies has been beneficial, and he is proud of their contributions to the business during the last 15 years. "At this point, my sons' love for the business comes from within. There's nothing I can do to add to how they feel about the company. They, like myself, are excited and enthusiastic, and want to see it grow," he says.

Boelter doesn't think about his comfort level as a business person. Instead, his objective is to do the right thing and let people judge him on his contributions as well as his character. For those who know Bill Boelter, he personifies what a hall-of-famer should be.