

# RECHARGER

Serving the Cartridge Recycling Industry

Volume 5 • Number 7

March 1994

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# Company Profile

# The Laser Group

(A Classic in De Kalb)

by Will Vernon  
*The Thomas Group*

De Kalb, Illinois is less than 60 miles from Chicago, but ask a resident of the "Windy City" about the place and they act as if its on another planet.

"De Kalb, oh yeah, they grow corn there, I think."

"De Kalb, isn't that in Iowa?"

Well, De Kalb might seem somewhat small and isolated when compared to its big sister on the lake, but corn is not De Kalb's only claim to fame. Two other "hybrids" hail from this classic mid-western hometown: Cindy Crawford (sigh), and some of the most widely distributed remanufactured cartridges in America.

Duane Siebert, President and owner of The Laser Group, along with wife and partner Annette, process between 2,600 and 3,000 cartridges per month, 95% of which are shipped out-of-state. What's more amazing is that very few of these clients are dealers. "Virtually all our customers are end-users," adds Annette, "we may have a fairly typical remanufacturing facility, but our marketing leans heavily to mail order."

## From Basement To Vault

As with many other early rechargers, Duane and Annette have grown up along with the cartridge remanufacturing industry. In 1987 they were both working in high pressure jobs as stock brokers for Merrill Lynch in Chicago. Although their careers were mon-

Duane decided the fledgling toner cartridge recycling industry was the most appealing.

Duane felt "It looked like an industry just beginning to discover itself. It had excellent potential and I liked the idea of recycling." After paying a recycler in Minneapolis \$600 for a half-day of instruction in cartridge recharging, Duane set up shop in his

basement and began searching for customers. Utilizing the same marketing techniques he had learned as a stock broker, he initiated a combination of "cold-calling" and small space ads in national publications. Response was immediate, and the dynamic growth of the Laser Group began.

Although Duane greatly enjoyed the personal and interactive aspects of business, he made a conscious

decision from the outset to concentrate on high quality cartridge remanufacturing and leave field service to others. This decision became the defining quality of the Laser Group. Removing field service calls from the formula allowed Duane time to de-



The Sieberts take special pride in producing high resolution training videos in their office/studio.

etarily rewarding, neither was satisfied with the high-rolling style of life in the city. It was finally decided that while Annette kept her job to support them, Duane would investigate, choose, and develop a small business. After researching scores of opportunities,

develop new standards of quality in the remanufacturing process. In fact, shipping to end-users without the benefit of service follow-up capabilities dictated the necessity for a high quality, low failure rate, "OEM-like" product. As a result the company's marketing

home-based success (the kitchen table had become their shipping dock and every bedroom a storage facility). The time to move the business into its own facility had come. Duane asked Annette to take a drive with him to the town of his childhood, you guessed it - De Kalb.

Although Annette did not instantly fall in love with the place (but Annette, did you know this is the town that invented barbed-wire?) she like the unhurried atmosphere and the availability of low cost commercial space. Perhaps here she



"Business-In-A-Box" (above) and The Video Training Program (below), provide the necessary ingredients for a successful start-up in cartridge remanufacturing.



area expanded to include virtually the entire United States.

As their customer base grew, it became obvious to Duane and Annette that neither their house nor the relationship could accommodate much more of this



could again enjoy going to bed without having to move small piles of SX body parts.

"As if moving to De Kalb wasn't quaint enough..." smiles Annette. "We also moved the company into an old bank building. I can guarantee that this is the only bank in America that has a Donaldson/Torit VS 1200 Vibro-shaker toner vacuuming system mounted in its vault."

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## Dynamic Growth & Diversification

The Laser Group has grown rapidly since its humble beginning in Duane & Annette's basement six years ago. The physical plant now utilizes nearly 8,000 sq. ft. of production, storage, office and studio space. Additionally, the company has evolved into two separate divisions: The Cartridge Remanufacturing Operations and The Recharge Training Program.

## The Cartridge Division

Like all the business production systems developed by the Sieberts, cartridge remanufacturing conforms to a standard criteria "Quality based efficiency and simplicity." A perfect example is the order fulfillment procedure. When an incoming "empty" arrives at the receiving desk, user information is immediately entered into the computer to generate an order. The Sieberts utilize a standard off-the-shelf accounting/inventory control program called Dac-Easy. At this point the order and incoming cartridge are routed totally independent of one another. There is no attempt to track a particular cartridge to make sure it is returned to its previous end-user. Nor is an I.D. or bar code tracking system used to monitor individual cartridges. "For most cartridges we have a standard price that we charge regardless of what we do to it," says Annette, "and since we unconditionally guarantee the quality of all replacement cartridges, which replacement cartridge is shipped is seldom an issue. However, for those clients who insist on having

their own cartridges returned, the Sieberts are more than happy to accommodate.

The one critical part the Sieberts do track is the OPC drum. Every "virgin" or "burp" (basically unidentifiable-remanufactured previously) cartridge is automatically

refitted with a new extended-life drum regardless of its apparent condition. The new drum is then marked with a small scratch (tick mark) outside the print area. With every remanufacturing cycle the OPC drum receives another mark. On an SX after four tick marks, the drum is replaced.



Roger Craigmile coordinates the order fulfillment effort, shipping remanufactured cartridges throughout the fifty states.



Hortencia Garcia prepares cartridge "batch" components for final assembly.



Jorge Garcia production assistant works at the reassembly bench.

spread over a 50 state area. Not bad, De Kalb!!

To achieve optimum efficiency in cartridge remanufacturing, the Sieberts utilize a "batch processing method." Large numbers or "batches" of identical cartridges are disassembled, inspected, deep cleaned, reassembled and tested as a group. This assembly line ap

proach provides for maximum utilization of personnel within a limited production area. Cost savings due to production efficiency can then be passed on to the customer in the form of a low cost, high quality product.

The product enhancement philosophy is evident in the toner recharging operation. SX toner hoppers are recharged (up to 25 at a time) with a standard 250 gram load of "graphics" quality toner, then "topped off" to 300 grams to provide an extended average page count to end users.

review monitors and a ceiling mounted high resolution camera for close detail recording.

"From my first half a day 'training' session in Minneapolis," explains Duane, "I promised myself that if I was successful in the recharging industry, I would develop the highest quality training program for future rechargers." And that he has.

Starting with a single manual outlining general techniques of cartridge re-manufacturing, the training program has grown to include seventeen comprehensive manuals and ten high resolution videos covering virtually every aspect of operating a successful cartridge remanufacturing business. From step-by-step disassembly of the SX/EPS cartridge to dynamic marketing tips, the



**Kim Cantrell**  
- Shipping Training Materials



**Sheila McCarthy**  
- Accounts Receivable

"When it comes to customers," Duane points out, "we under promise and over deliver. Keeping clients happy is what it's all about."

**Mike Walker**  
- Sales Manager

**Laurie Olson**  
- Database Management

## The Training Division

If the first time you visit Duane Siebert in his office you expect to find the usual desk, chair, and potted plant - you are in for quite a surprise. In fact, his office doesn't look like an office at all, more like the flight deck of the Enterprise. Actually, it is a recording studio for broadcast quality video tapes, complete with



training program is known for its high quality and ease of understanding. Over 600 students have taken the complete training program, and some of the Sieberts' proudest moments have come with calls from successful students.

"One of our favorites," explains Annette, "is a student from Florida who calls us about once a month. He went through the training course about 18 months ago. His confidence level

was not the highest when he started but he followed the program religiously. After 8 months he was recharging 300 cartridges per month. When he called a few days ago he was up to 500 per month. I think I was more excited than he was.”

In addition to the video/manual program, the Training Division can also provide its students with everything from toner to test printers. One unusual product that appeared to be in great demand (they were packing several to be shipped during this reporter’s visit), is



(above) Production Manager Francisco Izaguirre performs quality assurance testing on finished cartridges.

(right) “Test” printers ready to be shipped to new trainees.



called “Business-In-A-Box.” This product is actually an assortment of every item necessary to begin recharging and includes tools, supplies, cleaners, and even two empty toner cartridges.

Another training service the Sieberts’ provide is the “Technical Support Line.” This is a direct line to Duane’s office and only he answers it. Students with technical or business questions can utilize this service for instant answers while in the field.

## Future Directions

One of the questions we always ask of profiled

companies is, “what future opportunities do you see in the recharging industry?” This question brought to light an interesting aspect of the Sieberts’ business. As Duane explained, “It may not have occurred to you, but we get asked that question several times a day from prospective students. My answer is always the same; It looks better today than it did six years ago when I started my business.” Duane goes on to further outline several reasons he has such a positive feel for the industry’s future. First is the relatively low percentage (30%) of cartridges currently being recycled. “This certainly indicates a larger potential market as recycling becomes a more common and accepted practice.” Second, toner based laser technology still provides the most economical typeset quality printing currently available. “Ink jet just doesn’t measure up to laser printing,” explains Duane, “the quality is not there. If anything, I look for toner based technology to expand as copiers, faxes & laser printers begin to merge into the multiuse equipment of the future.”

And what of the Laser Group’s future? Annette put this in clear perspective. “We’re going to be

busy. Because we are a training facility, our students expect us to stay on the cutting edge of new technology as well as any industry changes. This requires us to operate our remanufacturing business as if we were sending each cartridge to the Smithsonian as a prototype for the industry.”

The Laser Group typifies what can happen if a company works hard to reach a self-imposed higher level of performance - they succeed. Ultimately they become a classic example of that timely adage.... “Excellence is a process, not a destination.”

## On Lawyers . . .

**Duane:** The best thing about stuffing 100 attorneys into a large punching bag is - you never have to worry about hitting the wrong one.

## On RECHARGER Magazine . . .

**Duane:** We need a swimsuit edition - you know, I could write a great article for that.

## On President Clinton. . .

**Duane:** Forced by the liberal media to endure the sight of Bill Clinton in his Speedos floundering around in the surf off the beach in Hawaii (speaking of which, have any of you seen "Free Willy," yet?)

## On how they put up with each other 24 hours a day . . .

**Annette:** I know it sounds mushy, but we're buddies.

**Duane:** Valium

**Editors Note:** *The opinions expressed by Duane Siebert are not necessarily those of the Publisher. However, We do entirely agree with his high opinion of Annette. (The swimsuit edition needs, at the very least, a little work.)*

As you may be aware, Duane Siebert is a practicing recharger, lecturer, and contributing editor to *RECHARGER Magazine*. In this last capacity, it is probably not altogether accurate to describe what Duane does as writing articles. It is actually more like romping than writing. I mean, what can you say about a man who starts an article with:

# Duane's World

## A Siebert Sampler



## On how they met . . .

**Annette:** Edna did it - she was this sweet little 70 year old sales assistant who sat between us at Merrill Lynch.

**Duane:** It was lust at first sight (but I thought she looked nice, too!).

*"Free Willy," you're dammed, if you do, dammed if you don't and corona magnets.*

Well, actually, if you're me you say very little. The man unfortunately is armed with three unbeatable weapons: technical competence, a slashing wit, and Annette - all of which at one time or another have sent experts, liberals, and other notables, crashing through the bush with the seat eaten out of their pants. It's just that when the time came for *RECHARGER* to do a profile on Duane's company, we were all so excited we decided to flip a coin to see who got to do

## On how to be a successful recharger . . .

**Annette:** Do the things other people hate to do.

**Duane:** Marry Annette.

it. I lost.

And so, like the sacrificial lamb, I ventured north to De Kaib to tsee what I imagined would be a cross between Rush Limbaugh and Home Improvement's "tool time" Tim. I knew he would see right through me - would instinctively know that I had voted for Bill Clinton and therefore would never have the mentaldexterity to disassemble a IIISI blindfolded.

Such is the fate of one who interviews a writer with a public following. But, I'm not jealous - I just think there ought to be a law against it...

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