

# BUILT TO LAST: SICO

SICO CEO Chris Wilson shares what makes this industry leader built to last: brand recognition.



Imagine the cafeteria in your elementary school. For some of us it may be difficult to remember the details, but I doubt you could forget the bench seating you sat at day after day, swapping your food and giggling with your friends before recess. Although SICO isn't specifically in the business of making memories, its products—quite possibly those tables you sat at some years ago—stand the test of time to be part of the backdrop of your school days, and many other milestones of your life.

SICO is a third-generation family-owned company that has been creating and innovating many of the products used in daily life: from stadium seating and school auditorium furniture from your youth to the stages, platforms, dance floors, and tables at your wedding, there's a good chance you've crossed paths with these products before.

Kermit Wilson, founder of the company, originally called the company Seating Company, and over its history it has been called Seating Incorporated, SI, and then SICO. This demonstrates the change of focus for the business, which originally

dealt in chairs and has since expanded to include anything you might see at a conference.

SICO products are known for their ease and speed of use, and its niche products like food warmers and wall beds allow the company to have a presence in many different marketplaces.

Current SICO CEO Chris Wilson—who just recently acquired the new title—started with the company in 1999 after time in the U.S. Navy during Desert Storm, and has worked for his family company in Australia, China, and Europe—SICO Incorporated has locations all over the world, which speak to the company's dominance in the industry.

“Our long history has allowed a high level of brand recognition in the industry all over the world,” said Chris Wilson. “The U.S. market however is where we are strongest. It's the leader in all of our product markets.”

**A Long History of Excellence**

Minneapolis, Minnesota is where it all started 64 years ago for Kermit Wilson. Chris Wilson shared that his grandfather was an inventor, always tinkering with new and better designs for the

products he was already selling. He believes this is what has helped keep the company at the top of its game.

“SICO has been offering products that other companies didn't have to start. My grandfather built the brand as a product innovator and our core success has been based on a wide-ranging offering that others don't have.

“From there, he created a business that was built around brand recognition and customer-oriented service.”

SICO's exceptional customer service was built on a common trait of many businesses—its serial number identification. Every single product since the company's inception contains a serial number. This allowed Kermit Wilson and subsequent leaders to know exactly which version the customer had if there was trouble with a product.

It also came in handy for the school district in Oroville, Washington. Remember those cafeteria tables at the beginning? The maintenance director, as well as most of the district



School cafeteria showing a mixed use of SICO tables to maximize seating and visual interest.



The Deco Cooking Station, a popular option with the hospitality market

staff, had sat around the same tables as its current 21st-century students. The district was interested in purchasing the new model cafeteria tables from SICO to replace the schools' older models—older by 57 years.

These Eisenhower-era relics had served the school district well, and even looked better than products that were used to replace them initially. However, these competitor products, despite just being 10 years old, were in worse shape than the much older SICO products. The serial numbers helped current SICO employees identify the modern version of these tables, and the story is one that proves the excellence of SICO's products and services.

#### **A Commitment to Sustainability**

Designing and constructing products that stand the test of time are great ways to run an environmentally-friendly company, but SICO doesn't stop there.

"We are dedicated to our commitment to sustainability," said Chris Wilson. "Our employees in our facilities embrace the company's sustainability initiatives, and our products undergo inspections and must pass requirements to achieve the GREENGUARD Mark of Distinction, which is awarded by an independent company, UL Environment."

Wilson also shared that sustainability is a trend for the whole manufacturing industry, and particularly in the markets SICO serves. Hotels and conferences are going linen-less, meaning base products like tables and chairs need to be higher quality and designed with appearance

in mind. Aesthetics is also an upcoming trend with hospitality, conventions, and schools getting away from the industrial look and moving towards a look of permanent furniture.

#### **What's Next?**

SICO will continue serving its major and niche markets and looks forward to more stories about products that are older than the current CEO. Chris Wilson shared that a large part of the company's strategy will be a laser focus on just that: focus.

"As a company grows, it can lose focus and get distracted by doing too many different things," he said. "Everyone wants growth, especially the shareholders, but we want to redirect some of the efforts to back to what made the company great in its early days." ■



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