

# One sun sets & others rise at K-Sun Corporation in Somerset

By Brenda Bredahl

Like a modern-day renaissance man, Mike Kasun has guided K-Sun Corp. through a veritable resurgence as the company prepares the final shipment of its original raison d'être and celebrates the launch of several new products to its line of industrial identification solutions.

"I've never seen a product last that long," says Kasun of the Kroy machine replacement cartridges that were once the mainstay of K-Sun's business. "It's the end of an era. As soon as we run out of cartridges, we'll have a party ... or maybe a wake. At one point we were making hundreds of thousands of cartridges a year on an assembly line in Stillwater."

Founded in 1978 as a supplier of replacement cartridges for the Kroy labeling machine, K-Sun Corp. over the years has transformed into a manufacturer and supplier of computer-compatible and stand-alone portable and desktop electronic labeling printers, developer of industrial signage software, and manufacturer of specialty coated supplies for various printers.

As the parent company of several divisions, K-Sun is committed to being a leader in industrial identification products and a source for custom labeling, marking and signage.

Today some 29 employees are committed to lean principles as well as cross-training in various operations among the business divisions. "Most of our employees have been with us for an average of 16 years," says Kasun.



Photo by Brenda Bredahl  
Mike Kasun,  
K-Sun Corporation

K-Sun subsidiaries include MaxiSoft® Inc., located in Reno, and AzCoat Inc., located in Scottsdale, which were both acquired in 1997. MaxiSoft® broadens the product base by offering specific industrial identification software solutions, while AzCoat's expertise is specialty top coating and adhesive technology. K-Sun corporate offices and marketing/distribution centers are located in Somerset, Wis., and Stillwater, Minn.

## Art initiates life

An accomplished painter who studied under noted art Professor John Maakestad at St. Olaf College in Northfield, Kasun founded the company in Stillwater after leaving Kroy. As an employee of UFE Corp. back in the 1970s, Kasun, who lives in Stillwater, helped form a division called Pierce, named after the Wisconsin county in which the business was located.

As vice president of UFE's Pierce division, Kasun and colleagues changed the name to Kroy Corp., named after the St. Croix River. Kasun saw Kroy up through the company's public stock offering in the early 1970s. He then returned to 3M, where he had worked before joining UFE. But he was bitten by the entrepreneurial bug and decided to leave 3M to compete with Kroy in the supply cartridge business.

If it weren't for temporarily abandoning his artistic wings for flight school, however, Kasun's company and life might have been an entirely different endeavor. While a senior in college, the art major and economics minor applied to Navy flight school. After graduating in 1965, he was accepted, and then later enrolled in defense information school and took training in intelligence and communications at Pearl Harbor on his way to Vietnam. Never

making it to theatre of war, he landed as a public affairs officer for Adm. John Hyland, Jr., commander of the U.S. Pacific Fleet during the war.

“It was a fluke; I was reassigned to Admiral Hyland as his public affairs officer, which was an anomaly in the Navy back then,” said Kasun.

His easy-going nature and raconteur sensibilities as a public affairs officer put him in contact with everyone from national media and President Lyndon Johnson to celebrities like Art Linkletter and Elvis and company executives including Burt Cross, chairman of 3M’s board, and 3M President Ray Herzog.

That chance meeting with 3M executives put Kasun, who joined the U.S. Naval Reserve after discharge, on the path to business. “I had dated Mr. Cross’s daughter in college, and the Admiral gave me permission to take them out in his gig [yacht] when they requested a tour of Pearl Harbor,” recalls Kasun. “I greeted them in my whites, and Cross asked, ‘This isn’t your normal tour is it?’ and I answered, ‘No, and how’s your daughter Nancy by the way?’”

Both executives were pleased to meet a fellow Minnesotan, and so taken with the tour that Kasun was invited to apply to 3M after he was scheduled to be discharged in late 1969. The rest is history.

## New products, new horizons

K-Sun began to branch out from the replacement cartridge business in 1987 when it partnered with Brother International. It distributed Brother’s P-Touch labeling machines on an exclusive basis. That’s been a long and fulfilling relationship, says Kasun.

“To this day we still distribute Brother brand products. Even though it’s not one of our major lines anymore, we still have an ongoing relationship,” he says. “The Japanese have a lot of loyalty ... Over the years they’ve made special products for me, and helped me get into the label printer business instead of just the supply business. Brother had a lot of technology that was available to

K-Sun at a much lower price than if I was to hire my own engineers and do my own tooling and manufacturing.”

While Kasun appreciates the longevity with Brother, he was eager to develop his own brand. “Around 1993, I was at a trade show when another company approached me with an exclusive deal under the K-Sun brand. It’s really the best of both worlds.”

The K-Sun LABELShop® products were the result of that partnership. Newest in the line are the LABELShop 2011XLB, a portable industrial labeling and bar code printer and the 2011XLB-PC, which includes MaxiLabel® Pro Windows Software and connects to a PC. Other new models, the 2012XLST and the 2012XLST-PC, can also print on heat shrink tubes for wires and cables. Costs range from \$349 to \$499. On the supply side, some 60 color and size tape combinations are available.

“One of the advantages of the new line is that it can also trim the tape so that the corners of the label are round,” says Kasun. “That might not sound like much, but every time a label peels off it is because the corner catches. When you round the corners, it produces a radius so you can’t catch the corners. The newest K-Sun machines feature that as an option – we call this trademarked feature ‘PeelGuard.’”

Another feature of K-Sun’s new label printers, is that the adapter, when plugged in, does not draw energy from an outlet unless the machine is turned on. “This complies with the new California Energy Conservation Requirements that go into effect this July,” notes Kasun. “We were fortunate to find out about this and able to stop production of the old adapter. The redesign with this new one will comply with new energy regulations coming this year and stepped-up requirements after that.”

K-Sun’s safety software sold under the MaxiSoft brand name, including PipeMarker and MaxiSigns labeling software, provides products that comply with OSHA/ANSI safety requirements.

“We are the only guys who have put the new Homeland Security Symbols into our

software,” says Kasun. AzCoat, K-Sun’s adhesive and coating company, supplies a variety of materials, including synthetic, for K-Sun and MaxiSoft products, which are suitable for ink-jet, laser, thermal transfer and other printing technologies. A thermal transfer printer is manufactured for K-Sun to distribute as well.

## Eye on the future

While Kasun still has a hand in his artistic roots and continues to paint in oil and acrylic, in 2002 the company acquired Doll Products, Inc., based in Knoxville, to add the Acculine Design System to the K-Sun family of products.

Acculine is a hand-drawing grid that makes straight lines and angles on paper without the use of a ruler or triangle. It’s perfect for designers, engineers, architects, draftsmen, artists or anyone who needs accurate drawing flexibility and mobility, according to the K-Sun Web site.

It also seems to be the perfect addition for a company started by an artist, who found his inspiration by serving his country, and who has ended up painting a successful kaleidoscope of international business and entrepreneurship.

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## just the facts

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