

One Sweet Job

By Melanie Mosher

Remember when you were a kid and going to the candy store was as though you had died and gone to heaven? Imagine having a career in a candy store. All around you sit scrumptious edible delights just waiting to be unwrapped and devoured. Chocolate, taffy, jelly beans, hard candy, popcorn, custard, and many other delectable treats surround you as you walk into the store. The wonderful aromas fill the air and make you want to taste everything in sight. If you happen to walk into a candy store at a holiday time, you might be lucky enough to revel in the presence of colorful candy canes, giant chocolate Easter bunnies, and huge hearts filled with titillating chocolates for special sweethearts. Bob Pacer is lucky enough to experience these sensual joys because he is a true candy man. As the general manager of Oliver's Candies in Batavia, New York, he is able to enjoy all the perks and embrace the responsibilities involved in running a small town candy business with not-so-small dealings.

For most of his life, Bob Pacer has enjoyed working with food. He mentions that during his senior year of high school he took a home economics class which helped guide him in his decision of what to do as a career. After graduating from high school, he joined the Air Force. In the Air Force, he had the option to apply to be a cook. With the help of relatives in the Air Force, he was guided in the right direction as he was accepted to steward school in Virginia. Upon completion of steward school, he was assigned to work in an Air Force hospital. His job at the hospital was a diet specialist. As a diet specialist he helped set up individualized diets for the patients while working alongside a dietician. He made sure the diet was correct for each patient, ensured that the food was cooked properly, and made sure the portions were properly set up.

After the Air Force, Bob went to college and earned an Associate's degree in food service management from Erie County Technical Institute. He worked in a Western New York winery first in the quality control department, then was a wine maker and eventually a plant manager. He eventually decided that he was ready for a change. He heard about the general manager position opening up at Oliver's Candies and saw that job as a work environment with a friendly atmosphere. He also saw it as a challenge he was gratefully willing to accept. He was hired for the job and started at the job which he described as "something new and different." Because he was fairly young when he started as general manager at Oliver's Candies, he faced the challenge of supervising workers who were older than him. It was an adjustment for employees to get used to having a boss who was much younger. Eventually, though, he was able to gain the respect he deserved, and was on his way to being a successful general manager and heading operations at Oliver's Candies. In order to be successful as a general manager, he believes, it is best to learn all positions at the company in order to know what each individual position deals with. When the general manager knows what each position at the company entails, he can maximize worker satisfaction and efficiency. Wouldn't it be nice if every boss was willing to carefully learn each employee's task for the betterment of not only the company but the workers?

Now in 2008, Bob Pacer has been at Oliver's Candies many years. Because he has been at Oliver's so long, he has fully learned the "ins and outs" of the company and has learned much valuable information about candy making. For the majority of his interview, he shares with me some of the tasty inner workings of working at Oliver's Candies. Today Oliver's makes over 360 different types of candies. They make their own candy canes, ribbon candy, chocolates, caramel popcorn, hard candies, and many other delights. Bob mentions that Oliver's used to make suckers and jelly beans, but stopped because of the poor profit margin and messy process.

Three products Oliver's makes, ribbon candy, sponge candy, and cashew glaze, are particularly special to the company. Making ribbon candy, a thin, fruity-flavored hard candy folded like ribbon, is a very long and delicate process. Syrup for the candy must be cooked down. The molten syrup is then pulled on a water-cooled table. Insulated leather gloves must be worn when handling the syrup as the candy maker folds and cools it. As it hardens, it is flavored and colored, then put on a candy puller which puts air into the candy. The candy is then given a deep, dark color and is given white stripes. It is then put on a table with a gas heater and the candy makers pull it as it goes through a roller. The candy is cut every thirteen loops. The candy makers must then carefully pick it up and place it into wooden boxes as it cools.¹ Then, the candy makers start all over again with another flavor. In all, Oliver's Candies produces nine different flavors of ribbon candy. After detailing the making of ribbon candy, Bob notes that ribbon candy is a seasonal item made only during the Christmas season. To prepare for the sale of ribbon candy at Christmastime, Oliver's produces 3,000 boxes of ribbon candy with ten pieces per box. The entire process of making this much ribbon candy takes about a week and a half as they are able to produce roughly one flavor per day. In the end, though, all the effort put into making ribbon candy pays off as it is a great seller at Christmas.

Two of Oliver's other specialties, cashew glaze and sponge candy are special to Oliver's because of where they came from. Cashew glaze, which can be described as something like peanut brittle but with cashews (and much better!), is unique to Oliver's. Although others may try to copy it, only Oliver's cashew glaze is made without preservatives and is made fresh every week. Sponge candy is unique to the Western New York area and Oliver's, located in Western New York, continues to carry on the tradition of making sponge candy. Bob mentions that many

¹ The Making of Ribbon Candy. 2008. Oliver's Candies. March 22, 2008.
<<http://www.oliverscandies.com/orgmain.asp?ssid=BAFC9DCA-78F9-488B-BDCF-082B664457F5&orgid=44>>

customers come to Oliver's for sponge candy because they know it is unique to Western New York and seek the product that originated in that area.

Another unique product that Oliver's produces are layered mints. Joe Oliver, the original owner of Oliver's Candies, took his recipe for these layered mint chocolates to a candy convention many years ago. At the candy convention, the recipe for the delightful layered mints was taken and the well-known Andes Candies were born. That's right, the idea for today's #1 After Dinner Mint was developed right at Oliver's Candies in small Batavia, New York.²

As part of the interview, I asked Bob to name different candies that Oliver's makes that fit into different categories I chose. His answers were quite interesting, especially because he gave explanations as to why these products fit the category. I first asked him what the most expensive product is that Oliver's sells. Without skipping a beat to compare prices in his head, he replies, "a four-foot solid [chocolate] Easter rabbit that sells for \$1800. Then comes a hollow four-foot rabbit for \$475 and then a three-foot hollow rabbit for \$225." I was astonished. Those must be huge Easter rabbits! What kid would not love to get one of those in his basket Easter morning? What surprised me more is that he mentioned that with ten days left before Easter this year, Oliver's had already sold twenty or thirty three-foot hollow rabbits. It's no wonder that, as Bob later states, Easter is Oliver's busiest season by far. During the season Oliver's makes thirty tons of milk chocolate rabbits...and that does not include the colored or sugar-free chocolate rabbits that they also produce. During the five days during Easter week, Oliver's sells 19,000 bunnies. That is a lot of chocolate rabbits.

In contrast to the very busy Easter season, I also asked him to tell me which season is Oliver's slowest season. For most national brand candy makers, the busiest season is

² Andes. 2006. Tootsie Roll Industries. March 22, 2008. <<http://65.109.57.129/andes.html>>

Halloween.³ Surprisingly, Oliver's slowest season is Halloween. Although the store is busy during this time, it is not as busy as other seasons. Bob mentions that people who do buy Oliver's chocolates at Halloween do not pass the candies out, but rather keep them for themselves or give them to relatives or friends.

I next asked Bob what Oliver's most popular item is. Although there are many and it varies by season, one confection that remains popular throughout the year is French creams. These French creams have almost disappeared from the candy market because of their difficulty to make, but Oliver's continues to make these sweet, creamy delights using an old family recipe.⁴ Although normally fruit flavored, they are made into cinnamon, spearmint, and peppermint at Christmastime. To make these popular delicacies, sugar and a small amount of corn syrup is flavored and colored. This is then either hand or machine cast, soaked in crystal syrup. It must then dry for a day. During this time, the center becomes creamy. After this, all the French creams are hand packed. Overall, they involve a lot of hand work to make. These French creams, though, have a shelf life of a year as they remain with a creamy center and a hard, sugary outer shell.

French creams may be the customers' favorite as it is Oliver's most popular confectionary delight, but Bob himself has his own personal favorite. Because he has been working in a candy factory for decades, he has been fortunate enough to try every product made at Oliver's. Of all the products produced by Oliver's, Bob Pacer's favorite sweet is the butter crunch. This is toffee coated in chocolate, much like a Heath bar. He describes it as better,

³ Encyclopedia of Careers and Vocational Guidance. "Confectionary Industry Workers." 14th edition. New York, New York: Ferguson. 2008. Volume 2. Pp. 620-4.

⁴ Fruit Flavored French Creams, Made from an Old Family Recipe. 2008. The Vermont Country Store. March 23, 2008. <
<http://www.vermontcountrystore.com/shopping/product/detailmain.jsp?itemID=31475&itemType=PRODUCT&iMainCat=731&iSubCat=868&iProductID=31475&searchid=inceptor>>

though, because, as most of Oliver's products, butter crunch is made without additives or preservatives.

After asking Bob about the products of Oliver's, I next asked Bob if he could tell me more about the business side of running a candy store and factory. He first described their customer base. They mainly cater to more affluent customers. Oliver's chocolates are by no means unaffordable, but rather are a much higher quality and the quality is reflected in their price. People of every age, though, visit Oliver's and are brought back to the times of their childhoods where they were surrounded by candy and wanted to eat everything in sight. Kids come to Oliver's because they love chocolate (and their parents must, too). Older people come to Oliver's to buy the products they love and have loved their entire lives. Tours come in and people buy the products special to Oliver's. Each tour, Bob says, brings forty to fifty people into the store. Getting two to three bus tours per week really helps bring customers into the door. In addition to tours, Oliver's advertises on TV, in the newspaper, and sponsors local activities.⁵ In addition to their in-store business, Oliver's candies can also be ordered online from their website. They ship all over the world. They have shipped to China and to troops in the military. In fact, they have sent packages to soldiers fighting in wars since World War II. With the help of the internet, Oliver's have been able to tremendously open up to the world in which it sells.

As one of the nation's remaining small-town candy makers, Oliver's goes to conventions in which it is able to see other candy makers' products and can display their own chocolates. At these conventions, Oliver's chocolates compete in peer-reviewed competitions. As its biggest accomplishment, of which Bob Pacer is very proud, Oliver's took Best in Show at a convention in Toronto, Canada. Not only is judging at these competitions based on taste, but also on

⁵ Our Television Commercial. 2008. Oliver's Candies. March 23, 2008.
<<http://www.oliverscandies.com/orgmain.asp?ssid=BAFC9DCA-78F9-488B-BDCF-082B664457F5&orgid=39>>

appearance and presentation. There are different categories such as seasons like Easter. The competitors must come up with an idea, design it, make it, and then display it for others to view and taste. They must also judge and taste other participants' entries. As general manager of Oliver's, Bob Pacer is responsible for coming up with the ideas they enter at conventions. After Bob comes up with the idea, all the workers at Oliver's work together to design the product and eventually enter it into the competition. Bob is very proud of the work Oliver's has done in entering their products in conventions especially because they have won many awards including the Best in Show award in Toronto.

Not only does Oliver's sell products all over the world and go to candy conventions in faraway places, they also purchase equipment and supplies from all over the world. They buy equipment and machines from Germany, Italy, Switzerland, and Sweden. One product, an enrober from Germany which coats fillings for chocolates with chocolate from all sides, was described by Bob as a "Cadillac in the industry." One time while at home in New York, Bob called me to help him with a translation problem dealing with his German enrober. He had to order other parts for the enrober, but the manuals were in German. Fortunately I was able to help him and he eventually received everything he needed to make the enrober functioning again. Unfortunately the language barrier is the downside of having equipment and products from all around the world. But the positives greatly outweigh the negatives. In addition to buying equipment from across the globe, Oliver's also orders cocoa beans from the Ivory Coast in Africa, hard candies from South America, and nut meats from Australia, Hawaii, and China. Oliver's truly is an internationally involved business.

One interesting thing that Bob mentioned about his job that I would never have expected dealt with the weather. As general manager, he must control how much of each raw material is

bought from which place. The weather plays a big part in determining how much he will order and from where. By monitoring the weather, he is able to determine how a certain growing season is. If the weather is stable and the growing season for their materials is like normal, the price of the materials will not change much. If the growing season is bad, the price of the materials will eventually skyrocket when it comes time to harvest and sell. So, if Bob can determine if the growing season is good or bad ahead of time, he is able to determine how much of a certain product Oliver's will produce or how that will affect their prices they pass along to the customers. If he thinks a large price increase will significantly decrease sales, Oliver's will not make as much of that product so that they do not lose money.

In addition to doing tasks special to being the general manager of a candy maker, Bob also must do tasks expected of most general managers. He is responsible for keeping the books, keeping records of gross and revenue, what is popular, and sales. He says that there are many reports to put out as part of his job. As the highest-level employee at the business, he is also responsible for overseeing operations and employees of Oliver's. As he expected when being hired for the job many years ago, the general manager position is filled with responsibilities and challenges.

Although the job can be stressful (yes, apparently working with all that candy can be stressful) and Bob must work some very long hours especially around holidays, he tells me just before the interview is finished that he greatly enjoys his job. The only main downside he finds is the hours. He comes in most days at around six or seven a.m. and leaves each night around five. In addition to the work he does and enjoys at Oliver's, he is also active in the community. He is a member of Rotary Club, the Chamber of Commerce, and the American Red Cross. He enjoys the

involvement in the community that his job enables him to do and he loves his job itself—mostly because of all the tasty sweets.

Bob Pacer, general manager of Oliver's Candies in Batavia, New York, has a sweet job. He is able to oversee production of over 360 different candies and chocolates. He is able to make business dealings all around the world as he orders equipment and supplies from across the globe. He is a pillar of the community and is known throughout the community as "the candy man."