Since its founding in 1914, the Paul H. Gesswein Co. (referred to today by its many customers as simply “Gesswein”) has been focused on one thing, as expressed in its guiding policy: “We are dedicated to giving [our customers] the ultimate in service and to making them think the best thing they ever did was to buy from Gesswein.”

That policy may not have changed in 100 years, but so much else has.

“I remember when I began working in the office in the early 1960s, we had the kind of calculator where you pressed buttons, like a little typewriter,” says company president Roger Gesswein Jr., the third generation of the family to run the business. Now, he continues, the company has an up-to-date computer system that integrates accounting with other areas and better enables orders over its website to flow smoothly. A far cry from push-button calculators, indeed.

What’s also changed is the breadth of the products the company now offers, and its global reach. In the early 1900s, when Paul Gesswein was a teenager working in a New York City hardware store, he found a huge demand among local jewelers for precision tools. So he opened his own one-room store, began importing tools from Germany, and met with immediate local success. Soon he began pushing the boundaries, opening new accounts in Boston, and producing a print catalog for those customers who couldn’t get to his store.

After Paul’s death in the late 1930s, his son Roger Sr. took over, and he shepherded the company through the years of World War II, when supplies (particularly those from Germany) dried up. He looked for more U.S. suppliers, and by the end of the war his supplier base had expanded greatly; by the early 1950s, the company carried over 1,000 items.

The company continued to grow, expanding internationally and earning a reputation in particular for its finishing and casting supplies. Today Gesswein operates from a block-long facility in Bridgeport, Connecticut, and carries over 17,000 products—everything from burs, abrasives, and benches to CAD/CAM systems, casting machines, and lasers. And while the United States and its jewelry industry still make up a major part of its business, Gesswein has continued to open international markets (Canada, India, China, Thailand) and expand into new industries. “Many of our products are for specialized metal finishing, and they have been a great help for the medical device industry in particular,” he notes.

But, he says, while the company may be expanding, that core policy still guides it, as do the words his father told him long ago. “My father, and his father too, used to say that honesty and doing what’s right for the customer was always in the front of their minds, and that’s how they made decisions. They may have sacrificed immediate gain, but the customers were happy. That’s the best business lesson I ever got.”