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He's the one behind those Foster Grants -- for real

Ron Wagner
Alec Taylor is old enough to remember when the likes of Raquel Welch and Sophia Loren were behind those Foster Grants. Today, however, it's safe to say that nobody is more behind the famous shades than he is.

Taylor, a 1975 Furman graduate, was named the CEO of FGX International, the company that manufactures Foster Grants, in October of 2005, marking the latest step in a life journey that began in Johnson City, Tenn., during the heyday of one of the most famous ad campaigns of all time.

"Not in my wildest dreams," Taylor says when asked if heading the leading eyewear operation in the world was where he thought he would be three decades after he earned a political science degree from Furman. "I was a lawyer for 20 years."

In fact, Taylor says he was lucky to have been admitted to Furman. "I got put on the waiting list, which is exactly where I belonged," he says. "I got in by the hair of my chinny chin chin. [University president] Gordon Blackwell had mercy on me."

Taylor went on to prove that the hunch Blackwell had about his potential was on target, as he did well enough at Furman to gain entrance into law school at Vanderbilt University. That sparked a long and successful career in the legal field.

Taylor says he wasn't really thinking about changing anything until a client, impressed by his work, asked him to make the jump to the business world by offering him a high-ranking position with Chattem Chemicals Inc. in Chattanooga, Tenn.

"He said, 'Come here and run this company and be my president, my No. 2 guy,'" Taylor recalls. "I had all types of reservations about it and wondered if I was capable of doing it. But it was kind of the midpoint of my legal career, and I thought if I was ever going to do anything different, it was now."

After taking the job in January 1998, he quickly discovered that advertising and bottom lines intrigued him. And rather than being a hindrance, his law background proved to be hugely beneficial.

"Lawyers are terrible business people," he says. "They struggle running their own checkbooks. But law also teaches a very logical thought process. You do a lot of A-to-B-to-C thinking. You learn not to do A and skip to Z."

He took to his corporate role like a seasoned veteran, and it wasn't long until he was ready to take another big step. FGX was planning to go public, and another friend thought Taylor would be the perfect choice to spearhead the transition.

"I'd taken companies public as a lawyer, so I knew that process," he says. "I hated to leave [Chattem], but I wanted to be a CEO and have a chance to run my own gig."

Taylor says one of the things he insisted upon when taking the job was that the company make a commitment to spend more money on advertising. FGX agreed, and soon the ads he remembered from his youth were revived — only this time with regular people replacing celebrities. The effort was designed to put Foster Grant on a new generation's radar and to keep the company at the forefront of the industry.

"We asked people under 40, 'What does Foster Grant mean to you?' And they said a government aid program," Taylor says with a laugh. "And they said a government aid program," Taylor says with a laugh.

In addition to the challenge of running a high profile company, Taylor also had to adjust to moving to Rhode Island (Smithfield), where FGX is based.

"People in Rhode Island have this deep, thick accent. My first three months I had to carry a translator around. I wondered if they were speaking English," Taylor says — then points out that his colleagues felt the same way about his Southern accent.

"But I've really enjoyed it," he adds. "We do a lot of kidding about Southerners. People wanted to know if we were going to add catfish and grits to the cafeteria. I haven't imposed any of that yet."

Taylor says he doesn't get back to Furman often, but he counts his years at what was then still the "new" campus as critical to the person he is today.

"I remember the first time going through those gates and having the 'wow' event we all had," he says. "It starts there. It's a really special place."

"Furman nurtured people and made you feel like you could be somebody."

— RON WAGNER

The author, a 1993 Furman graduate, is a free-lance writer based in Hendersonville, N.C.