



# INTERVIEW

## DANIEL MUELLER,

president and chief executive officer (CEO),  
Volm Companies

By Joe Kertzman, managing editor, *Badger Common Tater*



**NAME:** Daniel Mueller

**TITLE:** President and CEO

**COMPANY:** Volm Companies

**LOCATION:** Idaho Falls, ID (Daniel's location),  
and Antigo, WI (headquarters)

**HOMETOWN:** Antigo

**YEARS IN PRESENT POSITION:** Seven

**PREVIOUS EMPLOYMENT:** Corporate  
finance with Cardinal Health & CareFusion  
(business unit spinoff)

**SCHOOLING:** Bachelor of Arts, Concordia  
University, St. Paul, and Master of Business  
Administration (MBA), Tuck School of  
Business at Dartmouth, Hanover, New  
Hampshire

**ACTIVITIES/ORGANIZATIONS:** On  
the Elder Board and a drummer at Christ  
Community Church, youth coach for Idaho  
Falls lacrosse, and President's Advisory  
Council at Concordia University

**FAMILY:** Sarah, my wife of 20 years; children,  
Analise (16), Elijah (14), Isaac (12), and Lydia  
(10); and two dogs and a cat

**HOBBIES:** Ultramarathons (distance  
running), reading, and family time

8 BC'T October

*As Volm Companies celebrates 70 years in business, in 2024, company President and CEO Daniel Mueller reflects on the multi-generational family operation headquartered in Antigo, Wisconsin, and how it has evolved and grown through seven decades.*

The small family-run operation got underway, in 1954, in Bryant, selling groceries and hardware supplies and serving the needs of local dairy and potato farmers. That's when Gerald Volm realized that local customers needed a reliable supplier of used and new burlap to get their potatoes to market.

Over time, the company formed distributor relationships with other bag companies and moved its growing business to Antigo, where it began manufacturing its own products to meet changing market needs.

Volm Companies has since expanded to include multiple manufacturing and distribution locations across the nation.

Partnerships include those with Sunkist and Green Giant to produce packaging to their exact specifications, and national and regional retailers such as Menards



and Fleet Farm to distribute consumer items like snow and garden fences, shade cloth and privacy fabric.

### **BAGGING & PACKAGING**

Over the years, Volm Companies has grown to become one of the industry's leading sources for packaging and equipment solutions,

**Above:** Volm Companies President and Chief Executive Officer (CEO) Daniel Mueller reflects on the multi-generational family operation celebrating 70 years in business, in 2024, saying, "One of the things that impresses me most about Volm's history is how the first and second generations of the Volm family had a passion to serve the customers."



including, of course, potato bagging, packaging and palletizing machines and supplies.

“One of the things that impresses me most about Volm’s history,” Mueller says, “is how the first and second generations of the Volm family had a passion to serve the customers.”

“They weren’t necessarily trying to develop innovative solutions, partnerships or growth for the sake of growth; it just happened because of answering the question, ‘What’s best for our customers?’” he adds.

“Once that became clear, they were unafraid to take risks, invest in new technologies, and diversify their product lines and services,” Mueller continues. “While doing all this, they recognized the importance of building strong relationships with customers, suppliers, their local communities, and employees.”

In conclusion, Mueller says, “I’m impressed that 70 years later, we have retained our focus on striving to do what’s best for the customer and letting our decisions flow from there.”

**What have been the most notable advancements over the past 70 years, touching on just a few?** When you start out selling used burlap bags to local growers, almost everything we do now is an advancement! A huge one was the move from paper mesh to poly-mesh in the 1980s, bringing a more cost-effective and shelf-stable product for produce to the North American market.

Though the original style may be used less and less, the impact from that remains in our half-and-half bags, wicketed all-mesh bags, and netting that you see produce in.

Another obvious advancement came when we also started bringing computerized weighing and bagging to the North American market. This allowed our customers to service their retailers more efficiently and accurately.

And just like mesh, we’ve built



off that to bring automation and accuracy to as many of our customers’ packing-line operations as possible so that innovation from the early ’90s reverberates through today.

**What do you want readers to know about Volm Companies on this, it’s 70th year in business? What is Volm touting for its 70th anniversary?**

Touting is a funny word for Volm. We recently went through a core values exercise where we used the most common characteristics of our team to arrive at a more specific set

**Above:** Red potatoes are run through a Wyma Solutions washing and grading line, with Volm Companies being the North American distributor of Wyma post-harvest equipment.

of Volm core values. Unsurprisingly, some of the top team-member values were “kind, humble and positive.”

But because of that humility, it hasn’t been a topic of conversation on what we are touting to the market on our 70th anniversary. I guess this article may be the kicking-off point!

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**What is your own history in the company, Daniel, and how have you advanced and evolved within the business?** Upon leaving my corporate finance role within the healthcare tech and distribution industry, I completed my MBA degree before returning to Volm.

I came into a general business development role, but it soon became apparent that we needed to focus on the company's internal organizational and procedural aspects.

Our customers have done so well in their growth that Volm grew with them, and much of that growth happened without establishing some

of the basic blocking and tackling required for our company.

I've been CEO for about seven years now, and that journey is one we're still on today. We know we have a way to go, but if every day we answer the question, "How can Volm become easier to work with?," when we look back a month, a year, or a decade later, I'm excited to see the results for our customers.

**Is the largest part of the business still bags and packaging, or Volmstackers, Volmpacks, fencing, or other?** Definitely, the largest portion of our business remains packaging, with potatoes remaining the largest industry served.

**Above and Below:** General, flexible poly-based packaging remains the largest segment or product line in Volm Companies' manufacturing division. Here, potatoes are shown in Half N Half bags, mixed potato packaging, wicketed bags, and in a mesh bag with a Mono label.

From that, packaging and the need to automate, as mentioned earlier, resulted in our equipment division.

About 20% of our organization results from and serves our customers with equipment. We now have design and layout specialists across North America to support our sales team in servicing our customers with the best specific applications for their unique needs.

Our goal with both packaging and equipment is that, from when a customer's product enters their shed until it leaves, Volm would like to offer the best value, quality, and service for their needs.





**What's the largest segment or product line in Volm's manufacturing division?** General, flexible poly-based packaging. Our division in Idaho, Yellowstone Plastics, is our single largest division with printing, lamination, and converting.

When you look at the products that come out of there, we serve not just fresh produce, but also lawn and garden, frozen fruit, and even meatballs and meat patty bags you'll find in the larger club stores.

**Is sustainable and biodegradable packaging or meeting sustainability initiatives your biggest challenge today, or what are the biggest hurdles to overcome in modern bagging and packaging?** The biggest hurdle to overcome is clarifying the market confusion around packaging. We can offer true biodegradability, but the user must vet the promises made around it.

We offer recyclable and post-consumer recyclable content. We offer bio-blends to reduce the plastic used. We offer consumer-size paper. And we even offer compostable. With almost all of these comes higher costs, but more importantly, there is no silver bullet.

The benefits of biodegradable or compostable may be the exclusion of recyclability. The benefits of reducing food waste and extending shelf-life by using mesh may mean that How2Recycle won't support it even if it is recyclable.

There is so much out there, but no perfect answer yet, and any pie-in-the-sky promises should really be looked at seriously. No one wants to represent something that isn't true to the end user.

Currently, plastics are getting a bad look because we do a poor job recycling in North America, but they carry shelf-life and food waste benefits that are being lost in this discussion.

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**- Daniel Mueller,**  
*president and CEO, Volm Companies*

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## Interview . . .

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Paper is something we're showing at trade shows and doing customer trials with as well, but traction can be slow, and retailers need to be on board with some of the downsides of any new application.

**What materials do most of your wholesale and retail bag customers want their potatoes and vegetables packaged in?** Answering this, in general, is tough because of so many divergent desires. Some large retailers have already made promises in their public releases that seem to point toward sustainability, but their daily habits take them differently.

Other, more niche (but still significant) retailers are trialing paper packaging for consumers. Depending on the potato size and type, small-format all-mesh bags have exploded, while larger club stores might be moving away from 10- and 15-pound bags down to 5 pounds, even though their focus is generally bulk.

Recyclability is number one, whether from plastic or paper. There's a move by states requiring post-consumer recycled content, and we're ready to go when that comes.



**I see a lot of Volmstackers and Volmpacks in potato packing sheds. How was Volm able to capture a relatively large part of that business?**

It does start with the second generation's openness to seeing a need and going for it. At the right place at the right time and moving fast, but it's more than that, too.

We never want to be the company that drops a piece of equipment off at our customer and says, "Good luck." We've established a nationwide

team of field service technicians, spare parts depots, and strong vendor relationships to provide the best after-sale support possible.

Maintaining that high level of knowledge in today's environment can be hard, and we are often training new members on a widening range of equipment. But our goal is to be available long after the installation to keep an operation up and running.

**Is Volm Companies national or international, and how many locations and employees does Volm have?** Volm is international, with ownership of the Dutch arm that makes our weighers and baggers (known as Manter outside the United States) and a Polish company that makes the metal pieces for assembly.

We also have a large location in Canada with about 40 employees focused on engineering and building stacking applications (robotic palletizing), material handling, equipment assembly, and bag-making.

**Above:** About 20% of Volm Companies' business involves servicing customers with equipment such as Volmpack potato packaging machines and complete potato lines.







Throughout North America, we have 570 employees with distribution and manufacturing in Antigo, Wisconsin; Idaho Falls, Idaho; Pasco, Washington; and Brantford, Ontario.

We also have distribution in Monte Vista, Colorado, and Fresno, California. Many of our sales and field service teams are also in satellite locations outside of that to best service the customers.

**Bryant/Antigo, Wisconsin is still a major certified seed potato growing area—how does Volm remain rooted in Wisconsin?**

In all honesty, when we focused so much on packing for fresh consumption produce, we lost sight of applications for seed growers. It’s a funny question because just this season, we all sat down and said, “That’s not acceptable for us to have roots here and not try and serve them.”

So, we’ve onboarded a sales

**Above:** Historic images show the Volm Farm Supply office/warehouse on 7th Avenue in Antigo; a Volm Farm Supply trade show booth in the 1950’s; the Volm Store, in Bryant, in the late ’50s or early ’60s; and Edward Volm (right in the last photo with a customer) in the new Bryant warehouse, in the mid-’50s.

representative to start over and see what value Volm can offer within these operations. We have relationships that go back to the start of Volm, but we’ve let our path diverge, and that’s not something we want.

So, we hope for great things and to bring value to people whom we should be serving the closest!

**What tasks, job duties or initiatives occupy most of your workday?** Quite often, this depends on the time of year we’re in. We have a blended Board of Directors at Volm (family and outsiders), so my time may be spent interacting with the Board and pulling together the quarterly meeting packet.

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But for the most part, my workday is high sporadicity. It's not uncommon to be on a call about an equipment installation that needs some direction, to meet with a supplier of poly for our plants, to interview a candidate for a role, and then get an update about our ERP (Enterprise Resource Planning software for optimizing operations) implementation.

Then I try to walk our manufacturing floor in Idaho to say "hi" and get a

feel for production, but often the day gets by without that happening, sadly.

**What is your favorite part of the job?**

Working with the great and dedicated team we have. Another of our core values is "Without our customers, we are nothing."

The day can get chaotic, and the teams can feel a lot of stress trying to do their best for the customer, but it's because we have people driven by that core value, and it's really fun

to work alongside a team like that.

**Are you meeting growers in the field or retailers in the store?**

We're much more grower/packer driven. That's where our teams try to have the best relationships and offer the most value. We listen to them to hear what their needs are from the retailers and try to make sure we have something in our portfolio that can best serve them.

There are always a few retailers making more top-down packaging decisions, and we try to stay close to that, but our business model is to stay closer to the people we've grown with, and that's the growers/shippers.

**What do you see as the continuing role of Artificial Intelligence in bagging/packaging?**

We don't currently see much AI being utilized in a packaging line beyond grading ahead of the packaging machinery.

There will be further advancements in the way that the packaging line

**Above:** Daniel Mueller's cousin, Michael Hunter (second from right), and Michael's wife, Amanda (right), accept the "Manufacturer of the Year" award from the Wisconsin Manufacturers & Commerce (WMC) association, in 2024, on behalf of Volm Companies.

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machinery integrates with each other, and the use of AI tools will allow for better production control and reporting and offer a new level of predictive maintenance to the end users.

**Do you get excited by technological advancements in your field, or do you wish they'd slow down a bit?** Technological advancements have been exciting to be part of, as they have allowed us to offer our customers an ever-expanding suite of product solutions.

Some of those advancements also improve how we support our customers through better software updates and remote service deployment.

However, these advancements bring a host of challenges as we need to constantly adapt our people and product lines to the ever-changing landscape. Change can be exciting, difficult, or even scary for those most affected by the change.

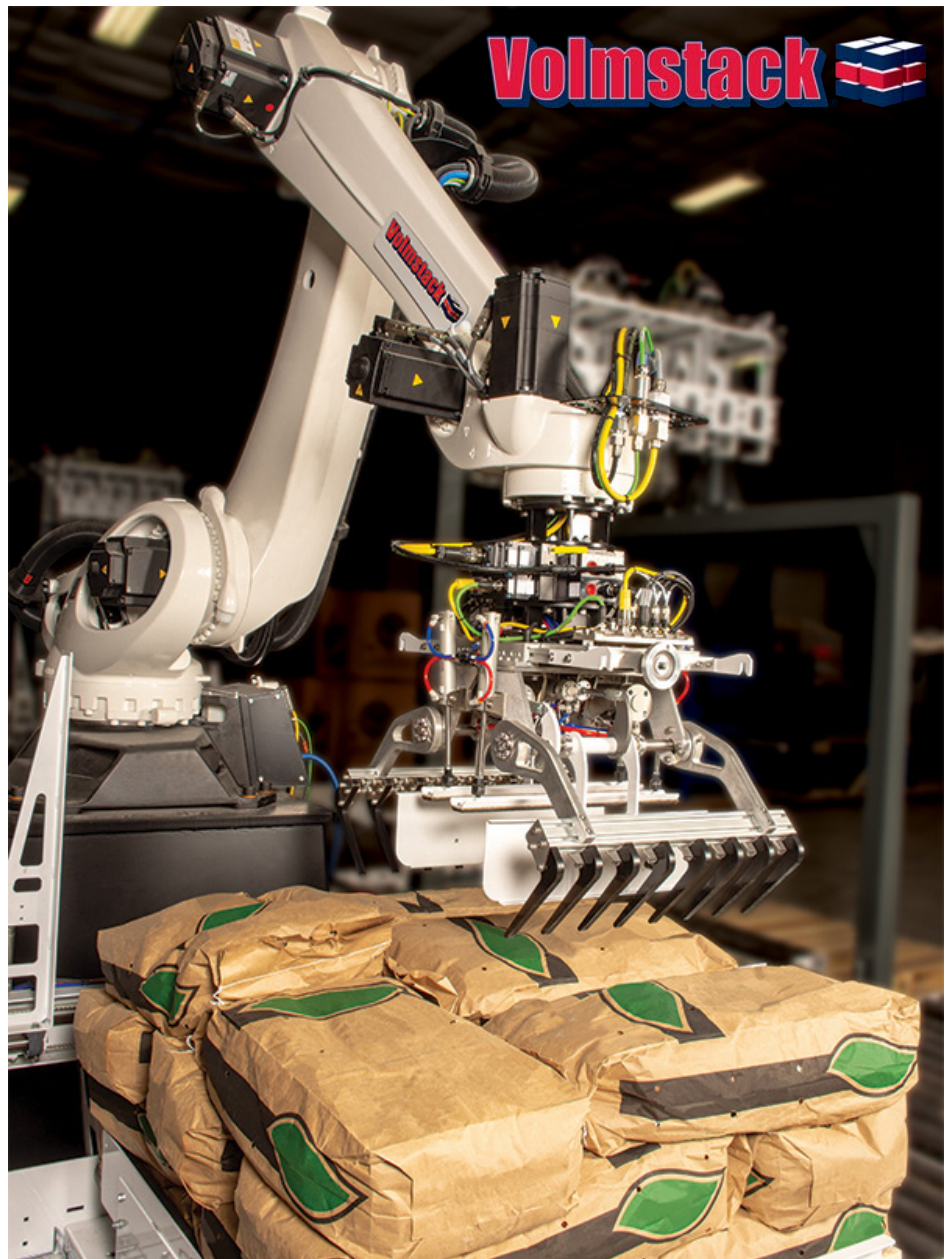
From a business perspective, adopting new technologies to improve processes and become more efficient often carries an upfront investment that needs to be carefully evaluated to ensure the business can maximize the intended benefit.

**Volm recently took home the 2024 Wisconsin Manufacturer of the Year Award. What do you think were the main factors in winning the award?**

I think it again comes down to people. A third core value encapsulating our people is "A commitment to our purpose."

Our Mission Statement is "The Volm Companies exists to serve and build up our customers, suppliers, communities, and each other guided by the principles of our Lord, Jesus Christ."

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Volm Companies has made significant inroads into the palletizing market with its robotic Volmstack palletizers.

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**Interview . . .**

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When we have team members who want to serve those around them, it will sometimes come through in well-deserved awards!

We know that current labor and supply chain factors impact us, and that has an impact on our customers' orders. We're not unaware, and when that happens, our whole team cares so much that they are grieved.

But the award recognizes people who are dedicated to making the best products for our customers, and our team deserves that recognition.

**How can Volm remain a leader in the field and be ahead of trends and progression?** We must remain close with our grower/shipper customers, listening to their pain points or dreams that come out as, "If I could just do this ..." Then, we must use our scale and connections to execute on



Winter doesn't stop the supply flow at the Volm Companies crop fertilizer store in Antigo.

their behalf.

With such an extensive portfolio, it would not be very smart of us to try developing every new application. New packaging materials are being

developed in labs, and automation technology could be popping up in a field as far away as automotive manufacturing.

What Volm can do best is monitor



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these developments and partner with the applications to bring a cohesive solution that meets our potato customers' specific needs, applications that we can work with the innovator to tailor to our potato customers.

We still have an R&D arm and develop applications we see needs for, whether that's the automation of what was manual packaging of pouches to lower-cost stacking solutions for smaller to mid-size operations.

We do develop, but having a wide-ranging portfolio also requires partnering with others and being the "fast follower" to best serve our customers' changing needs.

**What do you hope for the future of the company?** We have a rule about coming back to the three-fold business: you work outside the company and have to work your way up through leadership, you do some form of secondary education that interests you, and you come into Volm at relatively the level of position you left your career at, and the Board of Directors decides when to move you up.

This is our way of trying to ensure that, though there is an opportunity

because of your family, you at least have experience and work ethic to back it up if you decide to come back.

Just like it was never expected that I would return to the family business, I don't have that expectation for any of my four kids. But regardless of what my kids do, for the sake of our team and customers, I want the company to remain growing and healthy so that the fourth generation has that opportunity!

**Above:** The potato industry has been good to Volm Companies, with 70 years of business and growth as a global leader in agriculture packaging.

Volm is important to our local communities, and our local communities and team members are important to us, so we want to be here for 70 more years. To do that, we need to keep answering the question, "How can we be even easier to work with?" so our customers are blessed by us. **BCT**

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