

» Eric Birns, President & CEO, BIRNS, Inc.



# COMMITTED TO INTEGRITY IN BUSINESS

AN INTERVIEW WITH ERIC BIRNS,  
PRESIDENT & CEO, BIRNS, INC.

Our readers know BIRNS designs and manufacturing of high-performance lighting and connector systems, and it's true that they provide exceptional products. You can read about all of them on their website, and you should, because that commitment to quality is what built BIRNS into a global leader.

What you may not know, is that they are led by a man whose core values have become the driving force behind that renowned high-performance. Eric Birns is committed to understanding the requirements of every potential client that he meets, whether it's a leading ROV manufacturer or a small diving company, the U.S. Navy or a university laboratory. Our editor asked Eric Birns to summarize how he implements his core values in a cutting-edge, technology driven company:

## **BIRNS was founded in 1954. How was the industry different then?**

Back then, the industry was young and unsophisticated, and the technology was in its infancy, so every product introduction required new development. My father, Jack Birns, started a small business in Hollywood, selling photographic equipment to the Navy and other customers. It was a bit of a detour from his successful career as a photographer for LIFE Magazine, but every day, he worked hard to satisfy customers' needs.

As BIRNS grew, our product line expanded to include underwater

lights and other equipment, including specialty lights for the US Man-In-The-Sea program and Sea Lab, supplying what was considered deep submergence lighting at that time, even though those early incarnations only went down to about 92 meters.

We also began serving the Navy, the early oil and gas industry and the commercial diving market. Not long after, we started making subsea connector systems, for our own lights like the BIRNS Snooper and our lines of helmet lights, and then began supplying the industry with complex connector systems as demand rapidly increased.

Of course, even now, ours is a small industry, so to stay in business BIRNS had to develop on-going long-term customer relationships. These relations depend on customers recognizing that we are always striving to do the right thing.

## **What does do the right thing mean to BIRNS?**

It means we must act ethically. Over time, we developed our business structure and codified our practices. In 1994 we wrote our ethical code of conduct: the BIRNS Guiding Principles. We achieved third-party ISO 9001:2008 certification of our Quality Management System

(QMS) in 2009, and developed our BIRNS Cultural Statement (incorporating seven main ethical tenets) in 2014. Although BIRNS is a for-profit enterprise, we have always tried to operate the business in a way that makes the world a better place. For example, we run a vibrant internship program, make charitable contributions, and have an on-going annual college scholarship program.

Recently we upgraded our QMS structure and transitioned certification to ISO 9001:2015, which emphasizes leadership commitment to understanding the needs of all interested parties, in order to increase customer focus and satisfaction. The process required our management team to thoroughly consider *all* of the stakeholder groups with which we interact—in any way—and to work out how to improve that interaction.

During this period I happened to encounter three concurrent (and convergent) elements of ethical education: a Lockheed Martin webinar on implementing a formal Ethics Program; another on ISO 10018 and Quality People Management, leading to study of Employee Engagement; and my deepening interest in philosophy, which led me to ponder our company's purpose.

Therefore, we refined and upgraded our core values: *Focus on the Customer; Do the Right Thing; Treat People Right; and Continually Improve*. These core values are integrated into our business efforts, our internal projects and all communications.

**Are your employees buying into these core values?**

Yes, and they are an integral part of the process. We've implemented an ongoing Employee Engagement Program, giving every team member a voice so we can take appropriate action. Similar programs for other stakeholders are being developed. We actively consider how we affect the world during every major business decision, so we discontinued product lines for which we don't have a clear competitive advantage; actively recycle various materials; and are instigating sustainable business practices such as earth-friendly packing materials and eschewing certain plastics. We invest heavily in employee training and development as well as steadily improving tooling, equipment, and employee benefits.

We have now begun a period of unprecedented growth and efficiency. Our most recent employee survey rated "Direct Management" 8.21 (out of 10) and "Changes that BIRNS has been implementing" 8.29. In independent reviews by former and present BIRNS employees, the company received a 4.7 rating (out of 5) and fully 100% would "recommend BIRNS to a friend."

Employee engagement isn't just a nicety; it's a prerequisite for happy customers and overall business success. For example, our committed and focused team recently developed a new product with extraordinary performance characteristics for the Navy, requiring us to significantly improve our capabilities. I was proud of our team for their accomplishment, but especially so when the Navy told us afterwards that none of our competitors had been willing even to discuss the project due to its technical challenges.

Acting in accordance with a strong ethical framework can be a competitive advantage. It turns out that doing the right thing is good business! Nonetheless, doing the right thing shouldn't be done because it's good for business, but because it's the right thing to do.

**At a recent conference, BIRNS presented *Getting it Right the First Time*. Can you explain that concept for our readers?**

For BIRNS, building quality products includes durability and reliability, but it also means planning for future capability, something we can help clients with by having the right conversations. By building products that meet customers' long-term needs, we reduce their general costs, and by eliminating the need for future replacement, we help serve the greater good of the customer.

Subsea connector systems are expensive and component replacements impact multiple systems. So, to get it right the first time, you have to ask the right questions. Are you under-designing the system or over designing it? How will adding more capability now, or replacing components later, affect other systems in the vehicle? For example, a cable plug and receptacle designed for use in a fluid filled enclosure may be incompatible with those designed for a 1-atmosphere pressure vessel.



» Amy Brown, Chief Marketing Officer at BIRNS, represents the company at the Oceanology International Conference. The company invites attendees at OI Americas, February 25-27 in San Diego, CA to visit stand C21, where they can learn more about BIRNS' latest products.



» BIRNS has introduced new lamps for an array of lights for applications from helmet and vehicle use to Pressure Vessel for Human Occupancy (PVHO), including the BIRNS Doubly-Safe Chamber Light-LED™. The new 450 lumen lamps for this rugged chamber light have 35,000-hour lamp lives and come in a wide selection of voltage ranges, all with a mere 6.5W power draw.



» The BIRNS Primium™ series is a heavy-duty connector line that's open face pressure rated to 6km, and stands up to the harshest physical abuse that the marine environment can dish out. It provides incredible power, signal and voltage performance capabilities, including requirements above 3kV, and its wide array of pin configurations includes options up to 40 electrical contacts from 2 to 20 AWG.

We strive to have those discussions with clients early, so we can make suggestions about future capability and cost-savings across the system lifecycle. If adding future capability is easy/inexpensive, do it, but also keep in mind that assessments must include the impact on other systems. Before purchasing products, identify your critical needs. Consider whether the system must be easily reconfigurable, either in the future or the near term. The answers to such questions will determine things like whether purpose-built solutions are preferred to a "one size fits most" product.

BIRNS offers high-quality equipment for each of your critical needs, and our long history means we also have experience to talk about everything from future capabilities to wild-card variables. We understand the consequences of such differences, including how to make cable sets compatible across all of your instrument configurations. Getting it right the first time means that in order to make the most of our high-quality products, clients should talk with our experts as early as possible.

## ABOUT BIRNS:

BIRNS provides solutions trusted in the planet's most demanding environments—from deep ocean and marine applications to military programs and nuclear power facilities. They deliver a wide range of unparalleled, technologically advanced products, proven to perform in incredibly rigorous applications. From design to development to meticulous testing—BIRNS exceeds industry standards and customer expectations—constantly evolving to meet the changing needs of the marketplace. BIRNS will host Stand C21 at OI Americas, February 25-27 in San Diego, CA. For more information, visit

[WWW.BIRNS.COM](http://WWW.BIRNS.COM)