

## J.G. Ullman & Associates implements major corporate expansion

*The best laid schemes o' mice an' men  
Gang aft a-gley (often go awry)  
Robert Burns — 1786*

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CORNING — At John G. Ullman & Associates, Inc. (JGUA), strategic planning has been underway for more than five years to ensure nothing goes awry.

In 2011, the company's senior management team began a long and deliberate process of strategic planning. Over time, Jason Nickerson, Daren Wilcox, Tom Snow, Karen Meriwether, and the eponymous president — who collectively total 137 years of service to the company — worked with other members of the firm to develop a bold plan for substantial business growth over the long term.

The initiatives, resulting from the team's deliberations, were based on a confirmation of JGUA's basic mission of providing unlimited financial planning and investment management for its clients. The business concept presumes working with and directly assisting clients in individualized and customized-investment management. JGUA also offers financial planning to include, cash-flow planning, retirement, estate-decisions, insurance reviews, tax-planning and preparation, and other broad, financial support.

"The initiatives are designed around the company's core values," says John Ullman, the firm's founder and president, "which include our unshakable commitment to the highest ethical standards, an extremely close interactive relationship with our clients, maintaining balanced portfolios, providing comprehensive financial management, and developing and retaining a staff with exceptionally strong skills and dedication to our clients."



John G. Ullman, president of Corning-based John G. Ullman & Associates (JGUA) which provides financial-planning and investment advice, leads an internal team that has positioned the firm for substantial growth. As part of the plan, JGUA recently purchased a 30,000 square-foot building at the neighboring Air Park, is looking for opportunities to open new offices, and is actively hiring new staff.

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Back in his office in Corning, Ullman, a devoted Buffalo Bills football fan, calls the signals for a team comprised of professionals, including certified financial planners (CFPs), chartered financial analysts (CFAs), CPAs, attorneys, MBAs, and support staff who offer comprehensive financial management to about 1,000 client families in 42 states. The firm's current assets under management total about \$900 million (as of 2016 year-end).

In addition to its 15,000-square-foot Corning headquarters scattered among five buildings on East Market Street,

JGUA has a branch office in Rhinebeck and an affiliate in Rochester. The firm's revenue in 2016 totaled \$12.5 million. The corporation employs 58 people, has more than 50 shareholders, and is directed by a nine-member board.

"We charge a fee for our services based on the assets we directly manage," states Ullman. "For accounts with more than \$750,000 with the firm, the fee covers all of our services, except for unusual travel. I call it an unlimited retainer ... To avoid conflicts of interest, JGUA doesn't sell any products."

## How it started

Ullman launched the firm in 1978, operating from his apartment in Corning with one manual and one electric typewriter, and driving to his clients in a 10-year-old car.

"I always knew clients would respond favorably to an organized team possessing a range of skills in financial planning," Ullman says. "Why spend your time coordinating among an attorney, CPA, stockbroker, and financial planner when we can provide a single place for all your financial-planning needs; call it one-stop shopping. Not only is it more convenient, but it also ensures good communications. JGUA reaches out to the families so there is multi-generational involvement in the process ... In some ways, I feel like a country doctor dispensing financial prescriptions and being on-call whenever needed."

## Strategic plan

JGUA has grown organically for nearly four decades, but the senior management team plans to speed up the growth.

"Once we roll out the plan, the goal is to grow well in excess of 50 percent over a five-year period," notes Ullman. "We have used the past half decade to prepare carefully. In 2015, the firm completed a major investment in securities-trading and client-accounting platforms. It also acquired supplemental, financial-planning software and upgraded the client-centric, communications software. In addition, the firm has invested in its 'plan-for-staff' additions: tax, information technology, trading/portfolio management, and human resources.

"We have also used our planning time to rebrand the firm," continues Ullman, "developing new sales-and-marketing initiatives, including the use of social media and other outreach techniques ... The strategic plan also includes a focus on long-term continuity, which is important to our client base, our team, and the shareholders. After nearly four decades of service to our clients, it's not unusual to work with three generations of the same family. As an element of the strategic plan, the board of directors has established both short- and long-term succession plans to ensure continuity

... At the top of our list, is a major recruitment effort to add significant staff, half of whom will include CFAs, CFPs, CPAs, MBAs, and attorneys."

## New headquarters

A major task was to expand the existing headquarters or find suitable space elsewhere to accommodate the anticipated growth. "Our original plan had been to expand the existing downtown headquarters, but that proved to be cost-prohibitive. In December [2016], we closed on a 30,000-square-foot building in Airport

Park," posits Ullman, "formerly the Wick Office Building. [The seller was Grace Real Properties, LLC, owned by Gary Wick.] The one-story building is 20 years old and was built as two wings connected to a 3,000-[square]-foot atrium. In addition to buying the building, we purchased an adjacent lot which brought the site to 9.24 acres. The building currently has one tenant occupying approximately 9,000 square feet. There is no mortgage or loan associated with the project." JGUA is in the process of choosing an architect and contractor and expects the renovations will be completed in 12 to 18 months. The firm, which owns three of the five downtown-Corning buildings, is not abandoning the downtown location. Rather, it plans to retain ownership and maintain a downtown presence, using the Market Street space for client meetings and for staffing needs.

According to the Nov. 15, 2016, minutes of the Chemung County Industrial Development Agency (CCIDA), the total-project cost was projected to be \$2.85 million, including the purchase price of \$1.65 million and \$800,000 for renovations. JGUA applied for a 10-year PILOT valued at \$310,520 and sales-tax incentives valued at \$92,000. CCIDA estimated its investment as 13.8 percent of the total-project cost. In the meeting minutes, JGUA projected that its total staff would increase from the current level of 55 to between 90 and 95 employees. CCIDA subsequently approved the JGUA request.

## The game plan

"Finally, the five-year plan calls for opening new branches in order to generate the projected growth," avers Ullman. "There will be an internal team here at JGUA that will lead the search for suitable opportunities. This phase of our growth can either come through acquisitions or we could decide to open offices de novo." Before launching his business, Ullman spent six years at Corning, Inc. filling successive financial-management positions, including mergers and acquisitions.

Ullman's signal calling for nearly four decades at JGUA reminds this reporter of Woody Hayes, the legendary football coach at Ohio State University. His strategy was to follow fundamental principles by first establishing a sound running game, called "three yards and a cloud of dust," and then playing tough defense to get the ball back. Passing was only utilized when the quarterback saw the defense line up for another run. At JGUA, the strategic-management team also insists on following fundamental principles: maintaining high ethical standards and following the game plan while allowing for needed adjustments. The insistence on a balanced portfolio ensures steady progress toward the client's goal line without drama or the need for a Hail

Mary.

"We don't hire candidates looking for a job," says the company founder. "We hire people looking for a career at JGUA. Our success comes from a well-trained staff focused on advising and servicing our clients' best interests. That requires us finding exceptional people. It's the only way to build a multi-generational relationship with our clients: We understand their family history. At JGUA, the staff recognizes that we live in an age of blended and non-traditional families, many of our clients may require long-term care, some will have multiple careers before retirement, and the complexity of financing college plus a complicated tax code and an increased regulatory environment require careful planning and guidance. The game may have become more complicated, but the fundamentals don't change."

## Ullman's numeracy

Ullman exhibited a skill for numbers in his childhood. "I was a big baseball fan as a kid," he remembers. "Growing up on Long Island, I memorized the batting stats of all the players. When my father came home from work, he would find the sports page missing from the newspaper. To divert my attention away from sports, he bought me one share of Texas Gulf Sulphur [stock] hoping I would memorize stock prices instead of baseball stats. It didn't work: He then found both the sports and financial pages of the paper missing."

The fascination with stocks began at the age of seven or eight. By the time Ullman was in high school, he was not only managing funds for others, but he also hired neighborhood children to work for him selling greeting cards for the Elmira Greeting Card Co. He pursued his bent for mathematics by earning a bachelor's degree in economics from Johns Hopkins University and an MBA in financial management from the University of Chicago. In 1972, he joined the Corning Glass Works, now Corning, Inc., where he held five positions in six years. Ullman left in 1978 to start JGUA. Married to his high-school sweetheart Barbara (Bobbie), the couple resides in the greater Corning area and has three adult children.

At age 68, the corporate quarterback looks back with satisfaction on the positive impact he has had on the company. Like every QB, however, he recognizes that the firm's future success will require a team approach emphasizing both consistent offense and defense and keeping the corporate eye on the ball. The poet Robert Burns may be right about the best-laid plans, but JGUA has planned carefully to anticipate anything going awry with the corporate strategic plan and is prepared to respond to any obstacles that may arise. ■