Candy Man: Alum helps spread the love on Valentine’s Day

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Rob Nelson (BSM ’88) is CEO of Elmer Chocolate Corp., the nation’s second-largest manufacturer of heart-shaped box chocolates.

Rob Nelson (BSM ’88) won’t be scrambling to find a last-minute Valentine’s Day gift this year.

As CEO of Elmer Chocolate, Nelson has been planning for Valentine's Day 2025 for the last two years. The second-biggest manufacturer of Valentine's Day chocolates in the United States, the Ponchatoula, Louisiana-based company expects to produce up to 50 million heart-shaped boxes of candy this year.

Founded in 1855 by German immigrant Christopher Henry Miller, Elmer Chocolate was originally located in downtown New Orleans at Jackson Avenue and Levee Street. In 1963, the Nelson family purchased the company, relocating it to Ponchatoula seven years later. Today, Nelson runs the company with his brother, Michael Nelson (MBA '99), who serves as president and COO. In 2016, the brothers oversaw a $45 million company expansion that grew Elmer's manufacturing facility to 400,000 square foot and increased its workforce to 350 employees.

To achieve its staggering candy output, Nelson says Elmer uses a state-of-the-art chocolate molding line and packaging process. The molding line, which spans the length of three football fields, creates chocolates that are perfectly uniform in size and filling ratio. After the 90-minute molding process is complete, the chocolates are ready to be packaged into a variety of heart-shaped boxes.

Until 2006, Elmer packaged its chocolates by hand (think of the chocolate factory episode of "I Love Lucy"). Today, however, Elmer relies on robots to package its confections.

According to Nelson, robots have been a boon for the company, both in terms of efficiency and the number of jobs they create.

"Many mistakenly think automation reduces the number of jobs," says Nelson, who was inducted into National Confectionery Sales Association's Candy Hall of Fame in 2017. "But Elmer associates have made careers making chocolates from a computer screen and programming the robots that package the chocolates. For us, automation has been a catalyst for growth – in revenue, jobs and pay."

Now the largest employer in Ponchatoula, Elmer boasts a robust workforce of robot technicians, quality assurance managers, chefs, production supervisors, chocolate inspectors and other important roles.

"I love creating new career opportunities for people in our community and watching folks realize their true potential," Nelson says.

For Nelson, sharing a box of Elmer Chocolates means building a brighter future for Louisiana — and that just might be the sweetest gift of all.