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SECRETS OF CENTENNIAL FAMILY BUSINESS

Rieck's: The Product May Change, But the Quality Remains

By Donald Levitt

Charles Rieck moved from Chicago to Findlay, Ohio to seek his fortune during the great oil and gas boom of the 1880's. In 1888 he opened Rieck's – to sell art work, art supplies, wallpaper, and paint. Charles' son Carl took over the business when his father passed away, and Carl's daughter Nancy and her husband Jim Weaver ran the business in the third generation. Rieck's is now owned and operated by Charles Rieck's great-grandson Kent Weaver.

Secrets of Success

Secret #1: Evolve product focus over time to stay current

Everything Charles Rieck sold on the day he opened the business in 1888 is still sold at Rieck's today – but the emphasis on different products has changed over time. During the first and second generations Rieck's flourished with contract painting. During the third generation Rieck's exited the contract painting part of their business – though they continued to sell paint and wallpaper to independent contractors – and focused on picture framing.

“When I entered the business in 1976,” says Kent Weaver, “the limited edition print business was in its infancy. I did some market research and found that no one in Findlay was offering high-end prints – so we moved in that direction. The gallery end of the business really took off, and it's still very successful. We used to have a small section devoted to the gallery, but we still looked like a paint and wallpaper store. In 1984 we changed the whole look of the store. This was our first major expansion. We totally remodeled the inside to create a gallery atmosphere.”

“Through time you have to keep changing and diversifying,” notes Weaver. “Our main thrust now is North American-made merchandise – called American Crafts. We are introducing hand-blown glass, wood products and textiles. We've always strived to be unique. We don't want to be a cookie-cutter gallery.”

Secret #2: Evolve business processes over time to stay current

The second generation took Rieck's through a major business transformation – without the approval of the first generation.

“My great-grandparents were immigrants from Germany,” says Weaver, “and they wanted to go back and visit their families. When they were in Germany, my grandfather Carl sold all of the horses and wagons used for the paint contracting business and replaced them with trucks.”

Secret #3: Focus on quality

Kent Weaver comes from a long tradition of focusing on quality. “In Germany you have to be licensed to be a painter,” says Weaver. “Our contract painting flourished because we were craftsmen. Many of the large homes and fraternal organizations in Findlay had ballrooms, and for each of these we provided elaborate painting, stenciling, and gold leaf.”

“I always heard from my grandparents and parents that ‘You have to offer a good quality product and service at a good price.’ The only thing we have to offer is service. In a big box store the manager of the paint department was selling carpeting last month. We’ve been around a long time and we know all of the questions and answers about paint, art work, and colors. We sell paint at different levels of quality – but I would rather sell the better quality product because that keeps the people coming back.”

Secret #4: Don’t push the next generation

“My parents never encouraged me to come into the business,” notes Weaver. “My mother was never encouraged to come into the business. I’ve never encouraged my children to enter the business, and I never will. I may be the generation that turns the key for the last time. I won’t encourage my children, but if they want to become involved, that’s fine.”

Secret #5: Learn from parents and grandparents

“It’s exciting to carry on the heritage,” says Weaver. “It’s not an opportunity offered to many people. With changes, I ask myself ‘What would my grandfather do? What would my parents do?’ I feel like I’ve gotten enough guidance from them while they were here. When we were considering expanding the building I talked with my parents to get their opinion as to whether we should expand or sell the building and build a new building. I always involved them in the decision making process.”

Donald Levitt, Ph.D., president of Levitt Consulting, helps family businesses to succeed as both a business and a family. More information about this month’s topic, and other family business issues, can be found at LevittConsulting.com.