

## Communication key to father and son businesses

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Mike and Si Niswonger know about candy — how to mix chocolate and caramel and marshmallow, how to stretch and pull about 30 flavors of taffy, how to create peanut butter cups, mints and chocolate hearts.

And they learned it from their dad, Wes, who learned it from his father — the person who opened Patsy's in Colorado Springs more than 100 years ago.

“It's an easy flow,” Si said. “We grew up in the business, we learned our work ethic from grandpa, and our candy-making from dad. Grandpa would yell at us if we didn't wait on the customers — that's how we learned about customer service.”

For the father-son team, working together was a natural choice, if not always an easy one. Mike and Si grew up listening to their grandfather talk about hard work and good choices. They learned the candy-making side of the business from him, and from their father.

The camaraderie between the three men is obvious. Their dad makes sure the sons dress “in uniform,” while the sons refuse to don hair nets for pictures. Still, the three men seem to know each other — and the business — very well.

“We get along,” Mike said. “We've been taking orders for years now.”

While Mike specializes in Patsy's chocolate creations, Si focuses on the other items: taffy, English toffee, popcorn.

The sons work on the candy-making part of the business, while their dad — fresh from a trip to Germany for candy-making ideas, said he works on the “business” part of the business: the bottom line.

“I keep an eye on things — run the specialty area,” he said. “My dad bought the business, and I bought into it by default really.”

Most family-owned businesses start that way: a father starts it, trains the kids and then the kids (and sometimes their kids) take over. But working with family, especially children and parents working as a team, can be challenging.

Paul Henley, president of Henley's Key Service on Boulder Street, said the challenge is having the younger generation work hard — as hard as he did when he worked with his father.

“Now I have my son working, and a few nephews,” he said. “And they have to learn that just because their name is Henley doesn’t mean they get special privileges. They have an example to set — they have to work hard. And if they don’t, they get docked for it.”

The Niswongers say they’re “old school” as well — everyone works, and everyone works hard. The brothers do everything from making the candy and stocking shelves to polishing the floor.

“And we learned that from grandpa,” Mike said. “He worked hard, he went through the Depression, and they had a different attitude toward work.”

Michael and Josh Warner, a father-son team at Rapid Refill Ink, have worked together since Josh was 11.

“Well, what are the child labor laws?” his dad, Michael, asked. “He’s been in the office since about ’92, doing odds and ends. We just started the business back then.”

Having earned a college degree, Josh now manages the store on North Circle Drive, while his dad operates another business and a store location on 8th Street.

For Josh, the time with his father is important.

“I enjoy it, it’s great to see him out of the house,” he said. “I’ve learned so much from him, and what he’s done with his companies.”

For Michael, it’s all about “keeping it in the family.”

“Our plan is to have him be more and more involved in the business,” Michael said. “And some day, if the interest is there, for him to take it over. It’s been a lot of fun over the years to work together.”

But the business relationship isn’t without its challenges. Keeping everyone’s expectations in mind can be difficult.

“My expectations aren’t always the same as his,” Michael said. “But with a boss/subordinate relationship — and a father/son relationship — it’s fun to see him grow and develop critical thinking skills necessary in business.”

The most important thing in the father-son dynamic is communication.

“I’m his dad, so it’s difficult not to project my expectations and values on him,” Michael said. “It’s important that we come to an agreement, not that I just tell him what to do. It’s a negotiation process, that’s different than a parenting process.”

So far, Josh’s abilities have exceeded his father’s expectations.

“He worked here in the summer while he was at college,” Michael said. “And he did a better job than anyone else we had in sales.”

Henley agrees that communication and expectations have to be spelled out if fathers and sons are going to work together.

“It can be difficult,” he said. “But you have to tell them, if they’re going to work, they’re going to start out like everyone else would.”

Henley began working for his father when he was old enough to start a full-time job. He said he always figured he’d stay. But he isn’t sure about his son.

“He doesn’t really know what he wants to do,” Henley said. “But he’s young, just turned 21, so he’s got a lot of years to decide.”

Father-son teams also get to know each other on a different level, the Niswongers say. And the difficulty soon becomes keeping the “shop talk” in the shop.

“We have other things we like to do together,” Mike said. “And that helps. We all ride motorcycles, so it gets us out of the shop, and still working together. We play together, do family things, and it builds that spirit. It really helps.”



*Josh and Michael Warner operate Rapid Refill Ink.*