

Making every decision count, Appliance Center stands tall in market

If there's a corporate motto for Appliance Center, the appliance-electronics-furniture-and-just-about-everything-for-the-home store that's been a local fixture since 1963, it might be "Let's do this."

At least that's the impression one gets talking with Julie Abbey, the Maumee-based company's vice president and co-owner, and Ken Wanemacher, general manager. I had admired the store's display of radio-controlled (RC) airplanes; frozen in flight from the ceiling, the colorful aerial armada was a show-stopper. As Ken explained, it was something that grew out of customer interest.

"We built one plane to display and when we hung it up, a lot of RC enthusiasts loved it. They started bringing over planes they had stored in their basements, garages and sheds. We thought, 'Well, let's just do this' and added them to the display. After all, a lot of blood, sweat and tears went into building them."

It was a decision typical of what Julie calls the perfect triad: right for customers, right for employees, right for the business. In this case, the planes delighted kids — as do the stuffed animals for sale, the free popcorn and the red riding carts — and their parents.

"A lot of the employees here have young children, so we understand that this shopping process often includes them," Ken says. "We value families as our customers, so we try to make the experience as positive as possible."

Appliance Center's founder, the late Chuck Oswald, likely was also thinking, "Let's do this" when he was doing deliveries for Appliance Plaza on Lagrange Street and saw an opportunity, according to Julie.

"He was starting a family and thought, 'I can do this for myself.' His employer helped him purchase an existing appliance store — it also sold lawn mowers and record players — in Maumee's Parkway Plaza. Pretty soon he decided he didn't want partners, so he talked with his father Jim, who mortgaged his house to help him out. He grew his business, bought out his father and paid off that mortgage, and relocated behind Parkway Plaza to a site called Holiday Plaza."

The next "Let's do this" moment came when the site of the current flagship store became available. Julie, then a teenager, recalls thinking, "Why did he want to move out there next to the railroad tracks? But he was a visionary, and thought it was better to own your building than to rent it. He went from a teeny store of six thousand square feet. Now we're at 82,000."

Chuck turned the service area into a showroom with room for plenty of the era's console TVs, boom boxes and record players, with a warehouse in the back. Over the years they expanded via multiple additions. Along the way, John and her brother John (one of six Oswald siblings, and now co-owner and company president) bought the business in 1994.

Chuck Oswald's sense of vision was in play as well when he became one of the founding board members of the UT Family Business Center. "He was a very astute businessman, and he saw the value of like-minded business owners getting together and getting help from university," says Julie. "But more important to him was the chance to mentor. He actually taught at UT, and donated his salary back every year. He wanted to share with others what he'd learned the hard way. And he

was very philanthropic; he wanted to gift not his children but people who really needed it.”

Julie and John continue their father’s philanthropy, contributing millions of dollars in the community. As well, they continue the Family Business Center connection, with Julie in the center’s longest-running affinity group and Ken in year three of another. He says, “It’s an incredible experience. My group is around my age, at the same point in their professional lives. Quite a few marketing ideas I use now have even been generated by talking with the group.”

Chuck’s business acumen continued even after his death in 2004, Julie notes: “In 2008 we added space for furniture because that was always our dad’s dream.”

Fateful 2008, of course, brought a major Wall Street upheaval. But the Oswalds were undeterred on expanding, Julie says: “We said, ‘Let’s do this’ even though we didn’t know what the market was going to do. We were lucky because we had many people suddenly unemployed or underemployed, so we were able to bring them onto our team. We were one of the few local businesses growing at that time.”

And Appliance Center — today the area’s sole independent appliance store — continues to grow, with a Sylvania location, an outlet store, a distribution center and most recently, a parts division with its own development team. “And City Paper again just voted us Number One furniture store,” notes Julie.

Challenges remain, she says, as Chapter 11 competitors like Art Van have found. “Today, you have to be sharp and super-competitive, making it up in volume. Had we not done this big thing with furniture, maybe we would have gone by the wayside as well. Maybe,” she jokes to Ken, “with the market the way it is now, we need to open a new store. What are you doing tomorrow?”

More seriously, she adds, “We just keep trying to do a little bit more. John said to me at one time, ‘Did you think that the more we did, the more we’d have to do?’ Well, it’s a labor of love. It’s not what I had intended to do with my life — I thought I was going to be an attorney. (She earned her law degree at UT.) I guess I can still do that when I retire!”

Seated on the sales floor in a plush sofa — one of the few times that day when she wasn’t in motion — she reflects, “It keeps you young. I do love what I do, Ken loves what he does. Life goes fast. You gotta love what you do, do what you love.”