



The Churchill Legend at 100

Running a successful business is hard enough. But running a legend? Well, that raises the enterprise a notch or two on the difficulty scale.

Walt Churchill is up to the challenge that you might call living the legend. After all, he was raised an active participant in the grocery business of his storied family, learning every physical nook and operational cranny of a local institution now in its 100th year.

“My father was involved in the Marine Corps, politics, and the grocery business,” Walt recalls of the late Walter Churchill Sr. “If I wanted to be with him, I had to be involved in those things. And because there were no babysitters, Dad and Mom took us to work with them.”

Today, Walt operates the two remaining brick-and-mortar stores bearing the family name — Walt Churchill’s Markets, in Perrysburg and Maumee. His roots, though, stretch back almost all the way to the first Churchill’s market in 1917.

At a very active 90 — he maintains a pace that might shame someone half his age — he’s acquired a professional savvy that he combines with a shoot-from-the-hip personal style to produce a simple, direct motto for his customers: “I may be the owner, but you’re the boss.”

TV monitors in Churchill’s stores keep customers up to date with the latest food products. Newspaper ads are still used, but as Walt’s wife Lois notes, the focus is on the quality rather than the price.

“We’re doing targeted marketing now, rather than scattershot,” she says. Sponsoring special events or programs outside the stores are fine, she adds, “but for the public those become just another place for free food or a T-shirt. They don’t do anything addressing why Churchill’s is different.”

What precisely is that difference? Walt points to their most recent newspaper ad. No prices are listed. Rather, the focus is on the friendly, knowledgeable professionals who make shopping a pleasure — and on the product quality. The ad reads: “The Churchill’s difference. Quality products, value-priced.”

Both Lois and Walt take special pride in the store’s beef brisket and their pork sausages, prepared in the Churchill’s kitchen and its smokehouse. Walt says, “We have the ingredients for quality. If you’re looking for cheap, that’s not us. We’re value priced for the quality.”

He adds, “I read that Costco does not have a marketing department. They do more than \$120 million in business and do a good job of taking care

of the customer in the stores. Our marketing department has done a lot of work on bringing people into the stores — but if you live in Sandusky, it's not so likely that you'll make the trip to Maumee or Perrysburg. It is more likely, though, if a satisfied customer tells a friend. That's the model we're switching to — word of mouth."

They've also begun investing resources in social media, Lois says. The tastes of 20- and 30-something shoppers are well known: they want organic, and they want the stories behind the products. Social media can provide an immediacy the younger demo craves.

The biggest requirement of word-of-mouth advertising, both Churchills say, is an ongoing customer rapport. As Walt says, "Our strategy is that if they point out a problem, we'll correct it and have a better customer, because they'll have a better reason to shop with us."

The approach dovetails with the company's plans to become an ESOP (employee stock ownership plan). "When that happens, the employees will carry on the tradition," Walt says. "If they don't, they probably won't work long for the company. Employees who want their stock to improve won't want their customers served by other employees who don't play by the rules of customer satisfaction."

Lois adds, "We're concentrating on keeping customers happy, unlike a lot of grocery stores where it's just about price. We've always been the place where customers are listened to."

The Churchill family has always listened to the wider community as well, as active participants and supporters. Like his father, Walt is a veteran Rotarian, never missing a meeting in 50 years.

He draws a comparison with his longtime membership in the UT Family Business Center. "[The center] is similar to Rotary and to fraternities, with networking and multiple generations. But it's unique because of the opportunity to meet other businesspeople outside a single industry; that's been a source of fresh ideas.

"You establish friends through the center, especially in the small affinity groups of about a dozen members. You might meet farmers up in Michigan, the publisher of a newspaper in Findlay. It's a mixed group, so you can hear a lot of different ideas about things like employee benefits and retirement options.

"And the university does a lot of things to make the center prosper."

Prospering is what the Churchills intend to keep doing — one customer at a time. As one of the aspirational placards in the company's conference room reads: "We are the artist and the customer is the critic."