



Family Business Comes Full Circle

Retailer of the Year winner says secret to longevity is good partnership and a lot of grit

By Heather Hudson

You might say Frank Orchard is part of a unique sandwich generation.

He and his brother George, co-owners of Orchard Transport, are in the act of passing a torch that was handed to them by their father and uncle more than 40 years ago.

But George's sons, Geoffrey and Kent, are taking on a company very different in nature than the one the senior Orchards inherited in the late 1960s. It's been a lot of years of hard work and perseverance but the brothers have prevailed.

In fact, if the Orchards of Delisle, Sask. have a defining family trait, it's their ability to withstand the challenges every small company faces. While many businesses of Orchard Transport's size might have folded five times over in the last 70 years, three generations of Orchard family has nurtured this one along from its earliest days.

Founded as Orchard Brothers Garage by brothers George and William Orchard in the 1930s, the business was a simple farm machinery and automotive dealership. Through sheer grit and determination, the elder brothers were able to steer it through the Depression and the tumultuous 1940s and into some kind of prosperity in the 1950s and early 1960s.

By then, George's sons Frank and George (junior) were shaping up to be the kind of kids you can trust to carry on the family

business. But by the late 1960s, when they were ready to start, business had begun to slow down.

"It was poor timing in Saskatchewan for those types of businesses and it wasn't doing so well," explains Frank.

Eventually, it "ceased to operate." Frank and George continued to run a couple of gravel trucks and began to branch out into grain and fertilizer hauling. In 1973, Orchard Brothers Transport was incorporated out of the ashes of their family's former business.

"In 1976, Roy Ardell from Cominco Tech. offered us the Elephant Brand fertilizer contract and the company grew from there," says Frank.

With the same grit and determination their father and uncle had displayed during the Depression, the brothers grew Orchard Transport into two divisions, transportation, headed by George, and a farm supplies, fertilizer and chemical sales, overseen by Frank.

Frank says the division of labour was decided amicably, as each brother was interested in different aspects of the company. Today, the two divisions act almost as two separate entities. "We still talk to each other pretty well every day, but we don't need to talk about business more than weekly or bi-weekly to discuss major issues."

Member Profile

Despite the autonomy of each division, Frank says their partnership has been one of the secrets to their success over the

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years. “Sometimes you see something your partner is missing and vice versa. And when you get tunnel vision from focusing on something so hard, it’s good to have someone to point out when you’re going in the wrong direction.”

Frank says the brothers didn’t envision having a company this size when they incorporated back in 1973. When asked how they managed it, Frank points back to that family legacy of never giving up.

“There have been good years and bad years as you always have in this type of industry and I guess it’s our dedication to stick with it that helped us succeed. That and the fact that we’ve always been in the same community.

“We have a very good portfolio of customers and in some cases we’re dealing with a third generation of people. I guess we treated them right and they treat us right and have supported us.”

He’s quick to point out the other important people in the equation: the 30 full-time employees, some of whom have also been with the company for decades. “We have a lot of loyal employees who enjoy what their doing and have their own relationships with members of the community.”

But respect and admiration seem to go both ways. In his nomination for CAAR’s Retailer of the Year Award last winter, Frank’s employees said they don’t work for their boss, they work “with” him. He’s known for encouraging his staff to further their education, even if it means time away from work.

His generosity when it comes to education isn’t surprising when you consider his only wish about doing things differently would have been to start smarter. “It would have been better to have been better educated in going into business. Mostly I learned as I went from short courses and on the job because I had no actual business training or education. If we had we might have handled our cash flows and investments better over the years and avoided some of the pitfalls we ran into.”

The final piece of the success puzzle for the Orchard family is community involvement, according to Frank. Over the years, they have shown support to local sports, 4H Clubs, schools and churches as well as a generous equipment donation to the local Fire Department.

Frank has also served three terms on the town council and has been president of the Chamber of Commerce and Royal Canadian Legion.

“It’s important to get involved in the community to show you care. It shows interest and that you don’t mind putting money back into where you’ve made your income from,” says Frank.

As for the future of Orchard Transport, you might have to talk to his nephews Geoffrey and Kent. Frank says they’re involved primarily in the transport side of things and the family is making plans to have the younger generation take over.

When that might be is anybody’s guess. “We’re not planning to retire but it’s going to happen eventually whether we want it to or not,” Frank jokes. “I can see the business carrying on the way it has all these years”.

Sounds like a great place to start again. ♦

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