

A GOOD DESIGN... A Tribute to a retiring President

Nearly every excellent outcome starts with a good design. Sometimes it's meticulously planned, sometimes only a few guiding principles are at the root. In either case, paying attention to the design along the way is the key to success. This is true of creating and maintaining a business just as it holds true in the Landscape Design field I was originally trained in. I studied Landscape Architecture at College. So... I know a thing or two about designs. My father, Paul Horvat, is a technician and a mechanic. He's also, I am realizing, a designer. Our company was born of an idea... and steered by his design. I'd like to share the story of our company.



Paul Horvat

My Dad was first known around Bergen County, New Jersey as "The Wizard". He opened and ran The Wizard Repair Shoppe for quite a few years. His fame was that he could fix anything. It was a pretty cool place to grow up. It had lots of interesting stuff all over the place... and seldom fewer than a dozen clocks on the walls. So, every hour there'd be a chaotic chorus of all different chimes, koo-koos and such.

After a time, Paul decided to change course a bit... He went to work for Xerox Corporation as a Tech Rep. He did things a little different... not by the book. He used intuition and ingenuity. He could keep the machines running real fine with very little needed in the way of parts. Eventually, he set out on his own. He bought a bunch of accounts and launched his own company in 1984 with Elaine as the bookkeeper. The first few years he ran things right out of our apartment, and later out of the house our family was renting (I remember well how copiers tended to invade our living room on a regular basis). He'd fix any brand of copier, but the Xerox brand was always his specialty.

Slowly things grew till he had several friends working with him. A new twist was in the wind too... local techs began to request parts for the Xerox copiers because Paul had knowledge and an increasing number of parts machines. I think it was Rekha, one of the store front's neighbors who had joined the company, who first got excited about selling parts. When the Locator first went to print, we advertised with them and sent copies of their paper along with shipments. My dad came up with a first draft of a catalog

(mostly parts for the 3100 family). I was working with the company part time whenever I was home from College. My dad came to me and asked me to do some illustrations of the parts. He also showed me what he wanted the layout of the catalog to look like... it was to be inspired by a catalog which was produced by a surplus company... it had lots of items, each in separate boxes with a quick description and an illustration of the part.

Now here is where the designer really came to life... my Dad is an Insatiable dreamer. He'd put forth in conversation... and sometimes on a scrap of paper, dreams of goals and principles of how to run the business. The dreams would not have any strings attached, no plan of how to get there, just an idea to the wind. Those sort of dreams are wonderful... they're the sort of thing about which I'd lay down to bed at night with a warm feeling in my heart just to think of them. It amazes me how many of those dreams have come to pass. It seems once you have a dream to focus on, things start to happen around you which make it possible. One of the greatest of these was that we were able to buy a building which used to be an old knitting mill (Mark's Knitting Mill in Bergenfield, New Jersey) which suits us perfectly... plenty of space but nothing fancy.

The principles he dreamt up included some of the most basic principles of design... The first principle of design is simplicity... the simpler a design is, the better the final result is likely to turn out. Paul kept reminding us all to keep our focus on the aspects of the field which we know best... so we stuck to the Xerox brand copier parts & supplies only... no other makes. This turned out to be a great thing for us. It kept us knowledgeable about the parts we sell... too wide a range would've made it impossible to really know what we were talking about.

Keeping things simple sometimes means referring customers elsewhere. If customer's come along looking for something we don't have and don't know much about, and we're already busy with the stuff we do know, it's been a blessing to feel comfortable referring them to someone who can help them. Certainly if things are slow, it makes sense to spend extra time on new learning curves, but if things are buzzing, referring other vendors actually serves everyone better.

Another guiding principle of my Dad's design is to be a good friend to the folks around us. He'd consider it a big mistake to view a potential friend as "competition". My dad never viewed the other techs in our area as enemies... nowadays, we're surrounded with friends who come around from time to time to visit and talk about tech stuff and share information back and forth.

I remember quite some time ago, my dad posted signs around our place which said “The customer is our friend”... sounds an awful lot like common sense, but if you reflect on that during a conversation... it changes the way the conversation goes. I find that I tend to be more patient, more relaxed, and have more fun with someone I count as a friend.

Having fun is definitely one of the goals which is given high priority... If we're not enjoying working together, then what would be the point? We don't want to get all stressed out, and wind up running the rat race... so growth has been slow and steady and always enjoyable. In the 17 years we've been a company, you might expect us to be highly polished and professional... but not so. That was never a goal of my Dad's. He has kept things informal in a warm, small family & friends business, sort of way.

My Dad has made it clear to us all that the goal of our company is not to increase the size of our business (number of employees, operating space and overhead costs)... profitability is where we'd want to see increases. This is possible when we become better and more efficient at doing what we do. For us, bigger doesn't mean better.

My Dad is retiring this year after over 17 years of serving as president of our company. His design never needed to be written down. Its been loose, but ever present, and its success is unquestionable. He has inspired us to be human in business, and honorable, and rich at heart. He has reminded us over and over to pay attention... be excellent to one another, and.... Party on dudes!