



Hardwood Manufacturers Association

665 Rodi Road, Suite 305, Pittsburgh, PA 15235 – 412-244-0440 – www.HMAmembers.org

The Incredible Power of a Small Business

by John Graham

In the following article, Mr. Graham shares a personal experience that rings close to home for us all.

It was 9:30 on a Friday evening, after a particularly busy week, when we finally pulled into our getaway place. We were looking forward to our first weekend there in three months and we were ready for it. When we opened the refrigerator, to put the food away, we knew the weekend was off to a very bad start. What a horrible mess! In that instant, our plans had changed. We would spend Saturday getting a new refrigerator and trying to have it delivered - the same day.

Going online to find a local appliance store turned out to be a challenge. Several were listed, but no longer in business. That narrowed it down to Home Depot which opened at 6 a.m. We called to make sure they carried appliances and asked, "Could you deliver today?" The pause that followed failed to inspire confidence. "Oh, this is Saturday. We could ask....but I can't promise that." Hope was fading. However, it was better than nothing.

At Home Depot, we headed for major appliances. With measurements in hand, none of the display models worked. Since no one was around to help us, we checked online to see if there were a Lowe's nearby. Not on Rhode Island's Aquidneck Island, although there was a Best Buy close by that opened at 10 a.m.

With time to kill, we were headed to a favorite coffee shop when we spotted BJ's Wholesale store. Maybe they carried refrigerators. "Only the small ones," the greeter said. "Can you tell us where we might buy a refrigerator?" He thought for a few seconds, "Only at Home Depot, Lowe's off the island or Sears." Surprised, we said, "That's just a tiny store."

The Sears store was almost next to the coffee shop where we were going, and even though it seemed like a waste of time, we stopped in and were totally blown away by what we saw. The place was packed with an astonishing assortment of major appliances!

In less than ten minutes, we found the perfect refrigerator. "We need it delivered today." "Sure," said the salesperson. "We sponsor a Little League team and this is the opening day. We'll be back in an hour and be at your place a few minutes after that." He didn't exaggerate. By Noon, the refrigerator had been delivered, installed and the old one was on its way out the door.

And delivery was **free**. "Fast, free delivery is our brand," said the pleasant owner, who had recently bought the store. When I described our Home Depot experience, he smiled and said, "When people need appliances, they need them now and we make it easy to get them. That's what makes us different."

The store owner, Joe Kilty, gets it right. He isn't selling appliances. You can get them other places, including online. People want good communication; follow through, convenience and service. And they want it now. That's what he's selling.



Hardwood Manufacturers Association

665 Rodi Road, Suite 305, Pittsburgh, PA 15235 – 412-244-0440 – www.HMAmembers.org

It's not surprising that small business possesses an immense amount of power. Even Wal-Mart is learning that smaller stores may be what is needed to grow the business. And perhaps no company feels this more deeply than Apple. Over the years, they have made sure they are perceived as personal - the genius of an Apple store. The customer experience is friendly, helpful, reliable and fun. It offers the feeling of being a local store.

Customers want to feel that someone cares about them and is taking time thinking about **them**, more than just the sale. All this adds up to a winning proposition with good reason to give a high-five to the small business owner:

- ***The small business makes an effort not to disappoint.*** If we go to a big chain or a national retailer, we almost expect to have a bad experience since it happens so often. If a small business lets us down, we're truly disappointed.

- ***Customers are on the side of small business.*** They like to walk in the door and be recognized. They'll pay more for it, too. When that happens, they talk about it to their friends and neighbors. Buzz will always beat the big box every time. The worse the service from the big guys, the better it is for the little guy.

- ***It's easy to beat the big guy if you think like a customer.*** The big guys are very good at ignoring and alienating customers. Never smile or genuinely ask if they can be helpful. The playing field is anything but level.

When all is said and done, it takes a lot to knock small businesses out of the saddle. When times are tough, they hunker down and hang in there. Workdays get longer. Take home pay gets shorter. Even banks shutting off the lending spigot doesn't deter small businesspeople. Throw the little guys a curve; they'll figure out how to hit a home run.

John R. Graham is president of Graham Communications, a marketing services and sales consulting firm. He speaks on business, marketing and sales issues and writes for a variety of business publications. Contact: (617) 328-0069.