

CNT & R

News & Review



SURVIVOR

BUTTE BUSINESS

BY EVAN TUCHINSKY

Venerable firms share secrets in our annual entrepreneur issue

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LESSONS IN LONGEVITY

What we can learn from venerable firms

Story and photos by Evan Tuchinsky • evant@newsreview.com

The TV show Survivor boasts a motto for our times. “Outwit, outplay, outlast”—that’s how the strongest survive in a stark environment where rules change, fortunes shift, ethics are relative and competitors go to surprising lengths to gain any advantage.

This is the reality on television, anyway. What about in the real world? In order to survive, do businesses have to adopt a strategy that reeks of corporate ruthlessness?

The recession of 2008-09 certainly has created dog-eat-dog conditions, but they’re nothing new. Local firms that have been around 25, 40, 60 years have seen a series of downturns and ridden them out. These survivors come from every sector: agriculture, manufacturing, retail, housing, dining, professional and financial services.

To find out what’s kept them going, the CN&R spoke to people whose businesses have persevered through the hard times. Each story is unique, yet common threads emerge—secrets to survival that lay out an affirmative strategy for outwitting, outplaying and outlasting.

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New to the game

Chico shop Golf Etc. opens its doors at a precarious time. See sidebar on page 22



DAHLMEIER INSURANCE AGENCY

Est. 1948, Oroville

There’s no place like home. That’s what John Dahlmeier figured out, like his father and uncle before him, when he spent time away from Butte County as a young man.

Hal and Ed Dahlmeier left Oroville for military service in World War II. Their father, Gus, owned a real-estate business at the corner of Myers and High streets. He’d sold some insurance policies, too, and in 1948 his sons branched off in that direction.

John (Hal’s son) went from Oroville High to American River College to Cal State Northridge, where he earned a tennis scholarship, then his degree in business. He took a job with Travelers Insurance in Orange County, but when Uncle Ed retired in 1986, he succumbed to the lure of home.

“That timing worked out pretty good,” said John, who 12 years later succeeded his father in heading up the Dahlmeier Insurance Agency. First, though, the family firm expanded to Chico, merging in 1991 with Glenn, Gilzean, and Dumbroski, which coincidentally opened at nearly the same time as Dahlmeier. Longfellow Avenue has been the central location for more than a decade, but the agency still has its office in Oroville, down the street from the original.

“What helps us is people know our reputa-

POLICY SCION

John Dahlmeier is a third-generation insurance broker whose family agency has offices in both Oroville, the city of its founding, and Chico, where it expanded in 1991.

tion,” John Dahlmeier said. “We’ve been around 60 years; we’re part of the community—we’re not going anywhere. We have no reason to move or to think we’re going to move, so people know they are going to get the service and the pricing they need.”

The agency remains independent, selling a range of policies—residential, commercial, automotive, health, life, etc.—from a variety of companies. Insurance is relatively recession-proof, John says: “Usually there’s something you’ll always have coverage for.”

FASHION TEMPLATE

Linda Hein was hardly a fashionista when she and her husband bought a newly opened clothing store. Nearly four decades later, Paradisiens still take cues from Buttons & Bows.

Though there isn’t another Dahlmeier waiting in the wings to take over the business, John and his relatives have created an agency family of long-time employees. Their credo: “Honesty, integrity and looking out for the well-being of everyone involved, from employees to clients to even the insurance companies.”

Continued John: “One thing I do know is change is not a bad thing and change is always inevitable. We’ve changed quite a bit over the years. My dad started with paper files ... and I remember thinking, ‘He’ll never use a fax machine.’ Now we have the PC, printer and fax all in one, and e-mail on your cell phone.

“Even though there’re the same core values as when I grew up, the way we deliver them has changed.”

BUTTONS & BOWS

Est. 1971, Paradise

Linda Hein remembers when she and her husband, Ralph, moved to Paradise almost 40 years ago. They’d come from San Francisco to Chico, where Ralph re-enrolled in college, and found a one-acre place they could afford on the Ridge. It was quite a switch, going from the big city to a town with no stoplights, but friends who visited soon understood the reason for the move.

While checking with their real-estate agent about homes for friends, they learned of a business for sale: a clothing store called Buttons & Bows, which had opened just six

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