

Honoring Family Traditions in a Changing World

By Bernard Kliska, Ph.D.

In family businesses, tradition is something like truth: It's easy to uphold, until upholding it presents a risk. When grandfather Portobello started his neighborhood bakery, people began their days with an early morning walk to the bakery to buy fresh bread. He built his business on careful attention to quality. Now fast-forward to a world of preservatives, dual-income families who leap out of bed to rush to work, 24-hour supermarkets with on-premises bakeries and so many in the country following low-carb diets. The Portobello family is still in business, and they still turn out the best-quality product around. But business has been stagnant for years, and costs continue to rise. If we don't make the best, we shouldn't be in business, insists the aging second-generation baker. Indeed, he is simply restating for the thousandth time an unquestioned family tradition. The reputation of the family is the same as the reputation of the goods: wholesome and honest.

But now the family has gotten an offer that's difficult to refuse. A large commercial bakery wants to produce and distribute baked goods under the Portobello name. It's an opportunity to make more money in the next year than they've made in the last ten years put together, and that's just the beginning.

Grandsons with their own young families rattle off a long list of family food businesses that have sold their names to large companies and reaped huge financial benefits. But the father reminds them that those products are not nearly as good as they used to be. We've got to do something, says the son. We've got

kids we need to send to college soon.

In times of crisis, it's important to remember some basic points about traditions:

- Traditions are evolutionary, stretching from the past through the present to the future. Traditions survive because they help the family to prosper. It makes sense to honor traditions and trust them.
- Traditions should be seen as guides, not leashes.
- Traditions can make profits and everything else in life more meaningful.

The Portobello family needs to increase their profitability and still honor their traditions. But how?

Genuinely honor the tradition. A tradition that survives only as the motto on a package is hardly worth the cellophane it's printed on. Lip service to the tradition leads to destinations that can feel pretty empty. The most valuable time to reaffirm a tradition is when it's threatened. The Portobello family should spend time together honoring their tradition. They should talk about their history, sharing stories from business and family life illustrating the living importance and value of their tradition to themselves and their children.

Brainstorm ways to incorporate the tradition into the proposed change. This isn't a mere trick of words or a rationalization. If the family has genuinely done the first step, it will be inspired to genuinely do the next. Can it insist, and build in rock-solid assurances, that the new company will maintain the quality? Can this be included as part of the financial negotiations? Or, if the new company isn't willing to guarantee that it will maintain the quality that is the Portobello tradition, now that the idea has presented itself, perhaps the family can actively solicit bids from other companies.

Accept the need for change. During the discussions about what to do, the Portobello family finally faced the facts of their declining business facts that had been haunting everyone just below the

surface. But after drawing new determination and inspiration from their long tradition, the search for an honest new direction became energized. They discussed the changing culture and demographics of the neighborhood.

There were fewer old Italians and many more urban pioneers and college students. Although the new population ran at a faster pace, it still needed a place that was reassuring, relaxing and wholesome. The Portobellos decided to open a bakery café. People didn't have time to get up, buy bread and go back home for breakfast, but they had enough time to stop for coffee and fresh bread and rolls in a warm, friendly place. The Portobellos also rearranged their hours and baking schedules so that people stopped by for fresh bread on their way home from work. In the last decade, mid-day business had just about disappeared, but as word spread about the quality, genuineness and friendliness of the café, people began coming for lunch. A few years later, the Portobellos expanded by taking over the store next door.

Of course, not every story ends so successfully. But by following family traditions in a flexible way, without watering them down or rationalizing them away, success is more likely. After all, traditions are the foundation of the family's business and life. In time, it usually becomes desirable or necessary to renovate. Families may even have to strengthen the foundation, but they never tear it down.

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