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Your Produce Family[®]



Lessons Learned: Part 3 of the Cutler Family Trilogy

By HARRIS CUTLER

Dear readers, thank you so much for following the Covid-19 story of how our family and company have dealt with this cataclysmic event.

Our first segment set the background of who we are, what we do, and the sequence of events that came together for our company.

The second segment discussed all the steps we took to help people.

This last segment is the most important: it's about lessons learned. Because the pandemic still isn't over, we're sharing our suggestions for what the industry as a whole and members individually can do going forward—and one is to prevent the spread of the virus, so hospitals and emergency rooms are no longer overwhelmed with infected and dying patients.

With knowledge of the virus still changing, finding a balance between meals on the go, dining out safely, and home preparation will remain unpredictable in the days and months ahead.

We will all be challenged again and again, and it is the goal of this article to help us prepare for whatever may come.

STABILITY AND HARMONY

Over the course of my life, I have been taught many lessons from many wonderful people.

This is one I learned myself and share comfortably: in chaos management, when so much is happening and there are so many problems, first, secure a safe place for yourself and those you are responsible for.

Then deal with everything by separating what needs to be done into manageable parts. Always do the easiest things first; once you start eliminating tasks and solving problems, creative thinking kicks in and you're ready and confident to tackle the biggest problems.

Although it is noble to say that helping others is everything, your business must be on firm ground before you try to help others. Businesses must also be profitable; absent profits, all businesses fail.

Each business must determine what's necessary to stay healthy, then take the responsibility to ensure the welfare of its own employees first, then others.

Companies that work together as a team can accomplish so much more than leaders on their own.

Businesses need active bank and attorney relationships, outside accountants, food safety and transportation teams, and strong leadership to keep them afloat.

A company's objective or intention is a big question as well.

Today's economy has a massive group of profit-driven folks who are only interested in fixing problems, dressing

up companies, and selling—then moving on to the next project or business. Our produce industry needs commitment.

INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL FORTITUDE

During times of crisis, as well as everyday operations, it's essential for companies to have a spokesperson who not only has everyone's buy-in, but integrity and honor.

This person should handle all communications, make decisions quickly and with conviction, and have the power to spend money when necessary.

Take help from anyone who offers; we all have a tendency to want to go it alone. Identify trading partners that align with your thinking and have proven themselves capable and loyal. When they offer help, say thank you, and take it.

This is crucial to building and maintaining relationships, in good times and bad.

When we needed computers for our employees to work remotely, we ordered and received them lightning fast.

We got them so quickly because we always tried to be our vendor's best customer. We could have tried various options to save money, but we wanted our provider to know he could count on our business.

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And because we were always there, loyal from the beginning, our vendor made sure we had everything we needed—at pre-Covid prices.

His name is Bryce Derr, and he has often worked in our office after-hours to set up computers.

But during Covid, we were up and running at all our employees' homes within a few days. We were very grateful.

The lesson here is to be the best customer of every vendor. Have them want to only do business with you.

The dividends for this type of relationship are worth far more than saving a couple hundred dollars here and there.

RESPECT AND SUPPORT

Once our entire team had computers, we were back in business and running as if we were together at the office.

Team members who for any reason couldn't get on a computer found other things to do that were still valuable.

We were a team, we are a team, and want to be a force for good.

This is another lesson: treat your team well. Employees are always the most important customers, every day.

Each of our people went above and beyond the call of duty. We showed our appreciation, and they did great work.

Some companies, however, did not treat their employees well.

We heard of foodservice, transportation, and even retail businesses that let many people go.

These companies, with rock-solid balance sheets, had people who gave them decades of their lives and were dismissed without fair discussion or a promise.

In a moment of fear, these companies betrayed those who helped build their businesses.

A number of them still hopped on the federal Payroll Protection Program—meaning they could have kept their



employees on the payroll, for those few weeks, then had federal dollars to help out.

Others took a different route: we had customers that paid us what they owed then dropped their businesses down to minimal volume. This was a concern, and we reached out to make sure they were okay and to let them know we were here, if, and when, they needed us.

EMBRACE THE CHALLENGES

Businesses must also learn to have fun along the way and not show disdain for the work they do. Many have asked me over the years, "How did you decide to come into your family business?"

My Dad, Philip Cutler, was very passionate about the business, but he still had struggles. He loved the customers, the growers, the transportation, and the excitement of transacting business.

I watched him and decided that if he had all the money in the world, he still would want to be at his desk.

Everyone respected him, no one more than me. Every day I do everything I can to make him proud.

He was a genius (with the highest IQ in his army unit) and his programs and dreams gave us the blueprint for our company's development.

We encourage our children to be family people first, and then the best businesspeople second. The children and

grandchildren of family businesses don't need a bag of gold, they need golden hands and quick-thinking minds. They need a spot or position that matches up to their skills, passions, and opportunities.

So, look at your company critically—decide who will operate it in the future, and teach and empower them. Legacy businesses only exist because a generation or two selflessly prepared the company to carry on.

When a family business closes or sells, it's generally because remaining family members are no longer interested or involved. Success comes from hard work, commitment, and making the business the most important part of a day.

LONGEVITY AND GROWTH

My sons Marcus, Geoffrey, and Maxwell have established themselves in the business as innovators, marketers, and program makers, hitting their stride and performing at an all-star level.

As a sales team, they have taken the approach of lining us up with small- and medium-sized independent businesses that are likeminded in terms of dedication, longevity, integrity, and the ability to do their jobs very well.

As leaders they have shown commitment and tremendous resourcefulness in solving problems and increasing our root vegetable business, even starting the Riverdale operation from scratch.

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Their presence and dedication ensure our customers will have active, focused, and talented business partners for the next 35 years and beyond.

Very few companies can say this; but we are here and intend to stay through this fourth generation and beyond.

Marcus, who sells our potato programs from all over the United States and Canada, was a rock star during this pandemic. The sheer volume of potatoes being shipped for food boxes and distribution programs was mind boggling.

He performed like the seasoned professional he is, and did a masterful job. Marcus took over the business I developed and has run with it for years.

Geoff, one of the greatest onion minds of all time, took care of everyone, as he always does. Geoff operates at a super-human level every day.

His programs are legendary, and he has created quite a following. Every load, every package, every pallet is critical, and in his world he's always in triage mode: fixing, saving, planning, and executing.

Max, the baby of the family, or as I love to call him, "Mackie the Mackie," took his three commodities (sweet potatoes, carrots, and watermelon) to the best customers in the country. His expansion

of these businesses and mastering of relationships—infusing every business moment with creativity, humor, and gratitude—was inspiring to his older brothers and me.

And I can't forget the longtime employees who trained Marcus, Geoff, and Max, and who go out in the field of honor every day in produce, transportation, food safety, and all the accounting and bookkeeping that keep it going.

They were and are awesome, and so appreciated. We have such great talent in our company.

I must also applaud Janice, the mother of our five children (Marcus, Geoff, Joseph, Charlotte, and Max), who remained calm during the pandemic, including its worst moments.

She made sure I had enough rest, kept our home and family safe, and as always, kept us well fed. She is the GMOAT—greatest mom of all time—as well as—greatest wife of all time.

Lastly, it is with a heavy heart that I mention the loss of Patricia Bravetti, our beloved receptionist and gatekeeper.

Patricia endeared many in the industry to our company and family. She served with distinction for over 30 years and will be missed tremendously.

CONCLUSION

I invite any of you who read this to contact me anytime. As a sage friend has noted, "real friends always make life better," and this is so true.

If you're not already part of our story and produce family, we hope you will join us to see how our businesses can help each other succeed.

As I conclude this trio of articles, I look back with thanks to my mentors, and the many blessings from Phil Ball, Phil Cutler, and Danny Cutler who created our magnificent group of companies and the environment in which we continue to develop to become better over the years.

The printed word seems to be losing space in our digital- and social media-driven world. The thoughts shared here will only be successful if they are helpful, in some way to you, your families, and your companies.

So, in closing, a few final thoughts: be your best every day; never panic; pray a lot; love your family, company, and industry; and live your life like each day is the most important. **BP**