

Tending Hiram's Store

by Sir Knight Kirk White

Hiram's Widgets have been in business for many, many years. The business used to be exceedingly successful. At one point he had a store in almost every town in the state, and each was thriving, but over the last decade, business has been steadily dropping. Overall, his total number of new customers is down, and many of his customers come a few times and then stop. A number of his stores haven't been profitable for years, and even his best stores are marginal. He has closed a number of his stores over the last couple of years to cut losses. Hiram is at a loss for what to do other than keep closing stores as they become insolvent and hope that the customers from these stores will travel the extra 20 miles to one of his remaining stores instead of going to a competitor's widget store or buy their widgets online. So far, that has not proven to be the case.

I'm certain that this scenario seems familiar to most of us in Masonry in general and in the appendant bodies in particular. Our membership has been in decline for decades. In response, we have tried consolidation of Lodges, Chapters, Councils, and Commanderies in hopes that if we take two dysfunctional groups whose members don't attend that somehow they will be motivated to travel the extra distance and become one functional group. This delusional thinking has almost uniformly resulted in failure. What we need instead is to think of our problem like any other organization or business would. What would a business consultant tell Hiram?

Any time there is a situation where a formerly successful business starts to fail it is due to a problem in one or more of the following:

- product
- service
- marketing

Product

Problems with product usually revolve around two areas; either the product is outdated and no longer in demand, or the product being sold is somehow inferior. In the case of Masonry as a whole, we know that people will always seek venues for community, brotherhood, personal enhancement, and doing good in the world. There are other fraternal groups that provide versions of these things, so we know that there are people out there and that demand remains high. Many of them are just choosing one of our "competitors."

Is our product high quality? The answer is probably mixed. As Robert G. Davis noted in his address to the 2010 General Grand Chapter Royal Arch Masons International, "studies engaged in researching the needs of men in today's society are indicating that an organization that is centered on education, spiritual development, and fraternal bonding may be the most powerfully compelling organization to join for men who fall within the

19 - 40 age range." At its highest potential, Masonry is that organization. However, many of our lodges and chapters have become little more than a bunch of aged and aging men who meet once a month to eat, read the secretary's and treasurer's reports, tell a joke, and generally take up an hour or two without much to show for it. Those lucky ones doing degree work only focus on the letter of the ritual, not the meanings underneath, and once a candidate has received them, he is left without further instruction. However, this generation wants more. They are intellectually and spiritually curious, desirous of deeper thought and understanding, crave active participation, and they are knowledgeable about alternatives and motivated enough to leave if they don't get it.

To improve our "product" we need to have higher expectations for ourselves and our candidates. If you have zero expectations, you get what you expect - zero. Like our 18th and 19th century predecessors, we need to require something of our members. As per their oaths, they should be required to attend all meetings unless they have good reason not to. If they cannot, they should be expected to call the secretary and explain why not. They made a commitment, why do we not make them stick to it? Our new members see that going to meetings isn't valued by the rest of the Lodge or Chapter, so why should they value it? We have to expect them to be active in our groups, learning new things and sharing them in open Lodge or Chapter, participating in ritual, and serving on committees that actually do something. Committees such as: Mentoring Committee to help integrate new members, Education Committee to organize and lead Masonic education for each meeting, Social Committee to organize monthly fraternal gatherings, and Community committees to get the members involved as members in public events and good works. Any new members should be immediately given a piece of ritual or lecture to learn and a committee to serve on.

Of course, that means more work for those of us who are already members. We would also have to do more. We'd have to serve on committees, engage in education, and go to meetings, and we always hear, "I'm too busy to add another night per month." Frankly, I consider it a lame excuse. We are required to meet one night a month per Masonic body. That isn't very much. Rotary requires weekly meetings and any missed meetings are expected to be made up at another group's meeting. The people who say they are too busy find time for other things that are important to them. Masonry should be important too, and if it is not, then it is ourselves we have to blame.

Service

If two companies have the same product and one company is successful while the other struggles, often it is a matter of customer service. This is especially true when the company is having trouble retaining customers. Customer service is one of the most important things that draws new customers and creates customer loyalty. People will even pay extra for good customer service. We have dozens of new members who join, go to meetings for a few months, and then never come back. They may or may not continue to pay their dues, but they are absentee members. Clearly, we have failed them in our customer service - they aren't feeling welcomed, included, invested, or that they aren't wasting their time.

The "wasting their time" problem would be fixed by improving our product. To feel welcome, we need to be better at our brotherly love. Even after all of these years of being a Mason, when I attend a different Lodge or Chapter, I often feel like I'm at someone else's family reunion. The officers are busy getting things ready and the members are catching up with one another. All the while, I stand alone off to the side waiting for the opening. I can stand there an entire half hour and not have someone talk to me, and if they do, it is only to say "hello," shake my hand, and move on. For extroverts, this isn't a problem. They approach others and leap into a conversation, but for introverts, it can feel very isolating and unfriendly. Let's be aware that the kinds of brothers who join looking for education and deep spiritual development are often introverts.

The solution is for each lodge and chapter to have at least one person designated as their greeter. Traditionally this job fell to the Senior Warden as he vetted members, but it doesn't have to be him. Someone should meet every new member or visitor, introduce them around before the opening, and stay with them until they find someone to converse and hang out with. If they don't find anyone, then the greeter must be that person.

To get people invested and connected, they should be mentored, not just through their degrees but for the first year of their membership. The Mentor Committee should provide instruction about what is expected of members, the workings of the whole Masonic family, who's who, and how to get involved; make sure they are personally welcomed at each meeting and personally invited to each social event and generally taken care of like a friend and brother. Last, as stated earlier, each member should be immediately put on a committee and asked to learn a piece of ritual so that he feels necessary and involved.

Marketing

The business consultant would tell Hiram that the last thing a company should do is close stores. All closing stores accomplishes (especially if you haven't fixed your product and customer service problems) is to reduce your visibility and accessibility in the market. It also makes it clear that the ship is sinking, and no one wants to book a ride on a sinking ship. It is bad public relations.

If the product is good and the customer service is acceptable, then the organization isn't marketing itself well. Its message isn't getting in front of the people who are interested and motivated to buy its product. It needs more advertising and better targeted marketing.

So let's ask ourselves, who are Masonry's potential customers? Men join the fraternity for a host of different reasons. Some join simply because it is a family tradition. Dad, Granddad, and Great Granddad were all Masons. Some join for the fraternal bonding and social aspects. It is a chance to meet and hang out with other men in the community. Others join because they love ritual or are interested in studying and being part of the history of Masonry. Still others are seeking "more light" - education and spiritual development. Others are drawn to the large stores of esotericism hidden underneath our symbols and rituals, and many of these "Light Seekers" and Esotericists are looking for connections with other more serious, like-minded men.

To list them:

- 1) familial ties
- 2) fraternal and community bonding
- 3) ritual
- 4) history
- 5) Light/education and spiritual growth
- 6) esotericism
- 7) connection with serious students of Light and esoteric

Many men will actually be a blend of these, each valuing some over others, and for that reason, each of these groups needs to be approached in a slightly different manner.

Symbolic Masonry can market to all of them, more especially groups 1 - 5. To contact group 1, host Masonic "bring your son to Work" nights or other events. To contact group 2, host a Masonic horseshoe, golf, or (for the younger men) volleyball tournament, a bowling league, or such. Have an "I'm a Mason" week each year where every lodge member wears a tee-shirt or puts a sign up in their business, does community improvements (such as spring street sweeping), and maybe hosts one of those tournaments. Show that Masons are here, good wholesome productive community members, and have loads of fun. You might also want to have an "open house" where there is a representative (but not actual) ritual with officers in full regalia (for group 3), a short historical lecture (for group 4), and a talk about Masonry's mission to "make good men better" (for group 5).

Chapter, Council, and Commandery can only draw members from the Symbolic Lodges. They will by nature have less draw for groups 1 and 2, but their true strengths are in groups 3 - 7 anyway. They can certainly participate in the Symbolic Lodge events mentioned, this time in their Appendant Body regalia, but more importantly, they need to get out to the lodges and get their word out. Davis points out that the younger men who join are more likely to be interested in 5 - 7 than previous generations. These are the men who continue to seek further light in the York and Scottish Rite once they know about it. But we have to catch them before they become disillusioned by a Blue Lodge that focuses primarily on familial and fraternal bonds and does ritual without knowing the spiritual and esoteric "why" behind the ritual.

York and Scottish Rites need to be better about their visibility and accessibility to the lodge memberships. That means that they have to be more visible by regular visitations in regalia to lodges, presentations, articles in Masonic publications, targeted mailings, and solicitations to new Blue Lodge members. They also need to be more accessible by having active Chapters, Councils, and Commanderies nearby. This means that rather than closing these meetings, they actually need to start looking at seeding new meetings. Of course, in the meantime, getting the existing meetings to fix their "product" and "customer service" as well. That process in itself would help to make those bodies vital again. It would be a lot of work, but the best people to get involved are...our new members who want something valuable to do. What is more valuable than revitalizing our Masonic bodies?

Football coach Lou Holtz wrote: "In this world you're either growing or you're dying, so get in motion and grow." We have a choice before us. We can allow the slow decay of our institution, waiting until another part becomes nonfunctioning and then amputate it, or we can become proactive, do some hard work for a while, and make the core strong and healthy again. People say, "but we don't have enough people to do all of that work" to which I reply; there are numerous examples throughout time of one person changing the course of history; Jesus, Ghandi, Abraham Lincoln, our Founding Fathers. It also happens on the regional, local, and corporate scale; one person who decides to stop naysaying and just does the job. All it takes is motivation and vision.

Will Hiram save his store?

Sir Knight Kirk White is a member of St. Aldemar Commandery No. 11 in Barre, Vermont. He currently serves as the Most Excellent Grand High Priest in the Grand Chapter of Royal Arch Masons of Vermont and resides at 307 Christian Hill Road, Bethel, VT 05032. He can be reached at laurelin@sover.net

Update: July 11, 2014

Knight Templar Magazine Index - ARCHIVE of ARTICLES

HOME	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
----------------------	----------------------	----------------------	----------------------	----------------------	----------------------	----------------------	----------------------	----------------------

[Top](#)