

# The Community Page

## Rocknaks: Triumph for the Little Guy

Confronted with the giant warrior Goliath, Israel's hosts took the attitude, "Oh my goodness, he is so huge there's no way we can kill him." The shepherd David, by contrast arrived on the scene with a different perspective: "He is so huge there's no way I can miss."

In Idaho Falls, another David, Dave Rocknak took the same attitude when confronted with owning a home hardware business in the same town as two large box stores. Their national identification and advertising budgets are enough to bring fear to most would-be private hardware store owners—but not Dave. Instead, he offers customers better prices than even the chain stores.

Too often, customers compare only leader item prices and miss the bigger savings picture. "Shop us for 20 random items," Dave says, "and you will find [the big stores] are not saving you money"—a statement he can back up with professional price comparisons.

Dave admits that there are perils to owning your own business, and knowing when to expand is one of them. After 10 years in a small building on West Broadway, he took the gamble, assembled the financial underpinnings, and built a new, larger Rocknaks Hardware Plus very near the old one at 2250 West Broadway. The move is proof of his foresight and business acumen. As he told the press at that time, "Either we do this or we get out of business."

His new store added extra space to provide woodworking classes, which in turn will drive power tool sales. As the market changed—and consumers realized doing it themselves is more economical—Dave kept up by expanding his core departments of woodworking, plumbing and electrical supplies. This has allowed Rocknaks to become a "full project" store for customers who want to handle all their own remodeling needs.

As with other small, privately owned businesses in Southeastern Idaho, where sole proprietorships are the largest business growth category, particular attention must be paid to customer service and employee relations.

Dave says his customers mean more to him than profits. "In my business, [my customers] are my family, and I won't do them wrong," he says. Proof of his success with this policy is the help he received from customers, unsolicited and unpaid,



*Dave Rocknak, on the right, with his son Brian, grandsons Cameron and Austin, and their beloved Jasper.*

when moving into the new facilities. They showed up early in the morning and stayed all day, doing what they could to help move inventory.

When asked about this unusual relationship at the time, Dave's response was, "We don't answer to stockholders; we just answer to our customers. We can set our own prices and please customers any way we want. People come to us because we help them get the job done, not just sell them tubs and toilets."

Employee relations are the second focus of a successful small business en-

deavor. Dave looks for self-motivation in employees, those who will get the job done even though they're working for someone else. He doesn't have much patience for those who won't take pride in a job well done. Regarding the rapid turnover of workers in the large chain stores, Dave notes, "We give our staff a lot of autonomy and respect, and listen to their ideas. They think in new ways."

Difficulty in finding and keeping such employees eventually led to the closing of the Rocknak store in Afton, Wyoming. Distance and falling sales contributed, but the final issue was the inability to compete with gas and oil industries for good workers, without whom no business can succeed.

Needing a place for the inventory of that Wyoming store, Dave last year opened his new outlet at 1520 N 25th East. Now people on the east side of town can also find the savings and service of a locally owned hardware store without even crossing I-15.

Paying close attention to customer concerns and providing fairness to employees have both proven to be of great value in owning a private business. These details can make or break a new business. By the end of the first year in business, sole proprietorships will be reduced by 40 percent, according to a recent report in *Idaho Falls Magazine*. Within the next four years, another 40 percent will fail. Then, given another five years, 80 percent of the remaining will be winnowed out.

Whether David vs. Goliath or merely an uphill battle, Rocknaks is up for the fight. Bravo to Dave, Gretchen and their loyal customers.



*Ample supplies adorn Rocknaks Hardware Plus for the coming spring season.*

## Love of the Trade

Dave Rocknak grew up in New Jersey helping his family in the lumber and retail industries, developing a love of the business. He joined the Navy and came to Southeast Idaho on assignment where he eventually began working at the I.N.L. site in electrical engineering.

Here in Idaho Falls he married his sweetheart, Gretchen, and reared his family of two sons and two daughters. He was happy but always dreamed of owning his own hardware store. When the opportunity arrived 12 years ago, he jumped at the chance.

Why would he give up the security of his former position to gamble on owning his own business, especially given the parameters of small versus large home hardware sales in Idaho Falls? "It's just my personality," Dave says.

He describes himself as "driven," as valuing autonomy more than security. Though his workload expanded many times over, Dave was up to the task in order to realize a dream of a lifetime. And for one who is "driven," it is much more rewarding.

Dave cherishes the days of his youth when people used to fix things, before cheap labor and shoddy workmanship led to what he calls "the Wal-Mart Syndrome": If something wears out or breaks, don't try to fix it, simply throw it out and buy new. He observes that more and more of his customers are women whose husbands don't know how to fix things.

More than that, Dave and Gretchen cherish their family members, who share their love of and devotion



*Rocknaks Hardware Plus at 2250 West Broadway*

to the business. His son Brian and grandsons Cameron and Austin make the store their home away from home.

Regular customers like the family atmosphere and even ask about Jasper, the family dog, on the few occasions when she is not at the store.

Hardware "junkies" walking into Dave's stores, are lovingly assailed by the familiar smells of tools and garden seeds, hardware and yard décor, and find them bringing back the sense of the satisfaction that comes from repairing and making do. The old adage, "fix it up, wear it out, make it do, or do without," hearkens back to a time when Dave and many others took pride in the ownership and care of their homes, yards, tools and equipment.

That sense of satisfaction and self-sufficiency is evident in the lives of the Rocknak family, all of whom have worked in the store at one time or another—in-laws included. It is the same devotion they pay to each other, to their church, to their community and to their business.

The Rocknaks Hardware Plus mission statement seems to say as much about the people involved as it does the business. "Our mission is to provide our customers with: The best possible service, the highest quality products, and the widest possible selection. We recognize that we are in business to please our customers whose time is valuable, and their money is hard earned. We will respect both."