

Schroders Shine

Three Brothers, Two Businesses

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Whether or not you know the Schroder brothers, chances are you know the business they created. Car-Part.com has swept the recycling industry, linking auto salvage with the online world for the past 10 years. It was not the first endeavor for the talented team behind it, composed of Urban, Roger and Jeff Schroder with Janice, Jeff's wife.

True leaders in every sense of the word, Urban, Roger, Jeff and Janice are carving out a niche in recycling to which others can only aspire. Their work ethic, management style and communications are regularly lauded by both peers and employees. Some say it was ingrained when they were young.

"Our parents had their own business in real estate and construction," said Roger. "We were all involved growing up."

It's still a family business, though the type of work has changed. Two of the Schroder sisters, Gail Rider and Penny Dietrich, now work full time for their brothers. And Urban's wife, Theresa, also helps out. Plus, there are seven to 10 members of the next generation on hand at any given moment after school and during summer vacations.

The group went on to pursue some diverse interests until they came together for Car-Part.com. Jeff pursued a graduate degree in electrical and computer engineering from Rutgers University in New Jersey, where he met Janice. Urban met a pilot who flew bombers during World War II, and learned to fly, eventually purchasing his own air strip. Roger became a special agent for the U.S. government.

A turning point came when Roger resigned from his position and bought Foreign Auto Salvage, with his brother Urban - a business that they continue to run today. When Jeff offered his technical talent to take the business online, Car-Part.com was born.

"Jeff's the technical guy so he's the president," said Roger. "I deal with the day-to-day operations and management as vice president. Urban is corporate secretary. He deals with the infrastructure, the building and some of the implementation on the recycler end as well as the data center. Janice gets the word out. She's vice president of marketing."

Work Ethic

The group becomes passionate when asked about their business philosophy. "We try to study a recycler's business processes and simplify them with technology," said Jeff. "We want to make it easier for people to buy recycled parts. I'd say recyclers are very appreciative. That's really refreshing."

"Probably one of the biggest challenges is training everyone as new products and features are added," said Roger. "We put them out at a pretty fast pace."

"We communicate very often, almost constantly about different issues," said Jeff. "The fact that we're family helps."

The management team treats the staff like family too. In fact, the employees are so motivated by their bosses that both Roger and Jeff have been nominated for Boss of the Year. One employee wrote, "Bar none, [they are] the hardest two working individuals I have ever met ... They make coming to work fun!"

You'll find that Urban, Roger, Jeff and Janice speak equally well about their employees.

"A lot of bosses talk to people only when they do something wrong," explained Janice. "We go out of our way to compliment our employees."

"It's a pretty open company and upper management is available to every employee," added Roger. "We have regularly scheduled meetings with different groups. We send e-mails, instant messages and keep them plugged in."

"When we make decisions about new product features and strategies," said Jeff, "we talk to the employees first and get ideas. In that brainstorm session, everyone in the room has an equal say. That helps quite a bit. We get a buy-in from the start. Then we all work hard to make it happen."

The Schrodgers are known for strong work ethic and their long work hours, "a perk," joked Roger, "of being an owner in the business." It's not unusual to find them at the business in the wee hours of the morning, at 2 a.m. or 3 a.m., and then back again early the next day. If they get away for a vacation at all, they usually bring work with them.

Worth The Risk

Hard work certainly plays into their business success but the team admits that timing also worked to their advantage.

"It helped," agreed Jeff. "If you're the first to market with a good product that solves a problem, that's a pretty big advantage. When we started, people thought we were crazy to be spending so much time on this."

"Some people said it was too hard to do," said Urban. "But if you see an opportunity and don't take it, then you're not going to get anywhere. So we took it."

Jeff worked for the first few years while still in New Jersey. He was managing Phoneware.com, a precursor of Car-Part.com that eventually got "morphed" into the technical side of Car-Part.com.

Now a decade later, they're a strong player in the industry. To celebrate Car-Part.com's 10th anniversary, the Schrodgers brought their 100 or so employees, scattered all over the country, to Fort Wright, Ky. It was the first time many of them had met face to face. They had a conference on the business during the day and socialized at night, including a boat ride down the Ohio River.

The Schrodgers also have plans to fly in some customers to headquarters as well.

"We're actually starting some roundtables for recyclers," said Jeff. "They'll be able to get together, exchange ideas and give each other help in how to run their businesses. It's something that's a little different. We'll start it at our headquarters and then branch out to remote locations."

Also, going forward, the Schrodgers will each continue to bring his or her special strengths to the table - a topic that prompted much discussion among the group as to what those were.

"I'd say that Jeff is very analytical," said Janice. "It's amazing how he can look at something from different viewpoints. Roger is the hardest working person I've ever seen. He just works; he does not sleep. Urban is very dependable, very responsible. He always has something going."

Added Roger, "Jeff is always thinking of the future and how to make things easier down the road. Urban can fix it even if he hasn't seen it before. And Janice can talk to anybody."

"I think Janice really helps our image quite a bit," said Jeff of his wife. "She gets the word out and she gets people pumped up. Roger definitely is the guy who gets it done. He's very practical and passionate about the customer. He's also the guy you go to when somebody wants a product to do something it wasn't designed to do. He's great at reconfiguring it. Urban can fix anything. If there's something that needs to be done that you couldn't go to school to learn and it just takes raw talent, Urban's the guy to do it. Both Urban and Roger are calming figures for me. They don't worry about things as much I do."

Urban got in the final word on his brothers and sister-in-law. "Jeff sacrificed a lot to start the company. Roger and I still had a business going so it wasn't as critical to us that it became a success. That's why I think Jeff is perhaps the most passionate about the business. Roger is passionate about the customers. He's been on the other end and knows what it's like to be in auto salvage. Janice, she puts up with all three of us. That pretty much says it all."