

Ralph Angel

Owner and President of Angel's Distributing

BY JENNIFER JENSEN

It all started back in 1977, when Ralph Angel and his father, Anthony Angel, began Angel's Distributing. The two decided to venture into the unknown world of draperies, which seems to have paid off. After 45 years, the company is the last company to offer only drapery lining and nothing else. Which means, "you have to be better than not most but everyone," Angel said.

Prior to working in the window treatment industry, Angel worked as a division manager for a grocery store. While on the job, he was in a terrible car accident that left him blind. "One second I could see and the other second I couldn't," Angel recalled. While he could continue to work at the grocery store as a buyer, for Angel, not being out in the field and sitting behind a desk all day just didn't suit him. So, he decided to start Angel's Distributing with his father in his basement. Initially, they had the challenge of getting on people's radar, getting noticed. Angel said they began calling people, sending out mailers and going to trade shows. People seemed to like the services they provided and the prices they offered. "It was a nice progression and meeting everybody," he said.

They brought products in through the basement of Angel's home and tractor trailers filled with product drove up and down the driveway. When the cellars were empty, they loaded them back up. "We progressed a little at a time," he said. In 1994, they moved out of his home into a 3,000-square-foot space and rented a warehouse. Eventually, in 2005, they bought their first warehouse. Shortly after, his father passed away, but he and his wife, Karen [who serves as owner and chief financial officer] continued. Today, his daughter, Taylor, serves as vice president and his son, Niko, is the director of operations. They have two

warehouses and a total of 10 employees, including family members.

His business philosophy is to have a good product at a good price and service the customer. "It's the KISS principle. Keep it simple stupid," he said. "Don't overcomplicate business."

The company also offers a cut program so customers don't have to buy in bulk when it's not needed. "They appreciate not having to eat lining for Christmas dinner," he said.

And if a customer requires a product they don't have, Angel said they will try to find it. "You lend yourself to the individual customer," he said. "They appreciate our ability to go after things."

These are the things that have kept them in business for 45 years and why they continue to have repeat customers. And it could be the Tootsie Pops too.

One day, several years ago, after a long workday, Karen unwrapped a Tootsie Pop. Angel said he asked for one as a sugar fix to get him through the day. Karen then got an idea to sneak a few Tootsie Pops into the tubes that hold the fabric for their customers to enjoy. Angel wasn't on board at first, but Karen did it anyway.

"A week later, I was talking to a customer over the phone, and before hanging up, the customer said, 'I want to thank you for putting those Tootsie Pops in the fabric tube. You just made a very miserable day turn great and put a smile on everyone's face in the workroom,'" Angel said.





Today, they spend \$12,000 a year on Tootsie Pops.

“We keep the Tootsie Pops because 45 years later, the Tootsie Pops are part of our brand recognition and our customers expect to receive them or boy, do you bet, we get a phone call saying, ‘Hey where are my Tootsie Pops?’” Taylor said. “We have customers whose kids and grandkids rush to their door when they see our bolts of fabric because they know what is inside the tubes ... then they leave the fabric on the porch!”

One repeat customer is a woman who lives in the Amish community in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. A few years ago, she wanted a sheer fabric that was thin but also stiff. Angel got a mill to create the product for her and got it at a third of the price of the previous place she was purchasing from. Now, she buys from Angel’s two to three times a year. “We made it different for her,” he said. “It’s kind of neat to be able to do that stuff.”

When asked to describe his leadership style, Angel said he leads by example. “Show and tell is the best way to do it,” he added. His daughter, Taylor, described his style as “controlled relaxation.” She said he would never ask someone to do something he wouldn’t do or hasn’t already done.

His employees, who have been at the company for years, have seen this in action. “They’ve seen me work side by side with them,” Angel said. Whether it was wrapping lining, unloading and loading trucks, etc. He’s done it all and wants others to learn from his mistakes.

He also doesn’t walk around yelling and screaming at his employees. “It’s a matter of treating them like you would want to be treated,” he added.

Angel said he learned this way from his father, a man he truly admired. “Walk softly and carry a big stick,” he said.

And this is one of many reasons his employees seem to stick around. One employee has been around since the very

beginning and another has been employed for 16 years.

Recognizing an employee’s efforts both verbally and monetarily goes a long way, Angel said. When it has been a rough week, Angel said they will put a few extra dollars in their employees’ paychecks, they buy lunch for their staff on Fridays and provide a nice rest area and kitchen facilities. “I guess all those things wrapped into a little bundle is what keeps the people around,” he added.

Angel also doesn’t push anyone to work faster. “Fast is not the answer,” he said. “Fast brings destruction and problems and injuries.” Take it slow, take your time and do it right the first time, which will save time and money, he added.

And when there is a problem at work with an employee, Angel pulls that employee aside and talks to them individually. “Get it corrected and move on,” he said.

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When asked what truly inspired him, Angel responded, “The want to do well for myself and my wife, my kids and the people who work for me. I feel personally responsible for them and their families.” He considers his small business a microcosm of a family.

He also gets inspired by those in the industry. And those he does business with understand he is a family-run business and he understands most of them are as well. In this instance, his company is also able to offer things bigger companies can’t.

When asked about the future, Angel said, “You always leave the door open for anything new coming aboard.”

The company has taken on many different linings, decorative fabrics and blackouts. They also now offer an all-in-one, which puts the face fabric and blackout all together. “It’s progressing very nicely,” he said.

If someone came to them and wanted them to distribute something for them, Angel said they would listen to the opportunity.

“It’s a fun operation,” Angel said. “We don’t make it a drudge. We try to keep it fresh every day.” ▣