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Q&A – Marketing Stairlifts And Scooters To Health Providers And Baby Boomers – Silver Cross CEO Bob Harvey

Baby Boomers are a lucrative market.

They're also smart, skeptical, and on the lookout for the best possible deal.

Selling to the enormous, well-educated demographic is as challenging as it can be rewarding, a lesson Bob Harvey has learned well.

He's the CEO of [Silver Cross](#), a Burlington-based company that sells new and used mobility and healthcare equipment. He's been selling chairlifts and scooters since 1993, franchising his company out from a single store to 19 locations generating more than \$11 million in sales across North America.

Star Business Club editor Tom Henheffer spoke with Harvey to discuss/examine his methods for achieving such rapid growth, catering to a changing market, and maintaining a deep connection with customers.

Tell me about your company

We offer a lower cost solution to staying in your own home. If you need something small, like a walker or roller, we'll provide that, new or recycled. And if your condition changes and you need a scooter or a stairlift, we'll evolve that by buying back (your other equipment) so you have the lowest cost solution.

A third of people over 65 have one fall a year, and that results in two billion dollars per year in healthcare costs. That's a big number, but people really fight the realization that they might need our products. So we have a real soft approach to the marketplace — there's no hard selling, it's a solution based approach.

How much are you saving people?

Some equipment we sell for half the price, some we sell for 2/3rds. We buy it back for about half of what you paid, excluding labour costs.

Where do customers normally buy this equipment?

Motion Specialities, MEDChair and Shoppers Drug Mart are our major competitors.

What's your background?

I started a fence company, called King Fence, out of my garage when I was in my 20s. We captured 23 per cent of market share in residential fencing in Ontario. That's where I started franchising.

I sold that, and then two years later joined my father in law in (the healthcare) business. I worked with him for about six months, then I studied Play It Again Sports, and said, 'their mindset should be applied to (the healthcare) industry.'

That's when you founded your first location, in 1993. How did you first start expanding?

I needed about two or three years to create our second location. Once we had manuals and training, we expanded from Oakville to London, and then moved out from there.

How many franchises do you have?

19 total: four in the US, 15 in Canada with three out west and 12 in Ontario.

What is your growth strategy now?

We created a cluster of locations in Ontario that trade and sell to each other using our online database that lists everyone's stock. They also market synergistically. We want to duplicate that by creating a cluster of ten locations out west, and in Chicago, Denver, Kansas City and Charlotte.

Tell me more about your synergistic approach to marketing.

We focus on marketing to referral sources, and find end users through the internet, but don't market to the mass base through TV or expensive print ads. To justify major expenses through advertising doesn't make sense.

We market to the health care professionals. Let's say you're working for the MS society or as an occupational therapist in Ontario, I, as a franchise owner, have got to approach you numerous times in numerous ways to understand what you need and how Silver Cross can help your clients to find solutions.

So the clusters let your franchises share leads and provide multiple contact points for health professionals, who can then refer clients to a variety of locations based on where they live.

(Plus) we're also really strong on the internet, the leaders in our industry. We're heavily on Twitter and Facebook and are getting more and more traffic through our blog.

We have about 130 key words, and are on the first page of google for all of them. It's taken us ten years to do that and was a huge amount of work, but it's given us hundreds of thousands of leads. We have 230,000 leads in our online system, double our competitors. That's really helped grow the business.

How has the industry changed in the last ten years?

The baby boomers are hitting the market huge, it's just crazy. They're going to exceed 50 per cent of households in the US. Their helping their parents — seniors in the 80s — and they're savvy. They look on the web, they search information, they look for bad press and complaints.

How has this changed your approach?

You need to be more savvy. They need to find you in a variety of places, need to see you talking on Facebook, see your history on LinkedIn, and when they find you they need to get a warm, trusting feeling.

People are much more educated, and with social media, video and search engines each (representing) a third of web traffic, we've got our message out there in relation to all those platforms. That's a big change and requires a lot more work.

What are the biggest challenges you currently face?

Finding the right franchisees is an onerous challenge. (A competitor) just cleaned out their head office, and we're looking at some of those people. We're also reaching out to people in the franchise world to help us grow in the US and Canada. We've just had one of our strongest franchisees join the head office staff as the director of franchise operations. He's extremely knowledgeable, and will be setting up more locations.

How do you continue to effectively serve your customers as you grow?

It's corny, but we have to continue to maintain our core values. It's where we started, being fair, having integrity, and treating people with respect. It can't be top down, (that's why) our biggest challenge is finding people who have those values.