

Bradshaw Still Dispensing Wisdom at 98

by Bob Reeves
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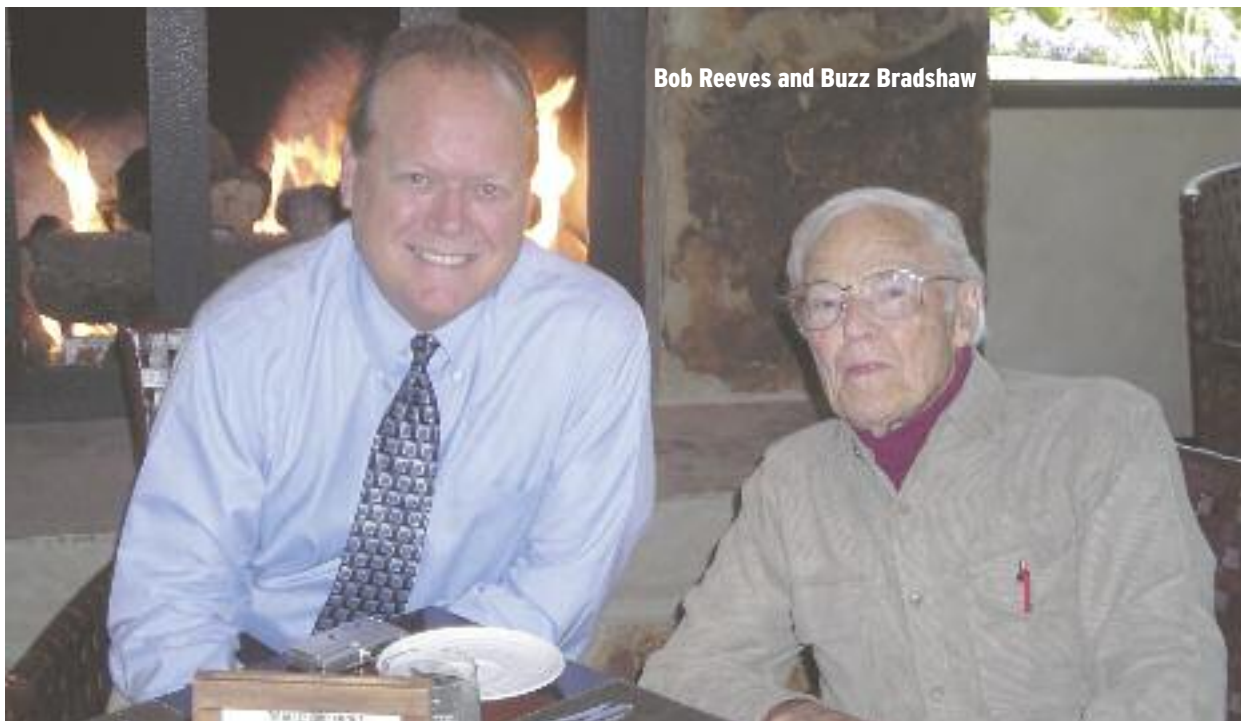
I spent almost half my life working for a major Southern California food broker—literally grew up in this organization. It is almost unheard of to spend 23 years with the same broker. With the ebb and flow of principals and the economy changing, a broker salesman usually bounces around from broker to broker. When asked how is it that I spent so many years with one broker, somehow dodging the layoff “bullet,” my answer was understood by my peers and associates. I got caught up in the mystique of the company, it gave me opportunities, gave me tools and, most importantly, it gave me confidence. There was, to coin a phrase from Buzz Bradshaw, esprit de corps within those walls that couldn't be found anywhere else. The brokerage shop I'm talking about was Bradshaw Incorporated—South.

The man that inspired me and infused me with self-confidence was the founder of Bradshaw Inc.—South, Buzz Bradshaw. I got an opportunity in mid-January to visit and have lunch with Buzz at Thunderbird Country Club in Rancho Mirage, Calif. He had just turned 98 a few weeks before. No surprise to me, he is healthy, sharp and as passionate as I had remembered. We talked for hours, while people came and went and his friends stopped by to greet him. What a great setting to meet with Buzz, a favorite hangout for many stars such as Bob Hope and Frank Sinatra. I glanced across the room while we spoke and noticed Carole Channing sitting with family. How old is she? She looks great, too! Maybe it's something in the water?

My mentor, and the reason I sacrificed and worked so hard not to disappoint, was someone who, truthfully, barely remembers me. Of course, he knew of me, but I was just a wide-eyed young kid, married, no kids (yet) and anxious to succeed. I can remember listening to this man talk about being the best brokerage shop in the state, and how we were feared by our competitors and revered by our principals. Why? Because we were always trying to improve and be the best we could be.

Buzz's introduction to the food industry was initially on the principal side. He and his brother and father ran the largest independent honey-producing and -packing business in the United States. Represented by 35 brokers across the country, R.D. Bradshaw and Sons was one of the first to develop a spreadable type honey, and they labeled their package Bradshaw's Spun Honey. After years of growth, they sold the business to Sue Bee Honey cooperative, when it became clear that the business wasn't going to be big enough to support their six families.

As soon as R. D. Bradshaw & Sons sold, early in 1964, Buzz began searching for new business opportunities. It wouldn't take long. In October 1965, Ray Welles called and invited Buzz and his wife Myrle to the upcoming World Series (Dodgers vs. Twins). He had ulterior motives it seems, as he offered Buzz a job. Buzz rejected the job offer, and countered with a proposal of his own: He would be interested in buying Welles' company. The Ray Welles Brokerage in Southern California had a fine reputation and represented some blue-chip compa-



Bob Reeves and Buzz Bradshaw

nies like Green Giant and Kal Kan pet food. Not long after this meeting, the papers were drawn up, and the Bradshaws were the new owners.

When the Bradshaws entered the food brokerage business in March 1966, the company was at a crossroads. Business was declining, with principals ending contracts and employees at a standstill. They spent the first three months trying to turn things around.

“We initiated breakfast meetings with management where we outlined our vision of the company. We introduced objectives, which instilled a new sense of direction in our people. However, as new owners, we still needed an extra dimension, a program to activate and stimulate the organization, develop momentum, and get the ball rolling,” he says.

“While attending the WAFC convention of about 500 people, we were fortunate to hear an address by Henry J. Kaiser Sr. Mr. Kaiser, a successful Ameri-

can industrialist and world-famous entrepreneur, constructed most of the liberty ships in World War II. His record turn-out of completed ships was unsurpassed.

“Although he had just been in the hospital, Mr. Kaiser was determined to talk to the grocery people. Using a wheelchair to get to the stage, he stood at the podium and delivered a most inspiring message, beginning with the remark, ‘I know nothing about the grocery business, but I will try in 15 minutes to translate a few business principals over to the supermarket industry.’”

This is what Kaiser said, as Bradshaw recalls: “As I observe your grocery business, you have the same size stores, the same size parking lots, the same size shopping carts. You buy your products from the same manufacturers. You have the same or similar brands and labels on the shelf. Under the Federal Trade Commission regulations, you pay the same price, so you have the same inventory costs. Your labor contracts are similar, you serve the same type of customers and your shelf prices are much the same. The only difference between your company and your competitors is your ability to inspire your people to move from 80 percent horsepower up to 90, 100 and hopefully 110 percent horsepower. If the people in your company respond to your leadership, you will have a major advantage over your competitors and, thereby, set your company up as the outstanding organization serving the consumer.

“After 15 minutes, Mr. Kaiser thanked his audience, returned to his chair, and was wheeled off the stage to resounding applause. His message has stayed with me ever since.

“I knew this philosophy was equally important in the brokerage business, which is totally people-oriented. When I called our employees together to announce the new bonus system, it was with Mr. Kaiser's philosophy in mind, and I borrowed from it to explain the brokerage business.”

This is what he told his people: “Let's assume our competitors are meeting in a building across the street. They are selling products similar to those we sell. Their sales people are just as bright and qualified as we are. They are well dressed and they have an excellent sales presentation. They drive similar cars to those we all drive. They serve the same customers we serve. They have credit cards and an excellent relationship with their customers. Their products sell at the same price. They each have an order book and a headquarters and call on the same customer as we do. They develop the same trade relations as those we strive for. The only difference between our competitors and us is how deeply we feel inside about winning.



The Welles sales team of 28 people that the Bradshaws inherited when they purchased the company in 1966.



Six years later...April 1, 1972—Bradshaw Inc.'s sales team totaled 101 members, each managing and measuring his performance and results in relation to a common objective (photo taken at Dodger Stadium). In the late 1980s, this sales team grew to over 200.



On the 30th anniversary of the founding of Bradshaw Inc. in 1996, family members pose for a photo: Sallie, Ben, Myrle, Buzz, Nancy and Doug.

If we have that down-deep, strong desire to work harder, longer and with more dedication, we will move ahead of the competition.

"In addition to your salary, the Welles Company heretofore had been paying bonuses on an annual basis. There were no bonuses from earnings last year. The bonuses you received from the Welles Company were taken out of the capital. This is all going to change. Beginning immediately, we are going to pay you your regular base salary plus a bonus monthly so that you can see the fruits of your toil immediately and not have to wait 12 months for the rewards you have earned."

"This message generated considerable excitement among our sales people," Bradshaw remembers. "They reacted enthusiastically, saying, 'Give us the products to sell, and this company will start to move forward immediately!' Eager to earn bonuses, employees were fired up, and our new program resulted in company growth far exceeding my expectations. From the inception of monthly bonuses, our company put on a new face."

This is just one example of Buzz's deep understanding of human behavior and human relations.

"Rewards in life come through genuine and sincere human relations. These priceless ingredients cannot be purchased, borrowed or sold."

Here are some of his keys to harmony and success in business and life.

COMPASSION

"One key ingredient to good human relations is compassion for the other person. An excellent example of compassion for the other person is the famous letter President Abraham Lincoln sent to Mrs. Bixby when he learned of the death of her five sons during the Civil War," Bradshaw says.

Dear Madam,

I have been shown in the files of the War Department a statement of the adjutant-General of Massachusetts that you are the mother of five sons who have died gloriously on the field of battle. I feel how weak and fruitless must be any words of mine which should attempt to beguile you from the grief of a loss so overwhelming. But I can not refrain from tendering to you the consolation that may be found in the thanks of the Republic they died to save. I pray that our heavenly Father may assuage the anguish of your bereavement, and leave you only the cherished memory of the loved and lost, and the solemn

pride that must be yours to have laid so costly a sacrifice upon the altar of freedom.

Abraham Lincoln, November 21, 1864

SMILE

"Another key to good human relation is the smile on a person's face. A smile radiates the unspoken words, 'I come as a friend.' A smile is even transported over the telephone," Bradshaw believes. "Mr. M.B. Skaggs, founder of Safeway Stores, had a sign over the desk of each store manager that read 'You're never well dressed unless you wear a smile.' This was one of the basic ingredients for the success of the Safeway chain of supermarkets. This was before the days of self-service, when every customer was greeted personally and served by the manager or clerk."

LISTENING

"A third key ingredient to good human relations is listening," he says. "A good listener generally listens more than they talk. A writer once said that we should listen twice as much as we talk. We have two ears for listening and one mouth for talking."

COMMON VALUES

"A major ingredient in human relation is that we relate best to people with common values. These are people we can trust. Trust and confidence are the basis of all human and business relations. People of integrity. People of solid character," according to Bradshaw. "Character is a most valuable asset. It cannot be purchased, sold, borrowed or rented. There is only one thing in life that endures, and that is character."

"I grew up in a farm area in south Idaho and I recall my father saying a weak character is like an old fence: all the whitewash in the world cannot strengthen either one."

SELF-CONFIDENCE

"People with self-confidence perform like professionals. A professional always looks to the inside, asking themselves, 'What am I doing wrong?' They never blame others for their mistakes," he says.

POSITIVE ATTITUDE

"We all relate best to people that are upbeat and carry a positive attitude toward life."

HUMILITY

"The only things that can stop a fabulous future are arrogance, ego and conceit. People are generally reduced to rubble by these three acquired diseases. Humility is godliness. Arrogance is haughtiness. Conceit is false vanity."

LOVE

"Finally, to maintain good human relations, the most inspiring lesson is written in the words of St. Paul in his letter to the Corinthians: 'Faith, hope and love abide, and the greatest of these is love,'" quotes Bradshaw.



Buzz and Myrtle traveling by train in Switzerland in 1986.

Buzz would only come around a few times a year to address the sales organization at Bradshaw-South. When he would address our group, he would often tell a compelling story from his recent travels. These stories always resonated with me. In 1986, he spoke of the customer/principal relationship.

This is what he taught us:

- A customer is the most important person in any business.
- A customer is not dependent on us, we are dependent on him.
- A customer is not an interruption of our work. He is the purpose of it.
- A customer does us a favor when he comes in. It is a privilege for us to serve him.
- A customer is part of our business, not an outsider.
- A customer is not money in the cash register. He is a human being like we are.
- A customer is a person who comes to us with his needs and his wants. It is our job to fill them.
- A customer deserves the most courteous attention we can give him. He is the lifeblood of this and every business. He pays our salary. Without him, we would close our doors.

"I transcribed this from a plaque on the wall of the 130-year-old Brenner Park Hotel in Baden, Germany—currently rated as one of the top three leading hotels in Europe. These words were written by Mr. Brenner over a century ago for his associates and stand as a hallmark for success in any enterprise—especially the brokerage business...I had the good fortune of being a guest for four days at the world-renowned hotel and I sensed immediately that these words were for real the moment I set foot in the front door," Bradshaw recalled.

As you might imagine, Buzz Bradshaw is a reader. "As a Man Thinketh" by James Allen "is one of the most fascinating books I have ever read. The book's message is on the power of thought," says Bradshaw.

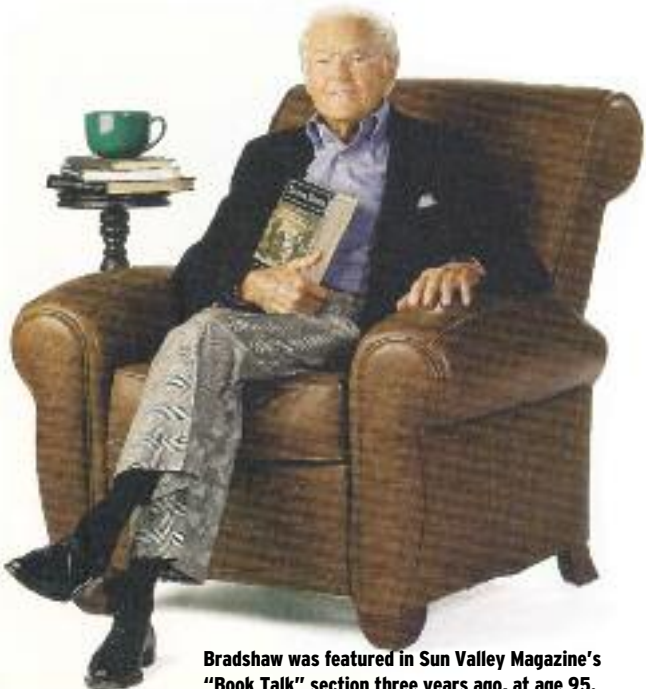
"For example, Allen explains the difference between the amateur and the professional. The amateur whines and bellyaches because he is dominated by outside forces. The professional never complains. He looks inside himself and asks, 'What am I doing wrong?'"

Allen's book had such an impact on Bradshaw that one Christmas he bought 200 copies, signed each copy and gave one to each employee.

"I think the influence of that book helped to build our team (into) the most powerful sales organization you've ever witnessed," he says.

Today, three generations of Bradshaws manage an offshoot of the original brokerage business, Bradshaw International, a highly successful housewares marketing company.

For the past century, the Bradshaws have fine-tuned the art of having a family business. Their learnings from the tough, competitive, demanding food brokerage business has served them well. Buzz and his wife Myrtle will be celebrating their 75th wedding anniversary on Sept. 30, 2009. Buzz will turn 100 in 2010. I hope I'm invited.



Bradshaw was featured in Sun Valley Magazine's "Book Talk" section three years ago, at age 95.