Goudchaux's kept them coming back for decades

By CHAD CALDER

The day the 1980s — Hank Stenberg can't recall when, exactly — a customer came into Maison Blanche saying a Polo shirt he bought there didn't fit properly. Simple enough. His money could be refunded. Trouble was, the man bought the shirt in June, before leaving for an extensive vacation in the Far East. Still, no problem. His money could be refunded. Hold on, things were not quite that simple, the man explained. Rather than trot the garment around on his travels, he had thrown it out.

Was this a problem? "My brother gave him his money back, anyway," Stenberg recalled recently, laughing. Bad business? Stenberg doesn't think so.

"Besides, he said, "I've gotten more than the value of the shirt just retelling the story.'"

The way he sees it, things like that kept customers coming to his family's stores for decades.

Goudchaux's, as the chain was first known, hit the scene in 1907, when brothers Bernard and Jake Goudchaux opened a 6,000-square-foot store with three employees in the 1700 block of Main Street. They moved the store to 1500 Main Street in 1925.

In 1936, Hank's father, Erich, joined Goudchaux's, and his family purchased the store in 1945. The Stenbergs soon opened another store here and one in Lafayette.

The company expanded mightily in the 1960s, acquiring the Maison Blanche stores in New Orleans in 1962 and buying the Robinson's of Houston in 1967. The company grew to 24 stores in 1969.

In 1988, the Stenberg's stores all had taken the name Maison Blanche, though it was wiped of the local retail landscape within the next decade as the massive expansion of retail chains continued.

The chain sold eight Florida stores to Dillard's in 1991 and its remaining 16 outlets in 1992 to Burlington Coat Factory, which decided to keep the Maison Blanche name.

Last year, however, Dillard's bought the Mercantile chain and inverted or sold off the last of its Maison Blanche stores.

In August, Dillard's announced it would close the Main Street location, where it all began for the Stenbergs.

With no apparent takers in the wings, the decision could mark the end of its 75-year reign as a retail landmark in Baton Rouge.

Still, it is unlikely Maison Blanche could be bought by anyone.

Many former employees of Goudchaux's and Maison Blanche have their own stories of the store they call home in the city. Some of them are among the most well known to today's customers.

Bernard Blanchard, 73, who worked for the retailer from 1956 to 1992, remembers a time when one summer he was in the middle of the night, repairing a fence for a funeral the next morning.

"It was nothing for us to open the store after closing hours to take care of a 'customer's' order," he said.

Stenberg recalls running into the back of a church with a wedding gown for the bride, while the guests were still in the front.

In addition to the spur-of-the-moment decisions to keep the customers happy, the Stenberg family's stories had customer-friendly policies in place that were not as common in the 1950s.

From getting rides in the parking area to interest free charge accounts, the Stenbergs were known for friendly gestures.

One such policy was giving school children a nickel for every "A" they got.

When asked how this benefited the store, Stenberg sounds as if he finds the question somewhat absurd.

"It's just fun," he said. "Just think about it. A report card full of 'A's' they'd say they'd talk to the buyer and see what they could do about it." Blanchard said.

When it came to the store, Stenberg was often the one who let everyone know the money could be refunded.

"Sometimes we'd have a customer who was mad at us," he said. "We'd say, 'We're sorry, but we want to make sure you're happy.'"

And the Stenbergs' practice of giving free bottles of Coca-Cola to every young man who came into the store shows how the family was willing to make small sacrifices for larger gains.

"It was fun, and it brought people in," Stenberg said.

While the Stenbergs may have been taking a 6-cent hit on each soda they gave away, such customer-friendly promotions kept people coming.

"I can't imagine," Blanchard said. "If you sell one thing, you really haven't sold anything. It's the second one, or the third, that shows whether you have a customer.

The Stenbergs made sure Goudchaux's and Maison Blanche employees, the foot soldiers in the battle for customer loyalty, were on the front lines.

"Over 90 percent of the people in the stores were on commission," Stenberg said. "And that gave them more of a stake in pleasing the customer. We always kept our employees focused on selling, and I don't think we got too far away from that."

Blanchard, who worked in men's clothing at the Mall at Cortina store for 22 years, remembers having 11 salesmen on the floor in his department.

"Today that's almost a thing of the past," he said. "Most stores today, they have one or two employees in a department."

Blanchard was also proud of the fact that the store's managers were not salesmen on the floor, even when they were doing office work.

"We had to be where we could see what was going on in the store," he said.

Larry Audet, a professor of marketing at the University of New Orleans and former vice president of human resources for Maison Blanche successor Dillard's, recalls that while his policy was copied by other stores, it was somehow never implemented.

"It made the store managers more aware of what was going on in the store," he said.

"In our store, I could get to the managers but the customers had a hell of a time getting to them, and I thought that was ridiculous."

At Goudchaux's, "the store managers were there in the morning to greet them and were there when they left," Blanchard adds.

Stenberg cites a policy of having the mail sorted on folding tables in the children's clothing section every day.

"We made every employee, from the newest sales clerk to the head of the company, come in on Saturday once a year to pick up the mail."

While the Stenbergs expected a lot from their employees, they made sure they felt needed as well, always taking solicitations from foundations working the floor.

"If I want up and told them we needed such and such in an item, that I thought we were missing sales on, they'd say they'd talk to the buyer and see what they could do about it," Blanchard said.

"It was a very, very good relationship," he said. "The Stenbergs knew everyone by name, not by a number. They knew their families, their children."

Stenberg said this was no accident.

"We always considered ourselves a family business, which meant that in everyone who worked there we hoped to instill a sense of belonging that would translate how they treated their customers," he said. "We wanted them treated as guests and as special guests at that — and I think we succeeded."

Blanchard agreed that the way the Stenbergs ran their company made them a retail force to be reckoned with.

"From a competitive standpoint we had to respect them a whole lot," he said. "They were fierce competitors, especially in Baton Rouge. We weren't competitors in Baton Rouge. We were there, we paid rent, but they made money and we struggled."

For Stenberg, however, being a part of the community and succeeding in the retail business were one and the same.

"Baton Rouge was very good to us," he said. "It's very dear to us, and whatever warmth they felt to the store and the family, we tried to return that."

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