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Inspiring Ideas for Design, Business & Living



Earlier this evening I had the pleasure of hearing Gordon Segal, the co-founder of Crate & Barrel give a talk to kick off the Chicago Market at the Merchandise Mart. It was ostensibly about how he started his successful retail business and grew it over the years, but the real message was clear - be true to yourself.

Crate & Barrel came about in the early sixties in Chicago when Gordon and his wife Carol were first married. They loved clean, beautiful Scandinavian housewares, but got anything but as wedding gifts.

He said they were blessed with "good taste and no money".

They did their research and realized that if they cut out the wholesalers and worked directly with the European factories, they could pass on the savings to the customer, giving them a leg up on the competition. The idea was there, but the funds were not. They were 23 and had 10,000 dollars to their name and needed double that to stock and open a shop. After trying unsuccessfully for 6 months to raise the rest of the funds, Gordon took a loan of 7,000 from his father - it was, according to Gordon, every penny that his Dad had in savings.

They put all the money into getting great, unusual stock for the store - they were bringing new, beautiful items to the US for the first time, and could afford to sell them at reasonable prices. Their concept was "buy what you love".

What they didn't have was any retail experience at all, nor any display furniture. Hence the now famous store displays in their first shop on Wells Street - the actual wooden shipping crates that

the goods arrived in, turned on their side. And....the rest is history. The company now has over 7 thousand employees and is a billion dollar a year business.

The concepts that Gordon stressed throughout his speech were far from hard edged, "profit is king" money making ideas. In fact, they seem applicable and worth remembering for any worthwhile pursuit, from creative projects such as design, decorating, cooking and writing to the most basic challenge of simply living your everyday life happily and well.

Gordon's Advice:

Let your personality drive your work. Your unique point of view is key to the success of whatever you undertake.

Be true to your style - don't try and guess what your customer (or reader, or viewer, or friend) wants to buy (or read, or see, or hear) - just go with what feels right to you and you will always be able to stand behind it.

Take risks - you may fail at first, but if you stick with it, you'll learn more and be ready for the next challenge. (Illustrated by Gordon's story of marking down more espresso makers than anyone else in America after being inspired on an early trip to Italy - the US market simply wasn't there yet! But in time, they were, and he was ready).

Don't fear competition - it makes you better. Without it, you don't push yourself and don't evolve. The first Crate& Barrel location had no less than 4 competitors within a few blocks.

You have a responsibility to your customers (and clients, and neighbors, and family, and lets face it, everyone around you) - take it seriously and treat people with respect.

Get out there! Gordon and Carol traveled constantly throughout their career, sourcing goods. But, the real benefit was learning from the people they met. He said they were sponges, being inspired by the people who they did business with both at work and while socializing. This is a man who doesn't discount the importance of a good dinner conversation over a few bottles of wine!