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Every day is Flag Day here

John Rolfe staff writer June 28, 2007 FINAL, BUSINESS, page B6

Q: How long have you been in this business?

A: It's been in the family for 50 years. We took it over when Paul's aunt and uncle (Roger and Madalyn Gagnon) became ill, in 1994 or 1995. Both our sons, Derek and then Ryan, ran this business after they got out of college, but they've both moved, to South Carolina. So now we're here.

Q: How did the business start?

A: Roger used to have a corner grocery store before this, and people used to come in and wonder where they could get flags -there was no place around. He started thinking that a flag business might not be such a bad idea. So when he started, it was just the original garage - he ordered some flags, and opened the door. Very simple.

But it kept growing, and as people wanted more things, it gave him more ideas. Flags for different countries, state flags, cemetery flags, things like that. We've expanded into custom flags and banners and other things people

need. Back when he started there was no competition, but that's grown over the last 10 years.

Q: Competition from ...?

A: Oh, locally, different flag companies, but they don't have the showroom and poles that we do. We get a lot of repeat business, and flagpoles are a big part of the business.

Q: How big a percentage?

A: Um ... Paul would say, probably about 20 percent.

Q: You must do a lot of selling to institutions.

A: I would say, it's probably 50-50 business and private homeowners. We sell a lot of flags for classrooms and stuff, and we sell the bunting you see on the Fourth of July and Memorial Day.

We see a lot of customers who have summer homes on the water, things like that. Certainly 9/11 seemed to wake a lot of people up, but it's all gone back to the way it was before. Some people go and buy a United States flag made in China.

Q: Better count the number of stars, right? Do you make flags?

A: No, we order them, but they're made in New Jersey.

Q: Do you dispose of them, too?

A: We collect them from people, and a couple of times a year Amvets or the American Legion takes them from us, for a burning ceremony. There are a lot of tattered flags out there, it's terrible.

Q: Is it a judgment call, when they should be replaced?

A: We usually recommend that a flag that flies year-round should be replaced every year. Especially when people are on the water, the wind causes rips and frays.

Q: Other than the U.S. flag, what are the good sellers?

A: Either the Maine, or the military flags - the Marines, Air Force, Army. We sell POW flags, firefighter flags. ... The Italian and the Irish flags are the two most popular (foreign) flags.

We had a lady from Britain who lives around here come in and ask if we would please fly her flag, she was so homesick. So we put it up for her. You have to try to make people happy. This is supposed to be a feel-good business.

A lot of schools call, and people in northern Maine. ... Someone from Puerto Rico called a month ago, wanting a Puerto Rican flag, so we sent it to him.

A soldier in Iraq wanted a Maine flag two years ago, so we sent one over. ...

Yes, we did it for free.

Q: Is yours outside the state's largest flag?

A: I don't know if it's the largest, but it's one of the bigger ones, 24 feet by 38 feet. It's been up about 30 years, on an 80-foot pole. ... We put a new one up every year, yes. We get a lot of comments on how nice it looks, blowing across the road.

Q: Do you sell that size?

A: Oh, sure, we can get all the sizes. I don't think anyone's bought one that large. There's a car dealer on Route 1 who flies a really large one, but he didn't get it here.

Q: How much does a big flag cost?

A: The largest that we sell and have in stock is a 12x18. That's like \$334. The most common sizes are 3x5 and 4x6. The 3x5 is \$31 and the 4x6 is \$42.72.

Q: Ever have any weird custom job requests?

A: We did have some guy come in who wanted a swastika, and we just refused.

Q: Did he say what he wanted it for?

A: No. We did not even want to talk with him, and told him to leave.

Q: Who buys custom flags?

A: We did Mercy Hospital's, that's a custom flag. All of BIW's custom and other flags. We did put a flagpole up for (former) President Bush in Kennebunkport, in 2000 - we do installations, too. He gave Paul a tour - he's a very pleasant man.

Q: Do you design flags?

A: We can help people, if they need it. But they can't come in and say they want a Red Sox flag. We do have the licensed Red Sox flags.

Q: What do they go for?

A: It's \$49 for a 3x5. Patriots, same thing.

Q: What about Yankees flags?

A: We can get them. We don't have them in stock, just the local (teams).

Q: Are you getting rich?

A: No. We do it because, for one thing it's been in the family. And it's a pretty easy and comfortable business to run - you don't get a lot of angry people. But it's not something you would support a family of five on.

If we were younger and wanted to we could put someone on the road, use the Web more and whatever. But we do very little advertising; it's mostly repeat customers and word-of-mouth. Before this, Paul had an advertising business he'd done forever, and then this came along and we decided to keep it going.

Q: What would you be doing in another life?

A: That's Paul in the background, saying 'not working.' I don't know! I'd have to think about it.

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