



# All in the Family

South Jersey family businesses are thriving thanks to inherited values and traditions.

[ By Alex Young ]

**When Anthony Bellia Jr. was young, he was already thinking** about running the family business. "I would sit at my father's desk and tell him that I was going to take over the company," says Bellia, the third-generation president of Bellia Office Furniture in Woodbury.

Companies as big as Holman Automotive, a family-run company since 1924, and Ravitz ShopRite, family-owned since 1938, have become staples in the South Jersey business world, creating a solid name for customers and associates to rely on. Bellia Office Furniture joins the ranks of family businesses across the area, large and small, that are passing on the groundwork for a successful business to younger generations.

Since opening in 1980, the Gloucester County business has been family owned and operated, moving from grandfather Salvatore to Anthony Sr. and his brother Tom, and finally to their sons Anthony Jr., Sal, Andrew and Michael.

"My grandfather started this company to provide for his family," Bellia says. "He said to himself, 'I can go work for someone else, or I can create something for my family's future.'"

## A Family Affair

One of the toughest things facing family businesses is the transition from one generation to the next—maintaining the company while staying up-to-date on traditions and policies.

"My father and my uncle had very similar goals as my grandfather," Bellia says. "They started the furniture business to really make something bigger and build even more for the future."

Salvatore opened Bellia Printing & Copy in Woodbury in 1973 and the furniture business followed seven years later. When it was time for Anthony and the rest of the third generation to take over, they were prepared and anxious to continue their family's decades of success.

However, not all inheritances run that seamlessly. For brothers

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Rob and Carlos Santiago, now the chief operating officer and vice president, respectively, of Para-Plus Translations in Barrington, the idea never crossed their minds. Their mother, Sonia, started the translation company in the dining room of their home in 1980, with no solid plans to pass the business onto her children.

"We were never groomed to take over the company and there was never any pressure," Carlos says. "When we started out here, we didn't think of it as more than a summer internship."

"I think that our mother had always hoped that we would take over one day," Rob agrees. "But she made it clear it was our decision."



Both brothers went on to their own careers—Rob was the manager of an engineering firm while Carlos was a physics teacher—but, like many family-owned businesses across the country, the tie to home pulled them back. “When our mom needed help setting up a few technical things for the company one summer, I came in to help,” says Carlos. “I’ve been here ever since.”

### Family Values

In an economy where a business needs to stand out to succeed, family-owned businesses have the leg up. That’s because they have their moral code and business strategy embedded among employees from the start.

The closeness of family businesses to their customers also allows the business to know exactly what their customers want.

“Our customers tend to know what the best products are,” says Mike Casey, second-generation co-owner of ABC Discount Appliances, with locations in Marlton, Pennsauken and Medford. “Our size and our dedication to service allow us to provide the best products available to our customers.”

“We learned from a young age,” Bellia says. “We all worked at the store and had those values really stressed to us.” Values like customer relations and quality service that, according to Bellia, are taught and passed on through a lifetime of involvement.

Family businesses have the unique opportunity to develop close connections with their customers because they are more than just businesses, they are institutions. “Customers like to know they get personal attention,” Bellia says. “They can see you care about more than just the product. They can see you care about the community.”

### The Chain of Command

The struggle in managing a family business can come from balancing a successful company with a healthy family life. As succession approaches, the choice of hiring a new leader can cause family tension, but the Santiagos know that examining the strengths and weaknesses of each family member can protect personal feelings while ensuring a successful foundation for the company.

“We took different roles based on the needs of the company,” Carlos says. “Rob had experience running a company and I had more technical experience. I had no problem letting him run it because in the end we both bring our own perspectives and skills to the company. ... We were very respectful.”

For Casey, the business reached into a more extended family. As he took over in his father’s seat, ABC’s other partner, Rick Super, was handing down the reins to his son, Rick Super Jr.

“It’s 50-50. Decisions are jointly met,” explains Casey. “He handles office; I handle logistics. We both get involved in every aspect.”

The Bellias recently went through a transition period of their own as the second generation left and the third took hold.

“When we were growing up, it was made clear that we couldn’t assume ownership,” Bellia says. “We were told that we could always have a job here, but if we wanted to make this our career, we needed to meet certain requirements.”

Businesses in situations like this, where there are multiple family members ready to take the reins, can hire a succession consultant whose job it is to prepare the family for the changeover. Brian Donnelly specializes in business succession planning for the law firm of Donnelly Ritigstein in Moorestown.

“Families will usually leave it to us to craft a succession plan,” Donnelly says. “It’s our job to figure out the dynamic that best suits the family and the business.”

“The first step is to ask the parent if they’ve talked about handing the company down to their children,” he says. “If they say no, we have to make sure that it’s something the child actually wants to do. From there we can start working.”

Donnelly and other succession consultants make sure that any person who may want to take over has the capability to do so before moving the family in any new direction.

“Having a consultant was critical for having a smooth changeover to the new generation,” Bellia says.

### Where the Heart Is

Family businesses may be an investment, but it’s also important they stay invested in the family itself. Balancing a personal life is just as important as keeping the books balanced.

“We can get at each others’ throats sometimes,” Bellia admits. “You really have to keep family and personal emotions out when it comes to the business.”

For Casey, he has the unique situation of handling a company owned by two separate families. “Sometimes if your business partners aren’t family it can be tough,” says Casey, who is working alongside his childhood friend to build a new family business that both of their fathers would be proud of. “We’re fortunate that we grew up together; there’s a strong relationship.”

No matter what the ownership situation or type of business, they all recognize where priorities lie. “It’s one thing to lose a job,” Carlos says. “It’s a whole different thing to lose a family member. We just try to stay respectful, and I think I am much closer to both my brother and my mother because of it.” ■