Intro

After 60 years in Retail, having spent significant time running companies with online, catalog as well as bricks and mortar, I've often been asked "How did I get started?"

The short answer is: I rolled out of the cradle, my grandfather handed me a wallet and said "Run this to the backroom and get it monogrammed… and hurry up…the Lady's waiting!" While that may be a bit of joke (and perhaps a slight exaggeration) it's pretty accurate to say I spent many hours during every year of my childhood "In the store" and grew up with Retail in my blood.

(As an aside, many years later when I was running what had become three stores by then, my wife was pressed into service when I had to fire a manager the day after Thanksgiving. She brought our 1-month-old baby girl in a bouncy seat and propped her up behind the cash/wrap. Every time the credit card printer went off Hannah jumped slightly then fell back asleep. Like Father, Like Daughter, born into Retail).

The real answer is my Retail skillset was shaped by a series of experiences and interactions in The Luggage Shop which shaped me as a salesperson, mechanic, person, and otherwise. These types of experiences are rarer today as Retail has become mass market and 25% online. To me, the experiences were invaluable. My hope is some of these may guide future Retailers to learn from experience.

Genetics of a Retailer

For some perspective on the quality of individuals who succeed in Retail, it's instructive to take a look at the colorful background of the founder of The Luggage Shop. "Being a Retailer" is more than just a set of technical or intellectual abilities. It's about a state of mind and shared, learned experiences dealing with people in person.

Five generations of Wolansky retailers began with Pesa and Yackov in Grodno Guberniya (Grodno Governate) then part of imperial Russia, today part of Belarus. Pesa was the daughter of a wealthy merchant; Yackov was a relatively poor Jewish yeshiva (religious school) student. When he needed a husband for his daughter, Pesa's father went to the local yeshiva and asked for the best student. Yackov was selected.

Pesa's father set them up in a dry goods store in the shtetl (little Jewish town) in which they lived. Pesa operated the store while Yackov spent his time studying torah in the back room. The name "Wolansky" is Russian for "a person from Wola." Wola (known as the hometown of composer Chopin) is a suburb of Warsaw.

Pesa was only 27 years old by then. She and Yackov had had a total of five children: four daughters and then a son, Joseph born in 1894. Given that Grodno was somewhat of a crossroads in Eastern Europe, Joseph learned to speak Yiddish (at home), Russian, Lithuanian and Polish—as well as French, taught to him in school.

By somewhere around 1910--1912, Europe was gearing up for a potential war. Fearing military conscription, and with few economic opportunities for a Jew in Grodno, Joe dropped out of

school and left home. For reasons unknown he travelled south, travelling through Italy and across the Mediterranean to Alexandria, Egypt. He lived in Egypt for two years, finding work there and saving money for his eventual journey to the United States. Along the way he learned to speak Egyptian Arabic.

Arriving in New York, his first job was a bodyguard for a Jewish gangster. The gangster—and the job – didn't last long. But he was soon hired as a soda jerk/clerk at a pharmacy on the Jewish Lower East Side. According to him, this was due to his language skills: he could speak with almost every customer who walked in the door. By 1917, he was living in East Harlem but self-employed in the "fruit business" in Palisades, NJ. At or around 1920, he was introduced to Miriam Gott of Bayonne, NJ.

Miriam (Mary) Gott was born in 1897, in Stamford, Connecticut. Her family, however, came from Bialystock, Poland. As Bialystock is right next to Grodno (maybe 10 miles away), it's likely that Joe was introduced to the family by a relative or "landsman" from back home who heard that father Louis had both money and two daughters that needed marrying. When Joseph first came calling, Louis exiled younger daughter Ida to the top floor of the house, and did not let her meet Joseph until the engagement to Miriam was set—it was important to marry off the eldest daughter first. Joseph and Miriam were married in 1920.

Joseph and Miriam moved to Bayonne. Rhoda was born in 1922 and Alvin (my dad) was born in 1925; Jacob (Yackov, named after the grandfather) was later born in 1930 and Sidney in 1933.

Joseph got work (probably through his father-in-law) as a carpenter. After some time, he began to develop properties himself. His biggest development was two multi-family twin apartment buildings on Avenue A in Bayonne. The first was called the "Rhoda," the second the "Alvin." By this point, things back in Grodno were not good. His father had died, and his sisters, backing competing communist parties as part of the larger Russian Revolution, were constantly bickering: some were Mensheviks while some were Bolsheviks. In 1928, Joseph brought his now widowed mother Pesa over from Grodno to escape the chaos. She lived with them and became the primary care-giver for the Wolansky children.

Unfortunately, the two buildings were completed just as the Great Depression hit. Joseph went broke and was out of the real estate business[1]. He then started a trading stamp business in Jersey City called Colonial Blue Stamps, on the model of the popular S&H Green Stamps. Merchants would purchase the stamps from him and give them out to their customers as premiums with purchases. Once the customers collected enough stamps, which they pasted into collection books, they could trade them in for merchandise. Unfortunately, given the poor economic environment, the venture was not successful and soon went out of business.

With six mouths to feed, Joseph went to work running a "wheel of fortune" down at a small waterfront carnival on First Street in Bayonne, across from Staten Island. You would spin the wheel and win cheap prizes like kewpie dolls—the margins were good (always important in

[1] In 1930, Joseph was sued by the seller of a parcel of land in Hoboken for reneging on an agreement to purchase the land. Joseph was found guilty and ordered to pay $500 as damages.

Retail). He took in a partner, Abe Rogow—also from Bialystock-- who was married to one of his or Miriam's cousins and they expanded to selling fake medicines like "pep pills"—all sugar.

They also brought in Joe's nephew, who had travelled with a circus and who started an attraction called "Head without a Body." Someone sat on a stool (the nephew and his siblings took turns) and stuck their head through a round hole in a triangular table. The sides were draped in black cloth and there were a bunch of mirrors, so it looked like the head was floating in space. Customers paid money to duck into a tent and take in this miracle.

Joe and Abe were promoters (another good Retail trait), and eventually they talked themselves into jobs managing Dreamland Amusement Park, on Frelinghuysen Avenue on the border between Newark and Elizabeth. This was a small amusement park that featured (in addition to the usual carnival games, "game of chance" stalls and rides) a large outdoor arena, a salt water swimming pool and an indoor roller rink converted from a dance hall.

Dreamland Park was developed by an ex-horse jockey named Vic "Buddy" Brown. Under the management of Joe and Abe, the operations at Dreamland Park were expanded to host numerous boxing matches (including many championship matches—it was the largest such venue in New Jersey) and dance marathons at which Joe hired the then unknown comedian Red Skelton to serve as the MC.

At some point the partners got into trouble. They decided to build a Ferris wheel in the salt water pool, so that the customers could dip their feet into the water as they reached the bottom. But they were better promotors than engineers, and the salt water in the pool rusted away the bolts securing the Ferris wheel, causing it to topple over. Joe and Abe each blamed each other for the disaster, but in any case, their tenure as managers of the park was over.

Now out of work again, in 1936, Joseph moved the family across the Bayonne Bridge to Port Richmond, Staten Island, and opened a retail business on Richmond Avenue called "The Novelty Shop." The success of the store was made when the US began rearmament just prior to World War II.

By early 1942, all domestic manufacturing was turned over to military production; everyday consumer products became almost impossible to get. Joe, however, through his connections on New York's Lower East Side (then an area of small loft factories) was able to obtain "grey market" goods that others could not—his specialty was valises and other luggage. Prices—and profits-- matched the scarcity. When asked what brand the suitcases were (they were no brand at all) he would always respond "CHatskull brand." He and Miriam both worked the store, together with various family members during holiday times.

In 1962, Joseph was diagnosed with blood cancer. In keeping with then medical protocol, the doctors told his sons/son in law (doctors themselves) but not him. The Wolansky children got together and decided that they would, in fact, not tell him. There was little treatment at that time, and they figured that he could more enjoyably live out his remaining life without knowing that he was dying of cancer. They arranged that Alvin (who then had an optometry practice) would sell the practice and take over operation of the store so that Joseph could retire.

Alvin used the opportunity to lease the space next door, thus doubling the size of the store, redid the interior, and brought in Garden State Brickface to redo the whole exterior in Old English style, renaming the business The Luggage Shop (for its most profitable offerings).

Joseph and Miriam spent the next few years travelling, often on the steamship SS Shalom, to places such as Hawaii and Israel. The cancer apparently resolved itself, and he and Miriam remained active in the business, coming to work each morning, until they were well into their eighties[2]. Miriam died in 1987 at age 90; Joe died shortly after at age 93. He died of a stroke, never having even known that he once had cancer, and enjoying his one El Producto cigar a day until the very end.

Experience
My development as a Retailer really came about as a result of multiple life experiences; many quite colorful. It's safe to say many of the colorful memories of working in The Store came as a result of them. Warning: Not all of these are politically correct, and in today's world might be seen as penny wise pound foolish. But ultimately, they made an impression and have stuck with me been over the years.

Yiddish Curses
"You should grow like a onion with your head in the ground and your feet in the air."

Said by Pop Joe (Joseph) in Yiddish, loud so everyone else could hear, with a certain dismissive hand motion, as the door closed after a customer who has left the store without buying anything after spending an hour+ picking our brains (and hence "wasting our time") about what kind of luggage to buy.

Business Sense
"He does business despite himself"

Said by Pop Joe or Nana Miriam about someone who is so non-customer focused that they run their business without regard to what's convenient for the customer (according to them, virtually everyone else on Richmond Avenue).

"TIRO, TIRO."
Said with energy by Pop Joe (and later by my Dad, Alvin) to customers as they browsed during the week before Christmas for a gift to buy someone special. After getting a quizzical look by the customer, this was always followed up by "Time Is Running Out…better make your choice now." A little urgency in Retail can help conversion.

[2] My brother Paul remembers going with him in the late-sixties to the Lower East Side to buy brown and green paper bags, boxes, and wrapping paper for the Christmas season. All negotiations would be in Yiddish, and he would fill up the trunk of his Buick Riviera, before they'd stop at Ratner's on Delancy Street for lunch.

Eating

The cardinal rule of Retail is "Never Keep A Customer Waiting." You don't want to risk them leaving without buying (and then not coming back) because the wait was too long. This concept was instilled in me literally from the very beginning by my grandparents who, in their supervisory function, always encouraged a quick pace and hustle.

At one point, Dad further expanded the original Port Richmond store by taking over the Post Office in the back. In order to placate my grandparents who were nervous about the financial risk, he built into the rear stockroom a full kitchen, with refrigerator, stove, and kitchen table. Many times, at lunch Nana Miriam would cajole me to the back room with an offering to "Come have a nice plate of soup." She always had food going and fed my dad, and other members of the family who would happen to be working.

While this was convenient for its amenities, when Dad built his second store, he realized taking staff to the back room took them out of the action and created a blind-spot for what was going on in the store. You couldn't see the front door to watch for customers coming in, and you couldn't see if anyone needed help from that backroom kitchen.

So, in the new store he created a less well-equipped "lunch area" right inside the backroom, located right behind the cash-wrap. With the stock-room door always propped open, sitting at the lunch table, you politely faced away from customers while eating, but could look over your shoulder to watch for customers needing service. This concept of never taking a "lunch break" but always customer-first, was burnt into my Retail sensibilities.

Negotiating with the Nuns

Long before kids carried backpacks to school, Dad saw an opportunity on Staten Island to create a standardized "schoolbag" to sell to private school kids. Staten Island was very heavily Catholic and there were over two dozen parochial schools with names such as "Our Lady Queen of Peace," "Our Lady Star of the Sea," etc. As the government would not pay for private school books, the schools wanted to keep them in good shape as they travelled back and forth to student's homes after school.

Dad found a supplier in Brooklyn who could create miniature leather briefcases for children and then vinyl "gym bags" on which we could hot stamp in gold letters the school's name and then the child's name underneath. He then went around to each school and negotiated with the Mother Superior as to how big a "donation" he would give the school in return for sending business his way (by requiring that their students carried these school bags as part of the school uniform).

This created a steady flow of traffic in August and September and created a "Schoolbag Season" which rivaled Christmas for traffic and profitability. We wouldn't think of having the customer come back, so name-stamping was always "While You Wait."

With so much traffic Dad set up Steve (one of series of stockboys in their early 20s) in the dungeon-like basement of the Port Richmond store, to pre-emboss the school names, with just a bare light bulb hanging over his head. As a kid I remember helping /feeding Steve the bags as he'd whip out one after another creating stock which we then could add the individual child's name on an "upstairs" embossing machine on the fly. Once again, teaching me the value of a well-oiled retail machine.

One year, the entire stock of school bags arrived with a serious defect in the handle that could only be corrected by adding two brass D rings at the base, to take up excess space. But how explain this weird addition to the customers? No problem! The D rings were to attach an ID tag and a city bus-pass tag—the sale of which became additional sources of profit. A customer that bought the whole package of school bag, ID tag, bus pass tag—plus an optional personalized pencil case—was said to have bought "the whole schmere."

Learn to gift wrap

One of best life-skills I learned in the store was how to gift wrap every shape of box. The Luggage Shop offered free gift wrapping of everything and anything purchased. During the "Christmas Rush," speed and perfection went hand in hand. By the time I was 10, I could wrap 3 packages perfectly in 60 seconds flat.

"Too much Scotch Tape"

Associated with the "Free Gift Wrapping" policy was Nana Miriam standing at the end of the cash/wrap counter in her yellow zip front smock with The Luggage Shop logo embroidered on it, supervising. In her eyes, part of being a gift-wrapper extraordinaire was learning how to wrap a package using only three pieces of scotch tape—a key demonstration of frugality. Use any more than that and you'd be admonished "Too much Scotch Tape, it's going to break us!."

Learning to wrap huge pieces of luggage meant estimating how much paper to pull from the roll. This was a skill only possessed by a few mortals on this earth. Since we did so much gift wrapping, Dad bought huge bulk rolls of gift wrap in 12", 24" and 36" widths installed on cutters/dispensers. Imagine having to estimate how much paper to pull out in order to gift wrap a huge Samsonite suitcase in its box. Dad was a master at this. He'd look at the box, estimate in his head the length and width of the box, then pull out exactly five and a half FEET of 36" wide paper, never pulling too little or too much. None of the sales help ever attempted this. I never even saw Pop Joe or Nana Miriam do it. But I was determined to learn the skill. Watching

Dad closely I saw how he used his finger to measure as he pulled the roll…and Viola….now I was a master of luggage wrapping as well.

Selling luggage

Selling the luggage in the store was seen, for some reason, as a more complicated, more knowledge-heavy process that was relegated only to the men of the store. There was no actual reason the sales ladies couldn't sell luggage (and indeed later on in the mall stores they did) but it was somehow an accepted practice that whenever a customer wondered into the area of the store that displayed the luggage the announcement "LUGGAGE DEPARTMENT" summoned one of the men to go make the sale.

As a teen I learned to sell luggage by listening to Dad who was a great salesperson and often closed the sale on a big set of luggage by "making a deal" by offering "no tax," thus saving the customer the 8.25% sales tax. In reality, they "paid" sales tax, Dad was just discounting the sale by the 8.25% thereby maintaining retail price integrity by not seemingly discounting the luggage.

Before long I caught on to the process and was making my own "deals," "throwing in the tax," and selling sets of Samonsite, Ventura, Hartman and other brands. The pride of making the sale was sealed by convincing the buyer to have it all monogrammed (which meant it could not be returned) and even gift wrapped. I quickly learned that, in selling luggage, while it was always tempting to talk about features, selling benefits rather than features was always more persuasive.

Calculating 8.25% tax

Staten Island is a borough of New York City, which, in its wisdom at some point decided to raise sales tax to the uneven amount of 8.25%. Unlike 5% or 10% which are "easy" to calculate in one's head, calculating 8.25% is a tough piece of math. These were the days before computers at point of sale--we had an old NCR cash register that had a satisfying bell that would ring every time a sale was made. During the peak days at Christmas, Dad would "Read The Register" hourly and surreptitiously hold up a finger or three to indicate "One bell, Two bells, Three bells, etc." That was code for sales for the day up to that moment: $1,000, $2,000, $3,000.

Dad installed a desktop adding machine next to the cash register for "everyone else" to use to calculate the tax. I had a palm sized calculator which I religiously kept in my dress shirt pocket (the male employees all wore ties and jackets in the store). But Dad, somehow, could do the calculation in his head. He'd have the most complicated number, like $52.76 x 8.25% and he'd always come up with the right answer. He never did let on how he could do that: a Retailer's secret he took to his grave.

Christmas Eve dinner at China Sky

The last week before Christmas was always the busiest of the year in the store. (Yes, it was busy after Thanksgiving but nothing like the last week before the holiday). Even way back then, people would wait until the last minute to find a gift. As a result, it was always all hands-on deck. My brothers and I would all work, and Dad would have every salesperson available, a dedicated cashier, and dedicated "gift wrappers." We were a well-oiled machine, writing up old fashioned carbon copy sales slips by hand, taking cash, getting credit card AUTH's, etc. We moved fast and made a lot of customers happy.

By 4p on Christmas eve the traffic would start to slow down. By 5p we'd have a few male customers left over and they'd be buying gift certificates for their wives. By 5:30p we were done; key in the door. Of course, we were all exhausted and the last thing Mom was going to do was cook. So, Dad would take my three brothers, Mom, and me, to "China Sky" in Scotch Plains, NJ. We kids were always amazed that the waiters in yellow vests and black bowties could take our entire order without writing anything down and get it all right. The wonton soup was my favorite.

Wholesale Buying

One lesson about wholesale buying is, as a Retailer, it's up to us to determine the "best" retail price for the market. Dad was friends with an importer of small leathergoods from Asia. We'd drive into NYC to load up the back of the car with small boxes of men's leather wallets, beautifully packaged and individually gift boxed. The wallets really were very good quality and had a great "hand" to them.

Harold sold them to Dad at a good wholesale price (for cash). Only one problem: His suggested retail price was too low. The wallets were "too good." We'd get them back to the store and pull out all of Harold's preprinted price tags and replace with our own, representing a greater markup. Still a fair retail price because they were our best-selling "better" men's wallet line. Everyone was happy: Harold sold his wallets, Dad paid a fair price, and our customers were pleased to buy them (and they looked great with the free monogrammed initials in gold leaf). Lesson: Don't price by what the wholesale cost is. Price by what the retail market will bear.

NLDA – Learning Private Label

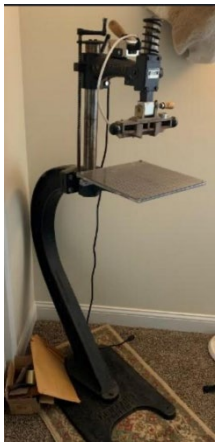
In the heyday of the luggage business (1980s/1990s) there were family-run luggage and gift stores like ours all around the country. We all belonged to a buying cooperative called The National Luggage Dealers Association. Run mostly by volunteers from the store ownership base, NLDA was my original experience with Private Label product. Leathergoods were produced in Korea, South America, and other parts of Asia for distribution in all the member stores under the "DiLana" brand name (NLDA jumbled …creative, huh?).

I helped out a bit with the design and development (this made me think I knew something about luggage design when, later, I went to work for Orvis as a luggage/leathergoods Buyer). But my strongest memories of this program were going to the 2x yearly "Luggage Shows" with Dad and walking around the "Sample Room" of all the private label merchandise laid out while we wrote our orders on sign-up pads on the tables.

The product was actually a great value. Nice leathergoods and we got great margins. We priced retail based on Market, not based on Cost. 40 years later, I'm still doing Private Label and utilizing many of the same techniques I learned from the NLDA program.

Learning to monogram at 350 degrees

Monogramming—stamping a customer's initials in gold letters onto a wallet, briefcase or other item-- was a key element of service in the store. It was seen as a huge value-add by customers, and from our point of view, kept our return rate low—a gift recipient could not return a wallet that had been "personalized.". We had multiple different types of monogramming machines over the years, but all had a common element: working with lead and brass type heated to 350 degrees. From a very young age my brothers and I all learned to monogram, first wallets, then brief cases, school bags, and luggage. It wasn't a perfect science and required some trial and error. But we all mastered the skill.



Dad was big on in-store efficiency. In both the original Port Richmond and the second New Dorp, Staten Island, locations he designed a wallet "monogramming pass-through" window behind the cash-wrap. When one of the sales ladies (who were never taught to monogram) sold a wallet, they'd call out across the store (or on the intercom) "MONOGRAMMING!" and the closest qualified monogrammer (always male) would duck into the little work space behind the wall, monogram the wallet on a 50 year old machine, and then slide the finished piece through the 8" x 12" pass-through window, ringing a manual jingling bell to indicate it was ready to be picked up by the sales person and go through the visual show/approval/gift wrap process. The "man behind the window (curtain)" was always a sense of mystique about the process and gave the store part of its charm.

Learning to do luggage repair

Traffic generation, then as today in Retail, was always a challenge. To bring in new customers, Dad signed up with the airlines at Newark Airport, JFK, and LaGuardia to refer to us for repair customers with luggage damaged by the airline—the airline would pay for the repair, but save the cost of buying a new suitcase for the customer. In the beginning we used to do most of it ourselves on the workbench in the back room, during downtime when no customers were in the front needing to be waited on.

In another sort of rite of passage, Dad taught me first how to change out broken wheels on the luggage. You basically tore out the interior lining, drilled out the old wheels, and then riveted back on new ones. We had over a hundred yellow bins with parts to fix the majority of problems with damaged luggage. I got pretty good at figuring out how to do the fixes and pretty fast at it.

One constant on the workbench was Barge glue and thinner. Still sold today, this stuff is the same glue that cobblers use to reglue the soles of shoes and it's got a nasty smell. But after a while you got used to it and it became "just like home." I remember one of the "stockboys" showing me how to mix thinner into the glue when the glue got too thick. OSHA anyone? I think not.

The Key Game

Our stores were large and had a lot to look at. We always had new items (to keep customers coming back) and customers (many being moms with kids in tow) liked to spend upwards of an hour or more browsing the "gondolas" laden with merchandise. Nana Miriam and Pop Joe early on realized that impatient little kids were causing parents to leave the store prematurely without spending "enough" money.

So, they came up with a game. They had tons of extra assorted mini keys that came with the schoolbags (which were removed before sale since the locks were a problem) and various pieces of luggage that had passed through the store over the years. They put them in two old "El Producto" cigar boxes (Pop Joe always had a cigar in his mouth), then stripped the wire hooks from a couple of wooden coat hangers. The "Key Game" was born.

Nana Miriam would sit on a chair and corral all the kids to sit on the floor next to her and she'd challenge them to see who could fill up the hook the fastest with the most keys. The kids loved it. In fact, after a while, they'd race right over to the Key Game as soon as they came into the store, which kept them occupied for as long as mom wanted to shop. Way better babysitter than a video game and the parents loved it too.

It's all in the presentation

Part of the "show" in the store was the big reveal when we'd bring the leather item out from the back personalized with the intended gift recipient's initials. For 99% of the time, it looked great. But once in a while it came out a little crooked or, even worse, smeared. This happened once when Pop Joe was behind the counter. He came out with a leather jewelry box with his thumb strategically located over the smear and held it about 3 feet away from the customer with a viola.

The customer kind of squinted and said “bring it closer” so Pop Joe moved it exactly 1” closer. The customer shrugged her shoulders and he quickly handed the item to Nana Miriam and shouted “wrap it up!!”

Burglar Alarm

Having a nice store meant, unfortunately, someone was always trying to break in overnight and steal stuff. Dad went through many iterations of alarm systems over the years. Some better than others. Many false alarms sounded due to crude wiring or faulty switches.

One night, late, the alarm again went off and the “Alarm Company” rang our phone at home rousting Dad out of bed. Thinking it’s probably just another false alarm, Dad got dressed but, still sleepy, Mom tells him to take me (maybe I’m 12?) with him. (Thinking back on this, I can’t believe my ultra-protective Mom thought this was a good idea, but I digress).

So off we schlepped from Cranford, NJ, over the Goethals Bridge, to Staten Island in the middle of the night.

The police had stopped responding to the many false alarms.

So, Dad and I showed up, pushed open the heavy iron gates in front of the door, put the key in the lock, walked in and shut off the ringing alarm bells. Of course, our family never had guns, and I don’t think Dad even thought to have nary a baseball bat in hand…I was too young to comprehend the danger we could possibly be walking in to.

Dad just walked in, turned on a couple lights and walked through the store, the backrooms, the loading doors.... Looking for evidence of intrusion. Having found no evidence of entry Dad shrugged his shoulders and again blamed the alarm system. He reset the alarm, locked the door, closed the gate, and we drove home. To this day, thinking back upon it, I’m sure there was someone in the store hiding. Dad may have found evidence the next day and never told Mom (or me). I guess we were lucky.

Long Hours

Dad worked Monday-Saturday. Sunday closed. He’d leave the house at 8:30am, get to the store by 9:30a, open up, close at 5:30p. If a customer was in the store at 5:30p he’d put the key in the door, but not chase them out. If they had money to spend, he’d stay until they opened their wallet and were ready.

With those exceptions, Dad would be home for dinner with the kids every night by 6:30p when Mom had it on the table (except Thursdays when he worked until 8:30p and got home around 9:15p. From Thanksgiving-Dec 24th, he’d work 7 days, and be open late every night. He (and later, I) always lost 10 lbs. “at Christmas.”

I carried on this tradition, but by the time I took over the store(s), was working 7 days year-round, and late at night since we now had one- then two - mall stores open until 10p every night. Besides long hours the concept learned here was that you never neglect a customer. If there’s a

customer wanting to buy, you work until she's satisfied. (I once fired a manager at Thanksgiving was because her "shift was up" and walked out of the store in front of me with a store-full of customers. I've never forgiven her.)

A Penny for Good Luck

Why do you put a penny in a wallet before giving it as a gift? The tradition of not gifting an empty wallet stems from a belief in many cultures that an empty wallet would lead to financial struggles for the recipient. A lucky penny, however, leads to prosperity and good fortune.

Dad sometimes had great marketing ingenuity, which of course, I like to think I picked up from him. Gift givers often like to keep it a secret where they got "that great gift." Since most leather wallets, in fact were bought as gifts, how do you let the gift recipient know about our great store…without annoying the gift giver?

Dad came up with a genius solution. The sales help, when no customers were in the store, would write, by hand "For Good Luck" in pretty cursive handwriting and scotch tape pennies to the store business cards (which had our address and phone number and a color picture of the store on the reverse side.)

Then, after presenting the monogrammed wallet for ooh's and ahs and customer approval, and before gift wrapping it, the salesperson would make a show of saying "…And we put in a penny for good luck…on us…" and in front of the gift-giver's approving and often smiling eyes, insert the business card right into the wallet, thereby guaranteeing our marketing gets passed on to the recipient. No customer ever refused.

Launching Pad

The Wolansky lineage actually not only launched me into my career in Retail, but also my older brother Lee and our cousin Donald.

Lee had two gorgeous stores; The Luggage Shop of Westfield, NJ and Evers & Fenworth, in Bridgewater Commons NJ. And Donald (who was Dad's Manager for a many years) opened The Luggage Shop of Bayonne. Dad helped both with inventory, financing, inspiration, and store design and build-out. All became members of the NLDA buying cooperative and all enjoyed successful retail business.

The Salesperson

Finally, ultimately, one of the most important lessons learned in The Luggage Shop, was that the most highly paid person in any business should be the head salesperson—it is sales (revenue generation) that drives every business that there is. I know that I may not be the most insightful CEO in the world, but I'm a good salesman. And that's a skill that I learned selling wallets and luggage.

The Port Richmond store, after Alvin expanded it in 1962.

Inside the Port Richmond Store

The second store on New Dorp Lane

The family business taking advantage of Direct Mail Marketing in 1964