



# Bill French

O'ROURKE SALES CO., DALLAS, TEXAS

**The start of his career might have been a fluke, but his success since then is no fluke at all**

**By Tiffany  
Hamburger**

**L**ike so many success stories, this one begins with a simple twist of fate. A young man working as an engineer for a circuit company is asked by his wife, who is employed by an appliance distributor, to serve as a bartender at a Whirlpool presentation—because, as she puts it to him, “I just got a call and we have no bartender.” He accepts and, despite not having any bartending skills aside from pouring a beer or a glass of whisky, favorably impresses the vice president of sales for the Frank Lyon Co. “Young man,” says this vice president, “I like the way you handle yourself. For someone who doesn’t know what you’re doing, you did a pretty good job.”

Today, nearly 40 years later, French is vice president of sales at O’Rourke Sales Co., a family-owned, multi-million-dollar appliance and electronics wholesale distributor, where he handles the rent-to-own channel of O’Rourke’s business. After Frank Lyon Co., but before landing at O’Rourke, French was southeast regional vice president at LG Electronics/Zenith for 16 years, making him a true veteran of the consumer electronics and appliance industry.

Given that, it truly means something when he says of dealing with the rent-to-own channel: “I far prefer it to all the other stuff I’ve ever done.” That may be why French is extremely active within the industry, including a position as vice chairman of the vendor advisory committee of APRO—a position that gives him a seat on the board of directors—as well as a participant at the annual Dave Egan Legislative Conference in Washington, D.C. “In the rent-to-own channel,” French says, “even competitors are friends. Outside of my family and the people I work with, most of my friends are in this industry.”

Kevin Quinn, owner of Seattle’s Quality Rentals, counts himself as one of French’s friends. “Bill is one of a handful of people I’ve known over the almost-30 years I’ve been in this business whom I would call a true hall-of-fame vendor in the industry,” he says, noting French’s 2007 APRO Vendor of the Year award. “He’s just a joy to be around.”

French’s success as both a businessman and a friend may have something to do with his commitment to treating people well and earning their trust. “When you’re in a business like I am or any business where you have to resell someone over and over and over again, it’s almost like getting married—you had better treat them right every day,” he says. “If you want them to stay around and be your partner, you have to think about them before you think of yourself.”

While his golden-rule approach has certainly contributed to his success, French’s enthusiasm for his work and his team at O’Rourke can’t be discounted. At 65, he says, “I’m working harder than I’ve ever worked in my life, which is my choice... I still get up in the morning fired up to get in here and do what I do.” About his retired friends who doubt him, he says, “They think I’m crazy because I’m not retired; I think *they’re* crazy because they’re going to go nuts. When this isn’t fun anymore, I’ll quit.”

Perhaps in keeping with his love of his work and belief in taking care of people, French emphasizes that his success and O’Rourke’s success as a rent-to-own vendor owe a lot to the people who support him. He talks about the “great ownership” at O’Rourke and insists upon mentioning his team in the

CONTINUED ON PAGE 46



of the silent auction, but it was the live auctioneering talents of Jamie that stole the show.

Late August and early September 2009 found us at APRO's Convention in Las Vegas. Our legislative momentum continued as House sponsorship for HR 1744 had grown to 101 co-sponsors; but the real highlight for me was getting to present our industry's highest honor, the Lifetime Achievement Award, to Gary McDougal, a three-term APRO president and the greatest statesman I have ever known. At the convention, I was re-elected president. I let the board know I could not travel as much as I did my first year, but would continue to concentrate on legislative issues.

The APRO board met in November in Louisville, very much aware of the uncertain political climate. We developed a strategy to continue the push for co-sponsors—particularly in the Senate—and upgrade APRO member benefits.

In February 2010, more than 125 rental dealers attended the 17th annual Dave Egan Legislative Conference in Washington, D.C., which continued the drive for support of our legislation. As of May 31, HR 1744 has 126 co-sponsors and S 738 has 18.

**A**s we all know, Congress has been consumed with stimulus packages, bailouts, health care legislation and, now, financial reform. Rent-to-own has not even been a blip on the Congressional radar, despite all of the co-sponsors for our bills. In today's political climate, that might not be so bad. No anti-RTO legislation has been introduced—and that is very good news. I can't emphasize enough what a fantastic job the industry's lobbyists—paid for primarily by Rent-A-Center—have done to protect and promote our interests. The lobbyists, teamed with your board of directors and the APRO staff, remain fully engaged in this, the most tumultuous political climate in my lifetime. And yes, if the opportunity presents itself, Congressman Clay is ready to push for a hearing on his bill in this session. Even if he can't get the hearing, I assure you that he has done more for his constituents—rent-to-own customers and dealers alike—than any member of Congress I've ever known.

I have worked hard for the industry and the association these past two years. It has been challenging, but more often, it's been a lot of fun. I have met a lot of rental dealers and made a lot of new friends. I have tried to advance the interests of the industry and foster a sense of cooperation among dealers. Two years later, we are better than we were; we are not yet as good as we surely are going to be. I look forward to seeing all of you in Louisville to celebrate APRO's 30th anniversary together! ✧

---

*Tiger John Cleek lives in Columbia, Missouri. His e-mail address is tigercleek@cleeks.com.*

rent-to-own division by name—Amanda Barrows, Brian Duke and Danelle Stanger—saying that “those folks make me look good everyday.” Again and again, he mentions the support he's received, from his co-workers and rental dealers alike. “We have the best dealers in the world,” he says. “We've got tremendous support in the dealer community.”

APRO, too, gets credit from French for his success in the industry. “The fact that we are involved supporters of APRO has been of tremendous benefit to our company,” he says. “Last year, I ran for the board for that very reason.”

It may not be surprising that someone who loves his work and has been in sales for nearly 40 years has had his share of protégés. “A lot of the fun I've had in this business has been coaching other people and helping others be successful,” French says. On this subject, he has a clearly defined philosophy. “I can't stand lazy people, nor those who are dishonest,” he says. “I will fire you for lying to me; I will never fire you for making a mistake. The only people who don't make mistakes are people who don't do anything.” Building upon that, he mentions a piece of advice from his manager at Frank Lyon Co. that has stuck with him: “Always hire people who are smarter than you, who will work harder than you and who probably want your job. If you do that, you'll always be successful.”

In fact, the only thing French says he enjoys more than work is time with his wife, three children and nine grandchildren. He calls his wife of 22 years, Mary Lou, a great supporter and a great partner. His children and grandchildren live in Missouri—where French is from originally—but he says he talks to his children on the phone virtually every day; however, he confides that it's “impossible to talk to my grandkids, because they just want to *text*.” Like any grandfather, though, who wants to dote in this modern age, he texts them right back.

Finally, there is golf, which he tries to play once or twice a week, although he wishes he had the time to play a bit more. “It's a sport at 65 that I can play at a high enough level where it's fun and I can compete,” he says, noting that he is a 16 handicap and that a good day for him is 80 and a bad one 90. “It's one of the places I don't think about work and you can just totally, totally, totally unwind.”

A successful career, good health, close friends, a loving family and some fun on the golf course. “I've got nothing to complain about,” French says. If he makes it look easy, it's only because he's worked so hard to earn all he's got. “It's funny the way the good Lord works,” he says of finding his career by first serving as an ill-prepared bartender. “I wound up here and it's been a tremendous amount of fun.” ✧

---

*Tiffany Hamburger is a freelance writer based in Austin, Texas.*