



Bonnie Nitzsche

THE NICHE CONNECTION, CINCINNATI, OHIO

Known for her good cheer and stalwart dedication, an APRO Vendor of the Year recipient and undisputed friend of the rent-to-own industry turns the reins over to her son

**By Tiffany
Hamburger**

When one generation turns over the reins of a successful business to the next, it's only natural to wonder: Will the circle be unbroken? For the Nitzsche family of Cincinnati, Ohio, certainly the answer is "Yes." When founder Bonnie Nitzsche retired last year due to health concerns, the company name changed, unifying two businesses—Let's Print, Ink and America On Hold—into The Niche Connection. But in all other respects, this veteran vendor of the rent-to-own industry hasn't altered the service or the philosophy for which it is renowned.

As Tom Nitzsche, Bonnie's son and the new head of the company, says, "We've been here for 20 years and hopefully we'll be here for another 20."

The business began in 1987 when Bonnie's late husband, Tom, attended an APRO trade show and encountered some rental dealers who wanted to create an advertising flyer but didn't know how. As Bonnie tells it, her husband quickly volunteered her, saying, "You need to talk to Bonnie; she can do anything." Bonnie, who was selling insurance and running a Mary Kay consultancy at the time, took on a new niche. "I thought, 'I think I would like this,'" she says, and so she jumped head first into learning the flyer-production business.

Later, Tom and Bonnie began another company to provide on-hold messaging. Now called Advantage On Hold (a subsidiary of The Niche Connection), the service boasts a state-of-the-art recording studio, allowing the company to provide high-quality productions. If you call the Association of Progressive Rental Organizations (800/204-2776), you'll hear the company's work; they've produced APRO's on-hold messaging for more than decade.

Successful early on, the business met its first real challenge when Bonnie's husband died suddenly in 1990. However, as anyone who has met her can testify, Bonnie is not one to give up on anything. "After he passed away," Bonnie says, "my oldest son, Tom, came in and started working with us. My son Chris went to graphic design school and then he joined us. So we became a team."

It's a team that has worked to build a business with an uncommon dedication to the customer and to quality, a reputation that Ernie Lewallen, president of Cincinnati's UHR Rents and a Niche Connection customer, confirms. "I've been one of Bonnie's customers for more than 20 years," he says. "Bonnie will refuse to let anybody be unhappy. She's the most customer-conscious vendor I've ever exposed to."

This commitment to customer service is no accident. Indeed, Tom Nitzsche attributes much of the company's success to what he calls "the personal effect. A lot of times when our customers call us," he says, "they don't have to identify themselves; we already know who they are." And, he adds, the company strives for unparalleled levels of consistency and reliability. "I don't think we've missed a print in 20 years."

When asked to what he attributes the company's longevity, Tom doesn't hesitate. "Experience dealing with the dealer," he says. "We have a good idea in advance of what they're going to ask for."

Another factor, he says, is contained in the company's new name: finding a niche that works and sticking with it. "We have a niche with certain small vendors," he says. "All the big guys had all their stuff that was in house."



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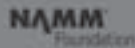


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We came in and gave the little guy the opportunity to put out a full-color piece that would compete with the bigger guy.”

While the industry’s consolidation has eaten away a bit of this niche, Bonnie notes that there’s always someone somewhere who can use The Niche Connection’s services. “We have customers all over the United States and Guam and Saipan and St. Thomas.” No matter where they are, she says, “we can give them a flyer that fits their needs.”



Nitzsche receiving the 1994 APRO Vendor of the Year award from APRO's 1993-94 President Kevin Quinn.

Today, the company’s services include custom flyers, direct-mail marketing, insert pieces and on-hold messaging. The company can also reserve markets for customers, guaranteeing them unique advertising.

In this economy, says Tom, advertising is key. He feels that rent-to-own is positioned well, since consumers may be less likely to purchase items outright. The Niche Connection, he says,

will help them get more of that business. “If you don’t put a piece out there to compete with your competitor, how is anyone going to know you’re there?”

The Nitzsche family has also long supported APRO and the entire rent-to-own industry, going so far as to print flyers promoting and supporting the industry’s legislative efforts in the 1990s. This support has garnered Bonnie and her business numerous awards, including APRO’s Vendor of the Year award in 1994. “I have never, ever gotten over that,” she says. “It was just such an honor and such a privilege to be singled out.” She explains her support of the industry matter-of-factly: “APRO has been just another arm of my business.”

Business, for the Nitzsches, is rarely just about business. “The big thing is,” Tom says, “is it’s about making friends.” Customer Lewallen agrees. “Bonnie’s business is very personal,” he says. “She goes out of her way to treat each and every one of her customers as a friend and she treats you like a best friend.”

Unlike many, Bonnie doesn’t shy away from this mixture of the personal and the professional. “I love my customers,” she says. “I just really admire them and I don’t think that any of them would tell you that I didn’t try to make things right if there was ever a problem.”

As The Niche Connection continues with the second generation at the helm, it’s clear that this philosophy will endure. After all, it has been passed down from mother to son. “Nobody’s going to do business with someone they don’t trust,” Tom says. “You’ve got to start with the cornerstone, which is building the friendship first.” *

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