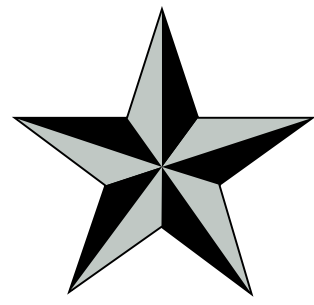


AN APROFILE OF DICK AND MIM EICHLIN



a SHINING STAR

What can rental dealers do to guarantee industry-wide success and continued growth in the future? The question is a critical one that members of the rent-to-own industry have always faced, but as we move further into the 21st century—into a more volatile, technology-based economy and an increasingly competitive market—finding the right answer may prove to be even more difficult.

If you ask Dick Eichlin that question, however, he'll tell you the answer is clear. The road to a better, more prosperous tomorrow, he says, begins with federal legislation for the industry.

"The opportunity to get federal legislation that would prevent state legislatures from calling the rent-to-own transaction a credit sale is here," Eichlin says. "Right now the industry spends so much time and money on lawsuits and public relations that if we had federal protection, those energies and finances could be used to benefit the industry and increase business."

BY STEPHEN SCHENCK

PHOTOGRAPHS BY GENTRY PHOTOGRAPHY

An RTO veteran, Eichlin entered the business in 1980 as a store manager for Universal TV Rentals. Together with his wife, Miriam, they opened Shenandoah TV & Appliance Rentals (STAR Rentals) in 1987. During his 21 years in the industry, Eichlin has learned that the roller coaster world of RTO offers no guarantees, but from the beginning he says he recognized how fundamental national involvement and lobbying would be to his livelihood.

"We attended the first seven APRO legislative conferences in Washington, D.C., because there was a need to explain the nature of our transaction and to educate the people who are against RTO and who mislead the public about interest rates," he says. "There are no interest rates because there is no obligation. There is no debt!"

Eichlin's passion for the business led a fellow RTO dealer at the time, Roger Sharp, to ask him to run for the APRO board of directors in 1989. Outmatched by more experienced candidates two years in a row, Eichlin says he ran again after "realizing what the board was all about" and won. He went on to serve with the APRO board for seven years and says it was a high point in his career.

"The board is just a fabulous group of people. I was on the public relations committee and my philosophy was to do whatever they wanted," he says. "I told them I was a grunt—I just wanted to contribute in any way I could to help preserve our interests and our business."

Bill Keese, APRO executive director, remembers Eichlin's years on the board well. "Dick was the kind of board member that you just loved because he brought a lot of enthusiasm to the job," Keese says. "He was always very involved and supportive and when we asked him for support, he would always follow through."

BLUE-COLLAR BEGINNINGS

Eichlin has carried that humble, "can do" attitude with him since his childhood days. It's also a big reason why customers have kept coming back to STAR Rentals year after year.

"We come from blue-collar families, so we know what

it means to work and we can appreciate good customer service," says Miriam Eichlin. Miriam or "Mim" is the daughter of an electrician and a homemaker and grew up in Tatamy, PA. Eichlin lived across the Delaware River, in Phillipsburg, NJ. His father was a machine operator and his mother was also a homemaker. Although they lived within 10 miles of each other, Dick and Mim didn't meet until after they had graduated high school and after Eichlin had finished a four-year stint in the Navy.

Shortly after returning home in January 1957, he met Miriam at a dance in New Jersey and six months later, they were married. He quickly put his GI Bill to good use and attended Rider Business College in Trenton. However, in 1959, with a baby on the way, Eichlin dropped out of school and took a job in a distribution center with Top Value Enterprises, a trading stamp company.

Gradually, Eichlin earned his way into management and, as the trading stamp business began to decline, was transferred to manage one of Top Value's catalog showrooms. For 20 years, Eichlin worked for Top Value, but when he failed to catch employees who had been stealing from the company, he was fired. Losing his job after so many years could have dealt a devastating blow to Eichlin, but instead it became a positive turning point that would lead to greater opportunity and success.

Unemployed and searching the Pittsburgh paper for work, Eichlin applied for a manager position with a Universal TV Rentals store. With little knowledge of the RTO industry and few expectations, Eichlin interviewed for the position and on the afternoon of that same day was offered the job.

"I accepted it thinking I would continue to seek other employment," he says with a chuckle. "My reaction was, 'Who in God's name rents televisions?' I was dumfounded." It didn't take him long, however, to realize that rent-to-own was big business. During his first week, Eichlin trained at a store in Moline, IL, and was surprised to see the store crowded with customers.

"If you're in a white-collar job and considered middle class, you don't really realize how many people would not have the kinds of things they have in their home if not for this industry," Eichlin says. "Right away, I definitely felt like I was providing a good service to our customers."



"IF YOU'RE IN A WHITE COLLAR JOB AND CONSIDERED MIDDLE CLASS, YOU DON'T REALLY REALIZE HOW MANY PEOPLE WOULD NOT HAVE THE KINDS OF THINGS THEY HAVE IN THEIR HOME IF NOT FOR THIS INDUSTRY."



Over the next six years, the company grew from 15 to 60 stores. Eichlin worked his way up to store supervisor, eventually transferring to Columbus, OH, where he oversaw as many as 13 stores. Over time, Eichlin had seen his career take some remarkable turns—he had gone from what he thought was a stable, long-term job to suddenly being unemployed and landing a job in an unfamiliar industry to working his way back to upper management. At last, everything seemed to be in place for Eichlin and his family.

Then, one day, when he was helping to get two new stores off the ground in Dayton, OH, Eichlin's career fell apart, all over again.

"I reported to my immediate supervisor that we were having a credit problem. The manager of one of the stores was not controlling credit and was not collecting on his accounts. But instead of addressing the manager, [my supervisor] called me into the office and said, 'Dick we've got a problem in these two stores and I'm going to have to fire you.'"

Eichlin once again found himself on the outside looking in. This time, however, he was determined to get an explanation. After all, by uncovering the problem and reporting it, Eichlin had followed correct procedures. He submitted a written request to find out why he was fired and, a few days later, was rehired by the general manager

to run a store temporarily in Columbus.

As it turned out, Eichlin replaced the same supervisor who let him go. "I've been fired twice; once because somebody stole and I didn't catch it, which was my responsibility, and again because my supervisor was passing the buck," he says.

SMALL TOWNS AND BIG BUSINESS

In 1986, just as Universal's ownership was about to change hands, Eichlin left to become the new rent-to-own division manager for Bell Furniture, a furniture distributor. Philip Bell, the company's founder, saw in the RTO industry a relatively untapped market and hoped Eichlin could use his experience to convince RTO owners to stock his furniture.

"I could talk to store owners about past dues and specific business concerns and was able to build on the foundation of my predecessor and business doubled," says Eichlin.

While working for Bell, he often gave seminars to members of the RTO industry and gradually befriended the owners of Rent-A-Vision in Ohio. One day, they told Eichlin, if he opened his own store, they'd be interested in investing as venture capitalists.

Faced with this offer, Eichlin went to work putting to-

gether his own market research and found potential in western Virginia. Throughout his career, Eichlin had been based in big cities, but had made up his mind a long time ago that if he ever had the chance to open his own store, he would trade the sprawling metropolis for a small town.

While visiting relatives in Harrisonburg, VA, Eichlin decided the 20,000-person town would be a perfect location for STAR Rentals, but it wasn't until Miriam Eichlin gave her support that the decision became final.

"We talked it over and she asked me, 'Are you sure you want to do it in Harrisonburg?' I said, 'Well, if we fail and I go on the bread line, I'd rather be in the Shenandoah Valley than the big city.' So, my wife said, 'Let's do it' and that's the reason we're in business today."

Backed by investors and with borrowed money and Miriam's inheritance, Eichlin moved to Harrisonburg. He arrived to find his store unfinished and filled with ceiling tile for the grocery store being constructed in the same new shopping center. He hired independent contractors to finish the job and had enough money left over to advertise his grand opening special. Despite the ad, Eichlin says no customers showed up to the store.

"Nobody knew where the new Dukes Plaza shopping center was," he says. "I did a lot of soul searching at that time and, my God, I wondered if I could still get my old job back. It wasn't pretty."

Though the beginning was rough, Eichlin says he was able to make it through the slow times because of strong family support. His son and son-in-law joined the business early on, helping to keep it afloat, sometimes even working for free. Most of the credit, he says, belongs to Miriam, not only for her book-keeping skills and the valuable perspective she brings to the business, but also for her emotional support. Eichlin is also quick to point out that from the first moment they chose to open the first STAR Rentals store, he and his wife have shared 50/50 responsibility and ownership.

For some couples, working together would add stress to a relationship, but Dick and Mim say the positives far outweigh any negatives. "Sometimes it's a struggle if we



"SOMETIMES IT'S A STRUGGLE IF WE BOTH HAVE OUR OWN IDEAS ABOUT HOW THINGS SHOULD GO, BUT IT'S NOTHING WE CAN'T HANDLE. WE'VE BEEN MARRIED 43 YEARS AND HAVE STAYED IN BUSINESS FOR 15. I THINK THAT SHOULD SAY IT ALL."

both have our own ideas about how things should go, but it's nothing we can't handle. We'll always be a close-knit family," Mim says. "We've been married 43 years and have stayed in business for 15," Eichlin says. "I think that should say it all."

When the shopping center's grocery store finally opened, business picked up dramatically for the Eichlins and within three years they had expanded to six stores. Today, the Eichlins have seven stores in the Shenandoah Valley and only the first required outside funding; a fact that Eichlin says is a direct result of STAR

Rentals' dedication to customer service.

"I wish there was another way to say this because it's something you always hear, but the most important thing in this business is to treat people the way you want to be treated," he says.

"We provided the kind of service that RTO customers had not been getting from the competition. We took care of repairs quickly and gave out loaners so our customers didn't have to wait—eventually we began to capture a share of the business and more."

Throughout their 15 years in RTO, the Eichlins have seen many ups and downs, but they have never questioned whether to stay in the industry and don't have any immediate plans to retire or sell the family business. As they have gotten older, Eichlin says that some aspects of the job have gotten more difficult and the growth of STAR Rentals over the years has caused him to miss out on some of his favorite parts of the job.

"I enjoy working with people and get a lot of satisfaction from seeing people I haven't seen in years who still remember me and are still doing business with us," he says. "When we expanded and I moved to the corporate office, it was hard."

Despite these few complaints, both Dick and Mim are content and proud with their work in RTO not only for the professional success it has brought them, but also because it has reaffirmed their lifelong appreciation for hard work, customer service and family. ■

Stephen Schenck is a free-lance writer and a former student intern at Progressive Rentals.