

Lifetime
Achievement
Award

BY GARRETT LAI

Tom Korbas

Just Work Hard, and Everything Will Take Care of Itself

Some people know exactly what they want to do in life. They're born to it, or they're passionate about it from an early age. As kids we all knew someone who always wanted to be something: a firefighter, a doctor, a pilot, and grew up to make that happen. Tom Korbas wasn't one of those people.

Chance led him to the travel goods industry, but he definitely found his place, and made his mark. This past March, Tom Korbas retired from his role as president of Samsonite, The Americas, after an incredible 36-year career with American Tourister and Samsonite.

Beginnings

"I was born and brought up in Dorchester, a working class neighborhood in Boston," he says. "I lived in the Boston area my entire life."

"All four of my grandparents came from Greece, were born in Greece – my family taught me how to work hard, the value of working hard. My dad owned a restaurant in Boston, my mom worked in a supermarket head office in Boston. After Dad sold his restaurant in his 60s, he worked as a short order cook until he was 77."

Korbas is quick to mention his Greek heritage, and he's proud of it. "My mother's family is Spartan, so I'm half Spartan," he'll say (pronouncing the ar as ah – Spah-tan – a hallmark of his Boston heritage). But ask if he was raised Greek, and he'll say he had an Irish Catholic upbringing. "I was brought up in Dorchester in an Irish Catholic neighborhood in inner city Boston. I'm still good friends with the guys I grew up with. Did you ever see 'The Departed?' 'Black Mass?' 'Gone Baby Gone?'" he asks, naming movies that take place in Boston. "Or 'The Town?' 'Mystic River?' It was like that."

They're terrific films, all of them,



More than 30 years ago, both Scott Kosmin (left) and Tom Korbas were early into their travel goods careers at American Tourister. Here Kosmin, TGA Chair, presents Korbas with the Lifetime Achievement Award.



The Korbas clan: Tom and wife Jackie, whom he met when both worked at American Tourister. Son Nick (left) is an attorney, Greg (right) earned his engineering degree from Tom's alma mater.

but they're also crime dramas – movies depicting hard people in a hard town. But he's a little coy when asked if his movie references meant it was a rough neighborhood. "It depends on your perspective," he'll say. Ask if it was a tight community, and he'll reply, "Again, it depends on your perspective." It's a line practically cribbed from the movies he named – in 'The Town' Jon Hamm's character called it Irish omertà, a criminal code of silence. It's a little playful when Korbas says it, but it also feels like something that's just not talked about.

Just Work Hard...

"When I went to college, I had no idea what I wanted to be," Korbas relates. "I was good in math, so I went to engineering school and just figured if I got an engineering degree and worked hard

I'd be okay." He attended Northeastern University, a co-op school where he'd work half the year and go to school the other half of the year, commuting from Dorchester. "I lived in the Midwest on co-op, doing typical engineering-type stuff for Hyster Lift Trucks."

Korbas was the first member of his family to graduate college, earning a degree in industrial engineering before going to work for Armstrong World Industries. "I started as an engineer, then I was a production manager for making Armaflex pipe insulation, a rubber process." He also attended Babson College at night, working toward his MBA. But once again, it wasn't part of a bigger plan. "I just figured an MBA would compliment an engineering degree. I knew the more education I got, if I worked hard I'd be all right."

While at Armstrong, Korbas met

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someone who would change his career trajectory: John Pulichino. “He was director of engineering at Polaroid, and Polaroid was hiring engineers. I was giving a lot of other engineers references, and they called and asked me to come in, but I turned them down.” Pulichino was persistent – when he moved to American Tourister, he talked Korbas into joining him in 1979.

“I was 28 years old when John hired me; he was a mentor. I learned a lot from him. Along with Tim Parker, who’s the current chairman of Samsonite, they’re the two smartest people I’ve ever dealt with.”

“Tom really listens to the retailer and listens to their needs and any idea is a great idea for him, he always takes it back to his team, he’s always appreciative.”

– Seymour Daiches, Macy’s

“I learned start to finish business sense, really. How to get the right product at the right price, at the right time, to deliver what the customer wants. At that point I was just an engineer and production guy from Dorchester,” he laughs.

Korbas worked his way up from his initial role as engineering manager to become plant manager, then head of production and sourcing. He’d climbed up American Tourister’s ladder to VP of operations when it came to a screeching halt in 1993: Samsonite bought them out. “It was the worst thing that could happen to us,” he recalls. “We were bought by our primary competitor. My response was, ‘It is what it is. Just work hard, perform. And everything will take care of itself.’ Greek Americans, that’s what you do: Work hard, you’ll be rewarded.”

One-man Shop to VP

Korbas continued as VP of operations for a couple of years, until 1995, when Samsonite began consolidating

things in Denver, CO. “They offered me the chance to do private label as a one-man division of the company: selling, designing and sourcing private label luggage. I took that on, and had a blast.”

“I had an office, just me and my administrative assistant. I designed the luggage, negotiated prices, set up third-party distribution. Starting from scratch we did \$12 million the first year in revenues. It gave me the opportunity to excel, and the opportunity to get away from pure operations. I did everything, every task, start to finish, and it gave me an understanding of everything that had to be done in a business. I learned thoroughness, and I also developed customer relationships.”

“After a year management decided I was more valuable running Samsonite. I became VP of operations for Samsonite, and I commuted to Denver and Tucson/Nogales, AZ – we had a maquiladora operation in Mexico at the time – but I didn’t want to move my family.”

“I did that a few years, and then they made me VP of sales and marketing, because

of that experience. Somebody figured I could sell; they offered me the job and I thought it would be a good move to pick up that experience. This was the entire Samsonite portfolio – Samsonite and American Tourister.”

“In 2000 they made me VP and general manager of U.S. wholesale, reporting to the president with responsibility for everything in wholesale, start to finish. And in 2004 they made me president of the Americas,” explaining how Samsonite divides the world into thirds: the Americas, Asia and Europe.

Listen and Empower

Talk with people who know Tom Korbas, and you’ll discover something rare in business: He’s extremely well liked by staff and customers alike, and he’s an extremely effective executive.

Lynne Berard, Korbas’ successor as president, North America, has known him for 22 years and worked with him for the past 15 years. “He’s an amazing mentor for me, and to everyone in the

industry. Someone said to me recently, ‘We’re all better people for working with Tom,’ and that’s certainly the truth.” As to why he’s had such a successful run – the company experienced multiple, successive years of record sales and profits in the post-Great Recession era, and twice landed on the *Boston Globe’s* list of best companies to work for – Berard says, “He’s been successful in his ability to lead, to always listen and empower his people. He took the time to engage and learn from others, and he’s not afraid to ask questions. If he didn’t know something he’d be first to admit it, take the time to understand and learn about it.”

“I worked with Tom for 17 years,” says Dawn Sicco, general manager of High Sierra. “I really admired him when I was a new employee. Tom really valued the input of his entire team, it didn’t matter what level of management you were, or not. He valued analytics, fresh ideas, he was willing to take risks.”

“When we first met I was a new kid in the organization, clamoring for more, and he recognized I was willing to run and work hard for it, and allowed the gateways to open up and provide more opportunities, to the point where I’m general manager of High Sierra and Gregory. I never thought that was possible.”

That willingness to listen, to have faith in his people, is a common thread. “Tom is an incredibly, incredibly smart man,” says Samsonite’s VP, Sales Lloyd Rabinowitz. “But Tom always allows you to be the expert in your business. That’s a really unique quality in the president of a company. I’ve worked for other companies before, and very often it was their way or the highway. They would ask your opinion but not really want your opinion, and it was never ever that way with Tom. If he asked your opinion, he absolutely wanted and respected your opinion.”

Seymour Daiches, of Macy’s, remembers, “From the time Tom took over with Samsonite, Samsonite really started to flourish with us and really came out with innovative product. Tom really listens to the retailer and listens to their needs and any idea is a great idea for him, he always takes it back to his team, he’s always appreciative.”

“Besides surrounding myself with smart people, I think it’s important to really listen everywhere,” says Korbas. “Listen to people, to the market, be

constantly connected and engaged with everything, in combination with analytics, to drive strategy and decisions. That's my engineering background, the analytics. It's really about having the right strategy for the market."

Another word that comes up around Tom Korbas: focus. "The secret of Tom's success?" asks Paul DeCorso, Samsonite's general manager in Canada. "That's easy. He's a Southie," he laughs, using Boston vernacular to describe natives from some of the town's older (and some might say harder) working-class neighborhoods. "It wasn't handed to him in life, he had to earn it. He scrapped for everything he got, taught a lot to his team about focus and being driven."

"You don't really compete with Tom, you just follow in his wake," jokes Scott Kosmin, who arrived at American Tourister two years after Korbas, and now heads 24-7 International. "The thing that really makes Tom the success that he is is twofold: Number one is his understanding of the business. He understands every area of the business, whether it be manufacturing, sourcing, production, or sales and marketing. Number two, he has an ability to empower the people who work for him to go out and achieve their objectives, to give them the tools necessary to make that happen, so the company can achieve its overall objectives."

Legacy and Longevity

Korbas' most obvious legacy is Samsonite itself. As he points out, it's the number-one brand in every market it operates in. "Especially in the last few years of his career, he's changed the paradigm with a lot of the transactions and acquisitions he's made for the organization, which sets Samsonite on a different level for the future," says Kosmin.

But Korbas' legacy extends outside Samsonite. Look through the list of executives in the travel goods business, and you'll find plenty of people who've rubbed elbows with Korbas, and left with an impression. "I was his vice president of sales for five years," says Bill Lippe, president of DELSEY. "I literally, whenever I have a challenging thing come up, I think, 'What would Tom do?' He focused on the really important things, and he didn't let the other things get in his way. There are a couple of former Samsonite people on my team,

and whenever something comes up we all say, 'What would Tom do?'"

"Tom's legacy is twofold: One, the success of Samsonite. It's gone through a lot of changes – if you look at the North American business over the last 10 or 15 years it's growing tenfold? I don't even know what it's grown, but this tremendously profitable, successful business model is probably what most people think of as his legacy," said Lippe. "But for me it's the people at Samsonite, it's people like me who've had the opportunity to work for him but are no longer there, that really value what they learned. In football they talk about the coaching tree; I think in lug-

quite frankly. I'm an unbelievably lucky person, in everything. Very blessed. I just thought it was time to pass the torch."

So what are his retirement plans? "Dorchester kids don't fish," he quips. "I'm going to stay on the board here, and also going to stay on as a non-executive chairman of Speck, a west coast mobile case company, stay on there for at least a while. And other than that I'm not sure yet."

"I'm looking forward to time with my wonderful wife," he says, almost wistfully. "For 30 years I've had a very heavy travel schedule, I haven't been home a lot. I'm lucky I married the right woman." He and Jackie have been married 34 years,



Who do you know? See if you can recognize current industry personalities in this 1980s photo from an American Tourister sales meeting – here's everyone we could pick out, and chances are we missed some: Frank Berles, David Bieber, Karl Czerny, Rick Damiano, Ron Davis, Pat Deutsch, Mike Esposito, Clive Freidenrich, Doug Jacobs, Tom Korbas, Scott Kosmin, Larry Laurino, Jesse Lieberman, Kathy Maciel, Bernie Maduzia, Ted Miller, Debbie Nerone, Scott Newton, Kim Peters, Sara Platt Dieffenbach, John Pulichino, Bruce Soyers, Ted Steinmetz, Fred Tumulo, Rex Whitmoyer, Harvey Winograd, and John Wrobel. Anyone else?

gage we talk about the Korbas tree. He's a common bond for so many of us."

But ask Korbas, and he'll tell you it's because he was given terrific people to work with. "I've always surrounded myself with top flight, excellent people. I sussed that out early on – it seemed like the smart thing to do, and it made me look good," he laughs.

"It's really rare today for an executive to stay with one company that long. I admire that with Tom," says eBags co-founder Peter Cobb, who knows Korbas from his own time as Samsonite's head of marketing. "A lot of people move on, get better offers, but Tom has amazing consistency and integrity."

Korbas announced his retirement nearly a year ago, saying he'd always planned to retire when he was 65. "There's no reason to work any more,

and met when she was hired at American Tourister as a materials planner; she left the company after they began their relationship. "We both made out in the long run," Korbas deadpans. Their two sons both live in Boston. "My youngest boy Nick is a Boston University law graduate, he's an attorney. My oldest boy went to Northeastern, my alma mater, got a degree in electrical engineering and then went to MIT Sloan for graduate school; he's in marketing."

Congratulate Korbas on his amazing career, and he'll thank you sincerely, and maybe make a quip about being lucky. "My dad always used to tell me he'd rather be lucky than good. I'd always say back, 'Dad, I'd rather be both.'" And judging by the last 37 years, you could say he was. ■

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The Product Innovation Award Changing the Face of Travel

Winnowing a field of more than 100 brand-new travel products down to three finalists is no easy task. But the large list of entrants for this particular contest is reflective of The Show's increasing drawing power, attracting more first-timers and international exhibitors than ever before; which in turn brings a huge number of fresh new travel solutions to market. It's an excellent situation for travel goods retailers and travelers alike.

THIRD PLACE: Royce Leather Fly Belt



David Lomas, Awards Committee chair, presents Kathy and William Bauer of Royce Leather with the third-place trophy for the Fly Belt with removable buckle.



One of the most awkward parts of air travel is the need to remove and replace your belt to go through the metal detector. The Fly Belt, from Royce Leather, simplifies the process by eliminating the need to completely remove your

belt in order to pass through security. A spring latch allows the buckle to be detached and sent through x-ray – the belt's remainder is leather and plastic, so it won't trip metal detectors and can remain nested in your clothing's belt loops – and you just reattach the buckle on the other side of the checkpoint. It's a fantastically simple solution for an everyday travel problem.

SECOND PLACE: Trunkster



Trunkster's rolltop-opening, tech-infused case wowed with its innovative thinking. Here Trunkster's Gaston Blanchet receives the second-place trophy from David Lomas.



The second-place winner may already be familiar to regular readers of *Travel Goods Showcase*, having been featured in our recent story about crowdfunding. Fresh off a record-setting Kickstarter campaign, Trunkster brought its innovative interpretation of rolling luggage. The case's most distinctive feature is the zipperless rolltop door, which allows easier access in confined spaces than a

clamshell. Add in the removable battery for USB charging, the integrated digital scale, location tracker and companion smartphone app, and you can see there's a lot of wow factor to impress Kickstarter devotees (and the Product Innovation Award Committee).

FIRST PLACE: Everything ORGO



Camrin Perkins of Everything ORGO accepts the first-place award from David Lomas, for the company's clever solution to inadequate counter space.



The first-place winner came up with an ingenious solution for a common problem: Inadequate counter space in hotel bathrooms. The ORGO Lite is a 2-compartment toiletries case that can spread out like a fan, with a semi-rigid panel extending between the V-shape gap between the two halves. The hide-away panel can bridge the space over the sink, creating extra counter space; or either half of the case can cantilever over the edge of the counter to create additional working room.

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Buzz Award Let There Be Rest

The Buzz Award is The Show's populist trophy – the winner is selected based on voting by attending retailers and media. And the winning item is a brand new design, as only those items displayed in the New Products Pavilion are eligible to go on the ballot.

Despite the overwhelming glut of travel pillows the past couple of years, there's still room for improvement in this oversaturated category. Or so retailers and media seem to think, as the **Cabeau Evolution Cool Travel Pillow** garnered the lion's share of votes.



Building good buzz: TGA President Michele Marini Pittenger bestows the Buzz Award to founder David Sternlight (seated) and crew: Billy Allonce, Stephanie Randall, Steve Sharp, Ryan Hilterbran, Lenin Lora, Chris Samba, Ashley Sumii and Rudy Zuniga (left to right).



Cabeau – which now counts four travel pillows in its mostly comfort-oriented product lineup – came up with a better mousetrap this year, attracting Buzz votes with its dual-density memory foam design with a series of large, radially spaced air vents. It's such a preposterously obvious idea it's a wonder why nobody thought of it sooner. The patented pillow, which shares its stepped, wedding cake-like shape with Cabeau's other pillows, also features a magnetic toggle to help customize the fit, and ushers in a new price point for travel pillows, at \$59.99 MSRP.

Community Service Award Cabeau Cares

Time is money, so the saying goes. But time is not money – money can be gained, lost, and even recovered. But time can only be lost; you can't make more of it, you can't get it back. Which makes time the more precious of the two, and is why this year's Community Service Award winner's philanthropic contribution is so noteworthy.

Once a month, in a program dubbed Cabeau Cares, the company shuts its operation for the day. Instead of reporting for work, its employees devote that day's time to a local community project. The company's philanthropic energies have gone toward worthy goals as diverse as preparing and serving breakfast for family residents of the Los Angeles Ronald McDonald House; distributing camouflage travel pillows to Camp Pendleton marines headed for deployment; assembling care packages at the Los Angeles Regional Food Bank for distribution to in-need senior citizens; and doing laundry and food prep at the Los Angeles Mission.

It all began with a lunchtime conversation. "When we first started the company, my partner and I talked about what would be important for us. We realized it's really difficult to carve out time," recalls CEO David Sternlight. "I have a son, we have our families, our friends, and taking care of ourselves and going to the gym and sleeping enough and making sure everything was good on that end, and of course all the time we're spending with a new, growing company."

"We realized we could use the company as a vehicle, to be able to give back and feel good about ourselves; we're able to not just look at this as a business venture to make money, this is something bigger for us."

It's truly a team effort, and the way charities are selected is very democratic: employees take turns. Two employees are assigned to each month, and it's up to them to run that whole event, from picking the cause to how they will contribute. "We have a budget for this every month," says Sternlight. "Some of it entails giving product back, some of it entails buying food; it's part of our weekly meeting, every week. If we just had an event we talk about what just happened, get feedback and try to improve the experience. And we go forward three months in advance."

Lots of companies are involved in charitable giving, weaving volunteerism into the corporate culture, but Cabeau's devotion of an entire work day to a cause is unique. "A person came to me at one point and told me, long ago, this was a mistake because we were effectively losing one day out of the 22 days of work each month. I ended up doing some research and found this study, they basically had employees working a lot harder, a lot more intensely, with a lot more focus, when they're able to do something bigger than just trying to make money and going about their job working 9 to 5 and clocking in, clocking out. So we realized how valuable this was to our people within, and how much of a difference it made to our community."

It's a virtuous circle of good works. Employee Billy Allonce disclosed that after the day's philanthropy is over, employees actually head back to the office to complete their work, not because it's required, but because they feel the company deserves its own karma-like payback. Team member Rudy Zuniga's girlfriend was so impressed, she took a day off from her own job to pitch in on a Cabeau Cares day. Like the many good causes it's helped, Cabeau Cares has become something bigger than itself. *2016 Industry Awards continued on page 60*



Jack Holodnicki, TGA Award and Community Service Award Committee chair, with David Sternlight, founder of Cabeau, which won the award for its Cabeau Cares program of giving back.

Best Booth Contest

Putting a Shine on The Show

There's definitely a showmanship aspect to exhibiting at The International Travel Goods Show, and while most exhibitors put on a good show, there are those who go the extra yard to really put some polish on their product presentation.

Last year's Best Booth contest was a spontaneous pop-up, but was so successful that the Best Booth competition has become an annual event to recognize those companies that are upping the ante, inspiring others to level up their showmanship.

Like the Buzz Award, the winners are determined by popular vote among retailers and media, in three different categories:

- 100 square feet
- 200-300 square feet
- 400-600 square feet

The contest is purposefully restricted to smaller-size booths in an effort to reward inventiveness and creativity, rather than big budgets; it takes a lot more cleverness to create a transformational space within the confines of a tiny footprint and small budget, compared with the spending power of a gigantic booth and correspondingly large budget. And as you'll see from this year's tally, these small booths made the most of their space with clean, purposeful design that highlighted their products' unique qualities.

Innodesign

Fresh off its new product launch at the gigantic Consumer Electronics Show, Innodesign came to The International Travel Goods Show with a small, 100-square-foot booth to showcase its five product lineup of portable audio offerings.

With its brightly colored products designed to appeal to a younger audience, Innodesign's basic black booth and white showcase space helped give its over-the-ear and neckband style headsets and wireless speakers some visual pop to help it stand out from other 10' x 10' booths.



Innodesign's stark black booth and white display areas provided contrast highlighting the sculpted design of its audio offerings. Innodesign's Kevin Nagatini (left) and Randy Kems proudly show off their award in the 100-square-foot category.



Healthy Back Bag Co. Director Priscilla Chase (on her first-ever trip to Las Vegas from the UK) displays the company's award for best 200-300-square-foot booth, earned with its open plan that encouraged hands-on exploration and showcased its colorful bags.



Bluesmart's flatscreens called out features, while pedestal displays brought its techy rollerboards up to eye level for closer perusal. Bluesmart's Ryan Kam, TJ Moore, Chris Fulton and Allison Murray (left to right) celebrate the moment.

"Our products are designed with a younger audience in mind," says Randy Kems, VP of marketing. "We wanted to show our products in a kind of natural setting," he added, referring to the visuals employed within the display space. "We had kids using them in a school or college campus setting. We want people to relate to where they would be seen or how they would be used, so people could associate themselves with the use of this product."

Healthy Back Bag Co.

While the basic design behind the Healthy Back Bag Co.'s signature bags

is definitely form-and-function driven, the myriad colors and visually playful designs are definitely more fun than functional. So, logically, the company went with a less is more approach, building into its modest booth space a minimalist presentation that displayed a huge array of bags in a kaleidoscope of color, and earned it first place honors in the 200-300 square foot category.

"The warm and enthusiastic response we received from our visitors both old and new was wonderful, they definitely responded to our small but colorful space," relates company Director Priscilla Chase (on her first-

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ever visit to Las Vegas).

The company, which was a former Show staple, hadn't displayed for a number of years so it had a twofold goal: To appeal to new retailers, as well as get reacquainted with members of its existing dealer base. "We wanted to create an eye-catching and welcoming booth that was instantly identifiable with the brand, to ensure we could grab the attention of both U.S.-based Healthy Back Bag retailers who haven't seen us at The Show for several years, plus our distributors from around the world."

"Winning the award was very exciting and the icing on the cake of a very successful Show."

Bluesmart

The Bluesmart booth employed a very open plan, with examples of its debut high-tech rollerboards on pedestals that brought them up to eye level and encouraged hands-on exploration. "We let visitors see it from the right angle, and use it the right way," explains Alejo Verlini, co-founder and head of design. "Imagine when you go buy a phone or computer, you need to play with the technology to feel it."

The booth itself basically occupied just one wall, using simple icon photographs to highlight the rolling luggage's many integrated technologies. "We are powered by technology, and we were looking to bring that tone to The International Travel Goods Show and make a statement about connectivity, this new trend in the luggage industry. We used simple black and white surfaces, screens, icons, and then let the product do the rest."

The booth, which swept the 400-600 square foot division, echoed the suitcase's own black-and-blue color scheme, and was designed to facilitate discovery and replicate the retail experience. "We made a layout that was very inviting, like a store, with a lot of space for you to walk in. You could play around and discover not just the product, but also different videos and phones for you to connect to the suitcase, so you'd spend a few minutes in the booth."

It was a successful presentation for an attention-getting new product, and showed just how intelligent booth design can complement a hot new item and enhance its appeal.

Legacy Award

Barry Gelfand

Driving Value for the Customer

Newly created this year, the Legacy Award honors someone who has had an extraordinary impact on a company, or the industry at large. It's intended to be awarded to individuals who have created a lasting imprint on their business, or the travel goods industry.

The inaugural recipient of this award is the late Barry Gelfand, of Ross Stores. Gelfand enjoyed a long career as a buyer, first with Macy's and then with Ross Stores, where he remained for 20 years before passing away unexpectedly in December 2015. He began with Ross as a buyer for the boys' department, but it was after transitioning into luggage that he really made his mark. "He took a business that was very, very underdeveloped and built it into one of the significant businesses at Ross," explains Bruce Nelson of Ross.

"From a business standpoint he built an amazing business," relates Samsonite's Lloyd Rabinowitz. "I certainly knew the people before him, and they were very good at their jobs. But he set that business on a level and a path that took them to completely new levels, a new height.

A new plateau. And it's really amazing to see what he's done. I think his legacy will go on to be how big he grew the business."

But Gelfand's legacy reaches beyond his own company, and into the tight-knit community that is the industry's vendor network. "The word value is not a price point, and this is what Barry was so key in educating me about, and I think probably educating the rest of the marketplace," says Rabinowitz. "Value is not a price point; value is value. And he was able to educate me and the rest of the people in the marketplace how best to execute against that goal."

"Barry taught me how to be more professional, to be a better rep," remembers Jennifer Zorek-Pressman. "I told him once, 'We need you to change your PO [purchase order] to this date,' and he said to me, 'Do you think I'm going to

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Barry Gelfand in Shanghai, on one of his twice-yearly visits to Luggage America on behalf of Ross Stores.



Jack Holodnicki, TGA Award and Community Service Award Committee chair, presents the inaugural Legacy Award given posthumously to Barry Gelfand to Bruce Nelson (right), of Ross Stores, accepting on Gelfand's behalf.

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look up this PO and then do it? You are my rep, you need to do this because I'm not going to do the work.' And he was 100% right."

Gelfand was a perfectionist (in 13 years working with him, Zorek-Pressman only once knew him to make

in. But if you were trying to BS him God help you, because he'd pick up on it right away. He always had that value proposition in his head. He didn't have an ego, he didn't have a power trip, he did it to really give the customers at Ross the best deal possible."

Gelfand's recognition of value was

“Value was an important thing for his business, but something that was very interesting was that Barry didn't just look at value as a word, he lived it.”

– Frank Fenton, Randa Luggage

Barry Gelfand was known for an unrelenting pursuit of value for the Ross customer; shown here working on product with Luggage America in Shanghai.



a mistake – and she gleefully presented him with a certificate to mark the occasion), who knew what his customers wanted and what would perform for the Ross brand. “He was one of the best merchants that I’ve ever worked with,” says Scott Kosmin of 24-7 International. “Barry had a tremendous understanding of the off-price business he was involved in, he understood the customer and he understood the price/value relationship he had to establish. He was very tough, very shrewd, but very fair.”

He was known as a hard negotiator. “Barry knew what would sell, and it could be frustrating, but he knew his customer,” says Jack Holodnicki of Olivet International. “If you listened to him, you would know his customer too. And that was one of the lessons in working with him, to listen, because he wasn't there to steer you wrong, he was there to make sure you got it right.” Kostas Chronis, a member of Gelfand's team at Ross, recalls how he'd work a deal: “He did it in a way that people felt that the negotiation, the conversation, was going the right way. It wasn't just beating someone up. If he noticed something was truly a value, he'd give

legendary. But it went deeper than mere understanding – Gelfand lived for value. “Value was an important thing for his business, but something that was very interesting was that Barry didn't just look at value as a word, he lived it,” says Frank Fenton of Randa Luggage, who's known Gelfand for 20 years. “We were driving together in a car, and somehow we got on to restaurants and I asked if he'd been to Houston's lately, a place I knew he liked that was in Hackensack [NJ]. He said, ‘Frank, I don't go there any more, the value's just not there.’ I said, ‘Barry, you're kidding me, it's food.’ And he said ‘Cheesecake Factory has a much better deal.’ Then we talked about a grocery store that was on his way home when he went to New Jersey over the weekends, Wegmans, and I said, ‘Barry, you stop in there?’ And he said ‘No, the value's not there, I stopped going there.’ He believed in value in all parts of his life.”

“He loved steakhouses,” says Nissa Levy, a member of Gelfand's Ross team. “If we would go and I'd say I just wanted a 6-ounce steak he'd say, ‘No, the value's not in the 6-ounce. You buy the 12-ounce and I'll eat the rest.’”

Gelfand was memorable because he was larger than life. The word eccentric comes up often, in talking about Gelfand, but it's mentioned in an endearing fashion. And that's telling, because the only people who can successfully cultivate eccentricity without being marginalized and outcast are all uniformly good at what they do. It was a known fact that he couldn't stand heat. “I would always have a jacket if we went to see a vendor,” says Levy, “because every vendor would dial up the air conditioner the night before to make it nice and cool for Barry.” Fenton relates, “Barry was a hummer. He'd hum while we were working, he'd hum while we were in a car riding somewhere.” And he liked Peeps, says Chronis. “Not the white Peeps, they had to be pink. That was very important.”

But Gelfand was also a remarkable human being. Everybody who knew Gelfand knew about his mother, because they shared an incredibly special bond. “I think he loved his mother more than anything in the world,” says Chronis. “The way he always helped her, and she helped him, it's a bond very few mothers and sons have.”

“When my daughter went to college in New York, Barry insisted that I give my daughter his cell phone number,” remembers Samsonite's Rabinowitz. “‘Barry, she doesn't know you,’ I said. ‘It doesn't matter, he said. If she should need anything I want her to have my number. I want her to know that at a moment's notice I can be there for her.’ That's who Barry was.”

Gelfand was incredibly principled, and had a series of personal sayings, almost rules, that he would spout off with vendors and co-workers alike. “He always said, at his retirement, he would want us to list his Barryisms, as we called them,” relates Levy. A few:

- I want a Cadillac at a Chevy price.
- It's us against them but they don't know it.
- I can handle disappointment but not surprise.

And then there's the Barry Gelfand Slap/Kiss, a signature move mentioned by vendors and co-workers alike, where he'd have to get tough with a vendor but made sure they knew he still loved them. Because at the end of the day, it wasn't just business. It was about relationships. Which is, really, the foundation of legacy. ■