

The Nature of the Business • Focus: New England

The New Hampshire Antique Co-op

Philip Alvaré



A full parking lot and sunny skies greet customers at New Hampshire Antique Co-op's Expansion Open House.

The image in a local newspaper is eye-catching; a cupola being hoisted by a crane. The caption reads: "New Hampshire Antique Co-Op Installs 20 foot high Cupola to Crown 65-foot tall Clock Tower."

It's a monumental gesture that reflects the heroic efforts necessary to sustain a retail antiques business in today's market place. This, and other innovative strategies, is how the Hackler family, proprietors of the *New Hampshire Antique Co-op* for the past 23 years, are meeting the challenging demands of the antiques business in the twenty-first century.

In most parts of the country the retail antiques market has gone from boom to bust. There was an unprecedented level of spending from the boom of the mid-

1990s until the dot-com market collapse in 2000 delivered a gut-punch to the business. Five years later sales are still anemic.

The Internet, global marketing and the rise of auction houses have all had major impact on the way business is conducted. Changes in taste, style and preferences, like the current trend for mid-century Modern, challenge the very nature of what people consider "antique." But that's not all. So-called globalization and the ensuing explosion of multi-national marketing vehicles like glossy shelter magazines, television shows, catalogues and the World Wide Web, have foisted fashionable home design products upon an increasingly susceptible American consumer. The market is saturated with great looking, cheap stuff. Why pay \$6,500 for

an eighteenth-century wrought iron English Regency Settee, when a new one from Smith and Hawkins is \$650?

Ways Forward

As the saying goes, "nothing ventured, nothing gained" and let's throw in, "the squeaky wheel gets the grease," for good measure. Not that the Hacklers are squeaky wheels, but they seem to be making enough noise to get some attention in a marketplace where the competition's noisy and crowded. But Sam, Jason and Rebecca Hackler seem to be on a roll. The *New Hampshire Antique Co-op* at 323 Elm Street, Milford, New Hampshire, opened in 1983. Today, *NHAC* represents more than 200 dealers and is widely considered to be one of the finest group

shops in New England. It was voted “Best of New Hampshire” by *New Hampshire Magazine*, and *New Hampshire Chronicle* (WMUR/Channel 9) recently hosted live segments from the Co-op.

The Hacklers are covering all the market bases necessary to be competitive in today’s very competitive marketplace. They’ve been thinking outside of the box. These 23-year veterans responded to a sinking market, with something akin to, “Damn the torpedoes, full steam ahead.”

Meanwhile, back at the crane... The cupola was hoisted onto the existing tower on July 21, 2005. It was all part of an expansion project launched by the Hacklers under the guidance of architect Max Ferro of Preservation Partnership. The building’s design reflects the archi-

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tectural vernacular of a New England meetinghouse. Its new landmark tower and cupola topped with an eagle weathervane is 65-feet high and makes the NHAC building one of the tallest in the area. Inside is an additional 20,000 square feet of display space for antiques and fine arts: nobody’s going to miss it if they sneeze as they’re driving by.

The innovative thinking shows as we enter the Co-op and find ourselves in its plaza, which features a grand nineteenth-century cast iron fountain by Fiske. Leading off the plaza is “Main Street,” which is a historic recreation of stucco, brick, or clapboard-fronted store fronts, made up of different nineteenth-century architectural elements. Multi-paned glass windows and a mid-nineteenth-century door pediment from the former Goyette Museum, in Peterborough, New Hampshire, grace the space. Jason Hackler considers the ‘shops’ a great advantage over more conventional group-shop layouts. The flow is better as



Sam Hackler (left) and Jason Hackler (right) in New Hampshire Antique Co-op’s Plaza on the eve of the Gala Opening.



Celebrating at the New Hampshire Antique Co-op Gala Opening. From left: Mary Gold, Jason Reimers, Susie Hackler, Sarge Collier and Miki Collier.



A crane hoists the cupola from the New Hampshire Antique Co-op into place.

SHOPPING by region

customers enter and leave each shop as they choose. Each dealer has his or her own shop and can create a distinct experience for the customer.

The range of periods and styles represented is vast. One shop is arranged as a dining hall in an elegant country house filled with fine eighteenth and nineteenth-century furniture, such as a 12-foot long classical French dining table, mahogany shelving and other furniture and objects from the period. Another evokes a more rustic continental farmhouse bedroom with a stone floor from a different era. Each dealer has a chance to make a distinct statement about style and specialization. Customers enjoy being able to choose which shops to enter, instead of having to slog through an endless jumble of booths.

Beyond Main Street is a "small treasures" hall, a market square with a more conventional group shop area, and a discovery barn. In addition, there are two art galleries: one, interestingly, is the not-for-

profit *Tower Gallery* that was launched by an exhibition put on by the Milford Historical Society. This community exhibition space was designed to feature historical societies, museums and other antiques and arts-related nonprofit organizations. It's an exciting opportunity for historical societies and museums to team up with an antiques center, which helps both to target their market. People interested in historical societies and museums are also interested in purchasing antiques. Jason, who has a museum background, sees the potential synergy between profit and not-for-profit organizations as a profitable arrangement that also provides a community service.

It's Worked

When asked if their Herculean efforts and expansion have paid off, a resounding "Yes" was the Hacklers' answer. The increases in sales, in traffic, in new customers and new dealers, have all exceeded expectations. Since the cupola was

erected, sales have soared as high as the tower. Maybe things are picking up in general and the market is seeing a more sustained recovery. More likely, however, is that the improved sales volume at the *NHAC* is directly related to the Hacklers' grabbing the bull by the horns.

The days of shop sitting and thumb twiddling are over. A proactive approach, utilizing all the new tools and tricks of the trade, is what it takes to be competitive in today's market where you have to stand out in the crowd and make a good deal of noise to get noticed. It's not without its risks, though. The stakes are high. Entering the game can be costly. It demands expenditures of time and money, and takes nothing short of heroic efforts – like hoisting a 20-foot cupola atop a 65-foot tower. ■

For more information, call (603) 673-8499 or go online to www.nhac.biz



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