

Chapter Thirteen

World Famous Trading Post

*“I think of that freeway out there as a big ol’ river full of fish.
I’m sitting here with a cane pole dangling my hook in it,
and every once in a while I’ll pull one of ’em in.”*



IN 1987 we moved El Paso Saddleblanket from Alameda Street to downtown. At our new 36,000-square-foot location on Oregon Street another fascinating change took place. For the first time **THE PUBLIC WALKED IN!** Although we really liked the wholesale part better, we readily adapted to the retail business. We quickly became one of El Paso’s major tourist attractions. The downtown location became famous for offering reservation Indian jewelry, fine Oriental rugs and decorative items from every corner of the world.

The retail world was exciting but a lot of work. We had to increase our staff, keep longer hours, and take on a much more public profile than we had before. Our way of doing business had to change too. We weren’t just traders anymore. We were operators of a world famous trading post.

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ONE OF THE THINGS WE NEEDED for the retail business was advertising. I looked around at various options. For some reason, billboards caught my fancy. We had a huge flow of traffic moving through El Paso and, as it turned out, some of my old customers who owned trading posts were also in the billboard business so I could deal with them.

Billboards are like anything else. You've got to get a good price on them or they won't work for you. I just would never go out and pay the first asking price on them. I got a deal with the Bowlin Company. They were old trading post owners and had hundreds of billboards. Eventually the billboards got to be a bigger business than the trading post. I'd known Mr. Bowlin for fifteen years, and I worked a deal with him. I got a super low price on the condition that if he got a real player I got booted off the billboard. It's kind of like selling empty seats on an airplane. He had the right to throw me out at any time and vice versa. I also traded him tons of merchandise for the billboard space.

WHEN WE STARTED the billboard deal, I had to learn about how they worked. At first, I wrote down a whole laundry list of items I wanted on the billboards. The billboard salesman called me up and said, "Well, Mr. Henson, maybe you want to put less words up on your billboard. You know it's hard to read things when you're traveling at seventy miles an hour."

I said, "Look, you're just getting lazy. Now I'm paying for it, and you do what I'm paying you to do. Don't tell me what to do..."

He went ahead and painted the billboard just like I wanted it. I drove by and shook my head. Sure enough, I couldn't read anything. I called the guy back and said, "You're right..."

Some of the phrases that worked best on our billboards were "World Famous Trading Post," "Worldwide Import/Export," and "50,000 Rugs in Stock."

Eventually, I was paying over \$10,000 a month for billboards. We had them up north of Santa Fe, between Tucson and Phoenix, outside

Alamogordo and as far east as Sweetwater, Texas. “It pays to advertise,” I told the reporter in an interview for the *El Paso Times*. “El Paso is a great place. We have a lot of neat things here, and people need to know it. It’s not exactly all out of the goodness of my heart that I do this. I have a profit motive too. I see this freeway as a river, with a lot of fish in it. They say some sixty million people drive through each year. The trick is to pull out a fishing pole and bring ’em in.”

In one year, we spent \$500,000 advertising El Paso Saddleblanket Company, forty-seven percent more than the city’s own \$340,000 promotional budget. “Dusty Henson spends more money advertising El Paso than we do,” said Tom Caradonio, executive director of the El Paso Convention, Civic Center and Tourism Department.

Of course, some folks here in El Paso kidded me because of the billboards. But they worked to pull in customers. People often asked me, “Dusty, how many billboards you got?” Because I had so many of them and so many different deals, I always had to say, “Well, I honestly don’t know.”

I LEARNED that you had to watch some of the billboard guys. They can be pretty ruthless and cutthroat. Some of them will go out and sell one board to two or three different people. They can get away with it because people don’t go out to check on the billboards.

One day I was sitting in the office when the phone rang. It was an old rancher on the line, and he was pissed off. “I’m comin’ down there,” he snarled. “And I’m gonna kick your ass.”

“What about?”

“You put up a sign on my property without permission and I told that other guy before that I...”

“Now, wait a minute, wait a minute,” I interrupted. “Let’s talk about this other guy...”

The old rancher explained the situation and I said, “Now you’ve gotta understand, sir. This is not my sign. I didn’t paint it. I haven’t even seen it. I think some ass needs to be kicked, but why don’t you go to this guy who owns the billboard and deal with him? Then you come down here,

and I'll sell you a saddleblanket at wholesale price and we'll get along just fine. Now I totally sympathize with your position, but I didn't do it..." The rancher never did come down to buy a saddleblanket, but he never called me again, either.

WE GOT INTO a whole bunch of other promotions to help the retail business. One of the things we launched was the El Paso Saddleblanket Chili Cook-Off and Bean Cook-Off in Downtown El Paso. We donated the proceeds to the Americana Museum at the El Paso Civic Center Plaza.

We helped sponsor the International Paris to Panama Motorcycle Rally stop in El Paso. The city turned down a request to spend \$2,648 on entertainment and T-shirts to promote El Paso in conjunction with the event. I liked the idea of the event so I covered the expense. My good friend Sherman Barnett owns the El Paso Harley Davidson, which is the largest Harley distributor in the world, believe it or not (this is not a misprint, the world's largest Harley dealership is in El Paso, Texas). He was into the event, so I pitched in the money necessary to sponsor it. "These kind of events help get our name out there," I explained to the press at the time. "We're giving away one thousand arrowheads at the rodeo in conjunction with another promotion, and it's the same sort of thing."

We tried some interesting in-store promotions as well. For the first several years of our retail operation, we had a live weaving demonstration everyday. We had a big loom set up in the store, and a full-time weaver working. One year, we even took the weaver to the International Western Show in Denver and had a weaving demonstration in one of our booths.

We made sure El Paso Saddleblanket got plenty of airtime on TV and radio. I got a good deal on late night cable TV ads here in El Paso. Sometimes late at night our commercials would be on thirty channels at once. And we got great radio advertisement rates thanks to our friends at the Jim Phillips Radio Empire as well.



ALONG WITH THE BILLBOARDS and all the other promotions, we expanded our three-page catalog. I got a big kick out of the catalog, and I still do. To me, sending out the catalog is a lot like playing a slot machine in Vegas. Only backwards. The more money you put in, the more money comes out. You'll get it back. Now you may starve to death waiting for it to come back, but it will come back to you eventually.

What started as a small, simple catalog grew over the years. We started to include more images, and more pages. Over the years our catalog has proven to be our most reliable source of advertising. These days, every quarter we mail out about 250,000 copies of our new, fifty-six-page, full-color wholesale catalog to stores all across the country and the world.

I'm a believer in advertising. I particularly like what I call "non-vanishing" advertising. To me, radio and TV—it just kinda goes out into space or something. At least somebody could find an old copy of my catalog in some cave, or old mine shack, you know, five hundred years from now. Print advertising just doesn't go away. And what goes around comes around eventually.

There's a famous story about Mr. Wrigley, the chewing gum magnate. He was traveling on a train with a newly hired Harvard business whiz kid. The kid said to Mr. Wrigley that since business was going so well, they should cut back on advertising or cut it out for a long time. Mr. Wrigley pointed out that the train was going along at about seventy miles an hour, and if they cut the engine from the cars, the train would continue to go seventy miles an hour...FOR A WHILE. Also it is said that fifty percent of all advertising is wasted, BUT WHICH FIFTY PERCENT?