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THE BOSS

The Wagons Keep Rolling

Published: July 24, 2010

MY grandfather, Antonio, started [Radio Flyer](#) three years after he came to Chicago from a small town near Venice, Italy, in 1914. It originally made wood cabinets for phonographs, and started making wagons in 1917. My father, Mario, was expected to join the business, but he did not necessarily have the same expectation for me.



Robert Pasin

President and C.E.O., Radio Flyer, Chicago

AGE 41

LOVES TO Create family videos of his four children.

RECENT VACATION Family trip to Jackson Hole, Wyo.

It wasn't until I was in sixth grade and wrote a report on the 1933 World's Fair in Chicago that I began to appreciate our family and company history. Like most businesses, the company struggled during [the Great Depression](#). I found out that for the world's fair, my grandfather borrowed \$30,000 to create a 45-foot-tall wood and plaster replica of a boy on a wagon. There was a shop underneath it where he sold miniatures of stamped-metal Radio Flyer wagons as souvenirs to fairgoers.

I didn't start working in the business until I graduated from high school. I worked in the warehouse loading trucks and on the packing line to box up wagon components for mailing to stores.

After graduating with a history degree from the [University of Notre Dame](#), I volunteered for a year as a grade school teacher in a Catholic school on Chicago's West Side. I know this sounds funny, but I met my future wife, Muriel, in a convent — because that's where volunteers were housed.

When I came back to Radio Flyer, I began working on our small accounts, visiting toy stores to sell our children's wagons. When the vice president for sales retired, I took over the accounts for our largest customers.

By the early 1990s, our classic red wagons were feeling competitive pressure from the introduction of plastic wagons. We had also closed down production of the other half of our business — making wheelbarrows for Sears and other private labels.

I married in 1994, and the next year I started working on my M.B.A. at the Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern; I received the degree in 1997. That same year, the 80th anniversary of Radio Flyer, my father decided to hand over the reins to me and my brother, Paul, who now works overseeing our factories in China. He told us that my grandfather had allowed him to make a ton of mistakes, and said: "So that's what I'm going to allow you to do."

We struggled because the company had little new product development. It had taken us five years, starting in 1992, to find out whether we could make a plastic wagon that could compete. The first plastic wagon we made was a loser. We eventually made a model called the Pathfinder, with seats that folded up and down, and it was a great seller.

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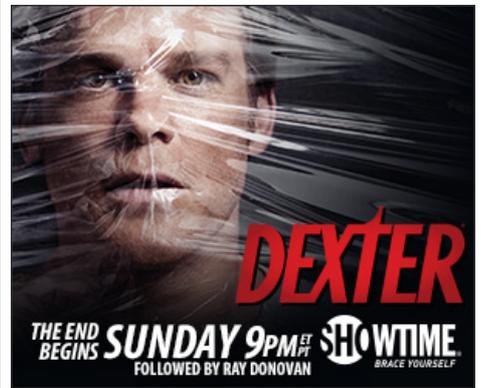
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I call this my “goof-ups, growth and gratitude” period because we were trying to figure out what products fit the company and would be successful. I felt a big responsibility to the incredible brand that our family and all the committed people who had worked at Radio Flyer had built over the years. But one of our first efforts, a doll in a little pink wagon, was a complete bomb. We found out the hard way that dolls are a very different toy category than wagons.

We began listening very closely to customers, because sometimes what they say they want and what they really want are different. We had panels of consumers and went to homes. From that, we developed some of our most popular models, including tricycles and all-terrain wagons with big wheels.

While I was on the road in the 1990s, I developed a lot of bad eating habits and put on 40 pounds of extra weight. To burn it off, I decided to take up running, and soon found that I loved it. I’ve completed 11 marathons, including those in Chicago and Boston, and have sped up my finish time significantly.

As told to Elizabeth Olson.

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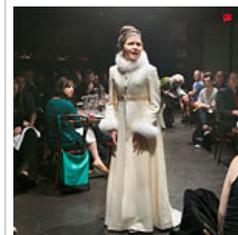
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