

Forbes

A Little Guy in Brooklyn

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By Jerry Flint

David Epner, 60, has been a Brooklyn boy all his life, and why would anyone want to leave Brooklyn? His company is into gold plating. Infrared light reflects brilliantly off gold, useful in, for example, missile parts and auto paint drying ovens.

“This is a job shop. You call me up with a problem. We solve it or you go somewhere else. That’s the bane of our business. You are always looking for another order. We always look for a product we can own, sell inventory, be in control of our destinies.”

Still, Epner survives. A good thing for the 40 people it employs, who would have scant chances for other jobs in this depressed area. To paraphrase Humphrey Bogart’s speech at the end of *Casablanca*, in this crazy, mixed-up world, the problems of a little guy in Brooklyn don’t count for much compared with the bit-time woes of IBM, GM and American Express. But those same little guys may tell us more about the spirit that drives this market economy than the giants.



“Dad started it in 1910. He went into business with my grandmother’s \$600 from her catering business,” Epner says. The Epners stuck with business while others went off into more glamorous things. Louis Epner’s partner was Emanuel Cohan, and Cohan’s grandson is executive director of the San Francisco Symphony. When the Orchestra performed in N.Y., we silver plated the mouth pieces for the entire brass section.”

Until the 1970s business was largely plating jewelry and novelties. “Remember, in the 1960s banks and supermarkets would give you a five-piece gold place setting. I was doing 60,000 pieces a day.”

The thrust of the business changed when he gold-plated an aluminum reflector for Xerox in 1972. “That doubled our sales. It was the most beautiful plating we ever shipped out. But we got back trailerloads of rejects, because we weren’t meeting their reflectance standards.” This led to an effort to raise his technical level, paying off later in the missile work.

“But in 1975 we nearly lost it all. Remember the digital watch craze?” He mimics the Texas Instruments buyer: “You are the only man who can save TI’s watch business, but

you're a quarter too high." That buyer knew how to strum a small man's ego. Wow, little me, I can save TI, and I'm only a quarter too high. "I was making 10,000 watchbands a day for Texas Instruments, and we lost our shirt. None of our creditors lost anything, but it was close. We were tapped out. So in 1979 we decided to downsize the company by taking this infrared know-how and moving it upscale."

Epner's had some luck in Detroit selling his gold-plated infrared oven-reflecting panels. European carmakers are buying, too. The idea is that the strong gold reflections make for faster and better-quality drying and less energy use in drying the new cars after they've been painted.

The gold plating also is used on some computer parts and systems for making semiconductor wafers. Epner has applied his technology to silver coatings: "Motorola said it's the most conductive silver they ever tested."

But finding new business isn't the only problem. "The cost of environmental compliance is staggering. I've hired a full-time \$60,000-a-year environmental person to make sure that not one part per million goes down the sewer. Anyone in Washington listening? Or don't they care much about 40-job shops in Brooklyn?"

He's 60, why not just quit? "My father died working." But David Epner has no children to inherit the company. "No, the next generation are the younger manager's Paul Brancato in engineering sales and Stephen Candiloro Jr. running production."

"I'm possessed by this. You go to work in your father's business, and you have one job in your life. It [ensuring that the company goes on] validates my right to be here."

He's sure that his Laser Gold coating has a bright future in thermal control of spacecraft and racecars. "I want to get the company to 10 million in a new plant."

It could be, or Epner might just go on surviving. Not every business turns into a roaring success. But they all make a big contribution.

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