

Curiosity and Focus

An Interview with Joseph A. Hardy III,
 Founder, 84 Lumber Company

EDITORS' NOTE *Joseph Hardy III went from being a college student selling homegrown vegetables door-to-door to becoming the Founder and CEO of 84 Lumber Company, which is now the largest privately owned building materials supplier to professional contractors. After graduating from the University of Pittsburgh with an engineering degree, Hardy became the top-producing salesman for the family's Hardy & Hayes jewelry company.*



Joseph A. Hardy III

At the age of 31, he left Hardy & Hayes and opened Green Hills Lumber. A few years later, Hardy pooled his resources with his two younger brothers and a friend to purchase a tract of land in the rural town of Eighty Four, Pennsylvania. There, in 1956, he opened a 'cash and carry' lumber yard focused on professional home builders in the tri-state region of Pennsylvania, Ohio, and West Virginia. He named this new business 84 Lumber Company. Hardy also founded Nemaocolin Woodlands Resort, one of North America's premier resort destinations. His desire to help Fayette County develop a better business and economic foundation to create more jobs and a better tax base prompted him to run for a seat as a Fayette County Commissioner to which he was elected and began serving his term as Vice Chairman of the Board of Commissioners of Fayette County in 2004.

COMPANY BRIEF *84 Lumber Company (84lumber.com) maintains corporate headquarters in Eighty Four, Pennsylvania, where its original store continues to operate. The company now operates 257 stores and component-manufacturing plants, employing more than 4,200 associates nationwide.*

To what do you attribute the success of 84 Lumber?

It's the people we have. What gets a company through cyclical changes is the quality of its people. This requires recognition for any small successes, since it's all about the people and their willingness to serve.

You also can't ever stand still. You have to keep changing things to remain contemporary. I call 50 stores a day and speak with each of them as if it is the only store I'm talking to. You have to relate to the store manager and

let him know you're well aware of all that he's doing.

You transformed your business model to sell directly to contractors. Was that a challenging decision to make?

It was so obvious. Right after the second World War, you could go into any lumber yard and see that the owners were fifth generation and more worried about their golf handicaps than their business. The person answering the phone at the lumber yard would ask, are you a

do-it-yourselfer or a contractor? It was almost discriminatory.

I couldn't believe there were businesses that asked who you were. It should have been about the price of an item; it shouldn't have been about what qualified you for a certain price.

That's when I opened up with commodities like plywood and roofing. When customers saw that I was offering one very low price to all, the concept took off like a rocket. I didn't create some magic formula – it was simply based on recognition of how discriminatory things had been. Depending on who you were, there had previously been several different prices for the same materials. My concept was a single supplier and a single price. We instill in our people that customer service is paramount. Regardless of customer size or whether they are a contractor or a homeowner. I wasn't necessarily smarter than my competition – it was just recognizing how poor that model was.

With so many things requiring your attention in running an operation of this size, how do you focus your time and energy?

The two words for success are curiosity and focus. I have an agenda each day with pages of things that require my attention. When I look at an item on that agenda, I don't think of anything except handling that item.

If you're curious about things, you can focus like there is nothing in the world except for that one thing. I approach everything with the same type of intellect and intensity whether it relates to a \$10 or \$10 million issue. You have to be very curious about what is happening and you have to focus – then things will happen.

I've also been fortunate in being able to recognize a person's potential and to have

that person grow way beyond my expectations. I had to do everything in the beginning. As our businesses grew, I tried to identify those who would be better at accounting or purchasing, and encouraged him or her to go way beyond the skills I had. It all comes down to people. You have to recognize talent and ambition, and nurture that.

Are curiosity and focus teachable traits?

No, these traits have to already exist within the person. I can tell from one's attitude whether someone has those traits and, if so, it's up to me to nurture them. A person needs to take a positive approach as opposed to telling you why something can't be done. They need to have some creativity as well.

Do you ever reflect on all you have achieved with Nemaocolin?

I don't think about what I've done. We were very successful there but time goes on and there is so much more to do.

What makes Nemaocolin so special?

Again, it's the people. I had no idea what the property would become when I bought it 26 years ago. I didn't plan it but I did try to instill a high level of expectation for every type of activity. We strive to have five-star treatment in everything we do. We have just over 2,000 acres, so when we consider a new idea, we have the space to follow through on it. You always want to make sure you have more land than you think you might need.

Does your mind ever rest?

The day I go, I want to be working to the last minute. Life is so great.

How important is mentoring as part of all that you do?

I try to help people and I get many letters of appreciation for what I do. It is exciting to give back.

Those who know your story realize that you're a self-made man. How is that in line with your personality?

I don't think I could enjoy a formal board of directors and try and build consensus on every decision that needs to be made. Since I've been 18, I've always been in control of my own affairs. Yet I have also been a politician. A lot of important people need a retirement plan and they get ready at about 60 and figure out successors. As an entrepreneur, until I drop, I'll be thinking about the next thing to do. ●