

# MY

## The Century Club

SECRETS  
TO SURVIVING

# 100

YEARS IN BUSINESS

**THE  
BIG  
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Turning  
an *inspiration*  
into lasting  
success

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{ THE CENTURY CLUB }

By Lee Gimpel

# How to Survive 100 Years in Business

ERIC MILLETTE



JEFF BUNDSCHU (LEFT) GREW UP WORKING WITH HIS FATHER, JIM, ON THE GUNDLACH BUNDSCHU WINERY VINEYARD, WHICH HAS BEEN IN THE FAMILY FOR SIX GENERATIONS.

Starting a business and seeing it endure is hardly a sure thing. The statistics of businesses fading away can be discouraging: Less than one-third survive the transition from the first to the second generation, according to the U.S. Small Business Administration. Of those that hang on, half won't survive the hand off from the second to the third generation. Yet there are inspiring stories of businesses that have survived not just a generation or two—but in excess of 100 years. It is the century mark.

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Survival takes resilience. Consider this: A business that celebrates its 100th anniversary this year would have seen—and survived—two world wars, the Great Depression, countless natural disasters, new modes of travel from the automobile to the commercialization of flight, the emergence of the information-technology landscape and a whole host of smaller issues from cash flow to management squabbles.

To survive 100 years or longer is something a business should be proud of. For those still wet behind the ears, there's a lot to learn from such long-lived enterprises.

#### HISTORY DOESN'T SELL

Usually those in a well-established business are deservedly proud of their heritage and may dwell on it more than a younger business. The date of incorporation may figure more prominently into the letterhead, and the Web site and marketing materials may include a nod at its history, something unseen in younger companies.

But, ironically, one of the overarching lessons conveyed by older businesses is that their history is just that—the past. And it isn't all that important to today's strategies. To rest on one's laurels and assume that customers will weigh the past over the present is a serious misstep.

"People are looking at 'What are you doing for me today?'" says Mark Sanderson whose father bought Springfield Printing in North Springfield, Vt., in 1967—a company that started in 1878.

To this end, Jeff Bundschu, the sixth generation to run Gundlach Bundschu Winery ([www.gunbun.com](http://www.gunbun.com)) in Sonoma, Calif., actually downplays the company's history, feeling that what's in the bottle deserves more attention than what happened when the company was founded in 1858.

"We embrace our history, but we're careful not to make it our defining point," Bundschu says. "We want to concentrate on the history we're making today more than what we have done in the past."

#### STAYING NEW

Older businesses approach their day-to-day activities unburdened by the prospect of change. Even though the name on the shingle outside may be the same, what goes on inside evolves over time. Bundschu recounts a history of change that could have ruined a business wedded to its past. After a successful run beginning in the 1850s, the company's warehouse was destroyed by the 1906 San Francisco earthquake. Then Prohibition forced the family to switch to planting pears and producing grape juice. After Prohibition ended, it was back to wine, and since 2000, the focus has shifted from being thought of as a quantity winemaker—a label that's stuck for generations—to being known for quality vintages.

"There was definite chaos when we changed direction," Bundschu admits. "It was a big change."

Similarly, Buchy Food Service ([www.buchyfoods.com](http://www.buchyfoods.com)) in Greenville, Ohio, which started its life in 1878 as the George Buchy Slaughterhouse,

"We embrace our history, but we're careful not to make it our defining point. We want to concentrate on the history we're making today more than what we have done in the past."

- JEFF BUNDSCHU,  
OWNER OF GUNDLACH BUNDSCHU WINERY

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WEB EXTRA

Does your business have what it takes to make it 100 years? Take MyBusiness magazine's longevity quiz and find out. Go to [www.NFIB.com/WebExtras](http://www.NFIB.com/WebExtras)



“We have the service the big guys cannot—or will not—offer.”

— JIM BUCHY, OWNER OF BUCHY FOOD SERVICE

## Triple Digits

### How to make it 100 years

Whether you've been open six months or six decades, boost your business' staying power by following this advice:

#### STAY FLEXIBLE

“Change or die” is a popular business catchphrase. And it's the best piece of advice for those looking for longevity. Predicting changes over the next decades is impossible; adapting your business at the right time is the best way to meet the challenges.

#### OFFER EXCELLENT SERVICE

No matter how much the world changes, good old-fashioned customer service never goes out of style. Businesses that survive 100-plus years never forget: The customer is king (or queen).

#### FILL A NICHE

If you notice a consistent challenge among customers, become the solution. Even if big companies crowd your industry, find products or services they don't offer.

#### LET GO

Just because something has always been done one way doesn't mean it's the best way. More established companies often struggle with change more than younger ones. Learn from your past, but don't be stifled by it.

#### PLAN AHEAD

The most tenuous time for a business is during a changing of the guard. Don't wait until the last minute. Start planning your exit strategy today to ensure a smooth transition and stable future. For tips and resources, go to “Succession Planning” in the “Managing Growth” section of [www.NFIB.com/toolsandtips](http://www.NFIB.com/toolsandtips).

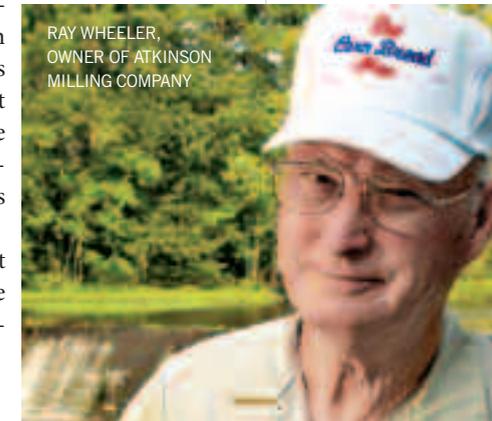
Conner Bottling Works ([www.nhsoda.com](http://www.nhsoda.com)) in Newfields, N.H., says that the company started by his great grandfather in 1863 could have been swept away by the likes of Coca-Cola and Pepsi, but instead has played both ends. On one hand, the company offers 25 flavors of its old-fashioned-style soft drinks, Squamscot Beverages, which have limited distribution but command premium prices. On the other hand, the Conners also distribute the major national brands.

“We sell a wide range of products so that kind of keeps us going,” Conner says. “If we just sold our own products, it would probably be a tough go.”

#### THE CUSTOMER REIGNS SUPREME

Even with a great product, it's not as simple as putting it on a shelf. If there's one constant with older businesses, it's a recognition that the customer is king—always has been, always will be.

TONY PEARCE



RAY WHEELER, OWNER OF ATKINSON MILLING COMPANY

Jim Buchy says that while other food-service companies require minimum orders before they'll stop a truck to unload, his family has won a following, particularly with other smaller companies, by offering better service.

“We have the service the big guys cannot—or will not—offer,” Buchy says. “We still have salesmen who call on our customers, and we don't have quantity limits. It doesn't make a difference what industry you're in; it seems the big guys don't like to fool with the smaller requests, but we do.”

In the end, the recipe for surviving a century is much the same as surviving the first year. Running a business means a lot of hard work and persistence, but it also requires that each generation look at the business as a new entity, sticking to a smart strategy, adapting with the times, listening to customers and planning to be around not just for the first 100 years—but for 100 more after that.

would seem like a completely different company if its founder visited today. By 1973, the company had gotten out of the slaughter business, moving on to what it is today: a food distributor that handles more than 10,000 items for restaurants and food-service operations.

“Everything from the paperwork procedures to the products that we sell has changed,” says Dara Buchy, daughter-in-law of the current president, Jim Buchy. “The biggest attribute to our success now after all these years is the fact that we've been flexible enough to change.”

#### FIND A NICHE

Surviving for a century is easier when there isn't a lot of competition, which is why the maxim for businesses new and old will always be the same: Offer something no one else does. When Ray Wheeler arrived at the Atkinson Milling Company ([www.atkinsonmilling.com](http://www.atkinsonmilling.com)) in Selma,

N.C., in 1958, the family business, which was founded in 1757, was on its last legs. Wheeler, who bought the business from the original family in 1971, says that about 100 years ago North Carolina had about 2,500 mills. But by the late 1950s, that number had dwindled to fewer than 200. Today Wheeler's is one of perhaps five in the state. Rather than surrender to the trend and assume that all milling would be done in huge industrial complexes, Wheeler kept making a product that he says is significantly better than the competition.

“Those big guys . . . they don't get in here and use a set of millstones like we do and grind that fine, fluffy texture that my customers want,” Wheeler says. “They have big roller mills; I can put out 200 pounds an hour on each millstone, they can grind 10,000 pounds an hour. But it's not the quality that we've got here.”

But the niche doesn't have to be so rigid. Tom Conner, president of

ANDY SNOW

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