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### **SMALL BUSINESS**

## **All in the family: Fathers, sons navigate tricky work-life dynamic**

By [CHUCK SODER](#)

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With Father's Day approaching, Jeff Susbauer has three rules for any parent who wants to bring a child into the family business: Have only one child. Have a competent child. Have a child who wants to join the company.

Though plenty of parents are able to successfully bring children into the family business, doing so can create "a minefield" of problems, said Mr. Susbauer, who taught entrepreneurship and business-related courses at Cleveland State University for 40 years before retiring in 2010.

He listed a few potential problems: The adult children can fight over who gets to take over the business, or they may not work well together. Plus, parents are "notoriously bad" at seeing weaknesses in their children and sometimes put their kids in positions they aren't prepared to handle. And should the son or daughter take over the business and fail, they may not get a warm welcome at the next reunion.

"It's a lot like borrowing money from a relative. If you're good for it and pay them back, everybody's going to be happy. If you're not good for it, that's a different story," said Dr. Susbauer, who also has founded five companies.

Businesses in some ways can benefit when the owner's son or daughter joins the business. For one, he or she might be more loyal to the company than an outsider.

Bringing kids into the family business also is a good way for parents to mentor their kids as adults — or at least stop them from moving hundreds of miles away, said Tony Micheli, a principal in the tax department at Cleveland accounting firm Cohen & Co.

Still, he echoed some of Dr. Susbauer's concerns. Parents, he said, need to evaluate their children like they would other employees.

"It's very different than running a business with people you don't know," he said.

### **BRAKEY ENERGY**

When Matt Brakey joined energy consulting firm Brakey Energy Inc., he had nothing to lose. Things have changed.

"Now it's an 'everything to lose' proposition," he said with a laugh.

Mr. Brakey became the first employee to work under his father, Mike Brakey, not long after he graduated from Miami University in 2004.

Back then, the political science major didn't see too many opportunities on the horizon. However, the "training wheels" were just starting to come off at Brakey Energy, which his father started in 1999 with four clients. So he figured he'd give it a try.

Today Matt Brakey is president of the company, which is run out of his parents' house in Shaker Heights. Not only has joining the company proven to be a great opportunity career wise — the company today helps about 60 large energy users understand and cut their energy costs — but working at Brakey Energy also has helped him become closer with both his dad and his mom, Cindy, who joined the company in 2006.

"We've really just gotten to know each other a lot better," he said.

Mike Brakey encouraged his son to consider joining the business, knowing that he was an intelligent, motivated guy who would succeed if given the chance.

"I knew he could become tops in the field," the elder Mr. Brakey said.

Mike Brakey brought more than 20 years of manufacturing experience to the company when he founded it in 1999, making him the company's technical expert. Matt Brakey handles business development and energy generation contracts. Cindy Brakey, a former actuary, helps analyze energy bills. That is, when she's not helping decide disputes between her husband and her son. Another one of their children, Stephen, is interning with the company until this fall, when he starts his junior year at Marietta College in southern Ohio.

Matt Brakey jokes that he probably should have been fired years ago; let's just say he speaks openly with his father. Luckily, they have a strong bond — which you better have before going to work for your parents.

"You have to be pretty confident and comfortable with your family relationship," he said.

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#### **Like father, like son:**

- Dad Mike Brakey learned from his son that the business needs to respond as quickly as possible to its clients. He also learned a lot about the online technology that helps the company with those responses. "It's always good to get a second viewpoint, especially from the younger generation."
- Matt Brakey says his father taught him that building long-term relationships with clients is more important than going for "a quick buck." He also showed him the power of specialization: "Having a niche in business and in life is very valuable."

#### **MAROUS BROTHERS CONSTRUCTION**

First there were the "B-3s." Now they've been joined by the "G-2s." A big group of fathers and sons runs Marous Brothers Construction of Willoughby. Though Adelbert "Chip" Marous Jr. is president, they all contribute ideas and help make decisions.

The fact that the "B-3s" — brothers Chip, Scott and Ken Marous — have input from the second-generation, or "G-2,"

Marous boys helps ensure that the company doesn't get stuck in its ways, Chip Marous said.

"You've got to allow the second generation to put their ideas on the table," he said.

Chip and Scott Marous founded Marous Brothers Construction in 1980. Their brother Ken joined them in 1997.

Shortly thereafter the "G-2s" began entering the business full time. Chip Marous' sons Mike, Jeff and Jason, as well as Scott Marous' sons Scott Jr. and Matt, work for the Willoughby company.

Mike Marous, 30, manages Vintage Development Group, a real estate development subsidiary. It took him a while to land the gig, though: Like other second-generation Marous boys, he spent a lot of time visiting job sites and cleaning up the shop while growing up. After high school he paid his dues as a whipping boy in the union carpenter apprenticeship program.

"We started from the bottom, and we worked our way up from there," he said.

The younger Marous said he respects what his dad has accomplished over the years.

"Not only as a businessman, but as a father. I hold him up higher than anyone," he said.

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#### **Like father, like son:**

- "From the boys I learned to be more open-minded and I think to be more patient, too," dad Chip Marous said.
- Mike Marous said his father taught him to "never take anything for granted" and to "work hard every day."

#### **KING NUT COS.**

To describe why he loves working with his father at the King Nut Cos., Marty Kanan told a story about a friend who is the head of food services for a major airline.

She recently invited her dad to the grand opening of a new airport kitchen in Seattle. He was so proud to finally see what his daughter did for a living, Mr. Kanan said.

Mr. Kanan said he and his brother, Matthew, don't have to wait for a special event to make their father proud.

"We get to experience that feeling she had, but every single day," he said.

Marty Kanan is CEO of King Nut, a Solon-based company that makes peanuts, dried fruit, pretzels and snacks. His father, Michael Kanan, bought the company in 1989, served as CEO through 2003 and remains chairman. Matthew is executive vice president of sales and marketing.

Marty Kanan previously had worked in sales for two automotive manufacturing companies in Michigan. When his dad asked him to join King Nut, however, he saw an opportunity that went beyond business.

"What greater of an opportunity do you have than to work for your dad and work for your family?" he said.

Both he and his younger brother joined the company in 1991. Though the partnership is "not always milk and honey," the three Kanans work well as a team, Michael Kanan said. He's the analytical one who tends to set lofty goals, while Marty Kanan is more outgoing and conservative in nature. Matthew Kanan helps them meet in the middle.

Michael Kanan said he wanted his sons to join him at King Nut because they all enjoy each other's company. Plus, they're capable guys. For instance, the elder Kanan described how, decades ago, after the Kanan family moved to a new neighborhood, 4-year-old Marty and his brother, Michael Jr., immediately went to meet the neighbors.

"I'd be a fool not to want (Marty) to work for me," Michael Kanan said.

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#### **Like father, like son:**

- Marty Kanan picked up "thousands of things" from his father. One of them, though, is his dad's tendency to analyze a situation in many different ways.
- Dad Michael Kanan, meanwhile, said he's learned a lot about how to be more of a people person. "That's a great lesson for me ... It has a big influence on how I act."



**Matt Brakey (left) and father, Mike, of Brakey Energy Inc., a consulting firm they run out of the elder Mr. Brakey's Shaker Heights home**

*Photo credit: MARC GOLUB*

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