

CONCESSIONS

Rob Berk A Wizard on the Midway



**He stands like a statue
Becomes part of the machine
Feeling all the bumpers
Always playing clean
Plays by intuition
The digit counters fall
That deaf, dumb and blind kid
Sure plays a mean pinball
He's a pinball wizard
There has to be a twist
A pinball wizard's
Got such a supple wrist**

Pete Townsend



Rob Berk, President of Berk Enterprises, is certainly not deaf, dumb or blind. His intuition and love of all the bells and whistles, however, do make him something of a wizard particularly on the midway as he helps concessionaires across the country watch their "digit counters fall" and their profits go up.

Rob came by his willingness to experiment and innovate quite honestly. His father, Harold Berk, a chemistry major at Ohio State University, formulated an extremely effective insecticide he named "QuickKill." When he moved to Warren, Ohio after graduation, he landed the city of Warren as one of his first commercial accounts and formed Berk Exterminating. Along with that, he started Berk Paper and Supply as a regional distributor of food service disposables, janitorial, and supermarket supplies. Harold's success with those allowed him to indulge his hobby of coin collecting, and he developed a third Berk company,

Warren Coin Shop. "What's crazy is," Rob laughs, "back in the sixties, people would walk into our old location, and we had three different companies going on there. You turn one way and buy a bottle of bug killer. You turn another way, and you see a coin counter with coins for sale. You walk down the aisle, you see all these restaurant supplies. It was all of this mish-mash all under one roof."

Like most kids whose parents operate a family business, Rob spent his summers and holidays working. When he started college at Ohio State University, his focus was quite different. "I majored in of all things, political science," he shares. "My parents wanted me to become an attorney, but I just didn't know what I wanted."

When his father became unexpectedly ill, Rob stepped in to help his family. "It made sense," he admits. "as a family member, I had to be there. Slow but sure I became more and more acclimated into the dealings of the

company, and the rest is history."

Rob very quickly began making history as he began shifting the focus of Berk Enterprises to an area that had always fascinated him. Rob recalls, "When I was growing up, I was always a real avid fan of going to fairs and playing arcade machines, especially pinball machines. In the 70's when I came to work for the family business, it was natural to attend the fair every year, but I started to focus a little on the items being sold there. I noticed that the market, at least in our area, was pretty much exclusively dealt with by one distributor. I thought, 'Why couldn't we do this as well as they do it?'"

He continues, "Still, it was just another "me too" business. You could buy a cup from him, or you could buy I cup from me. I thought I would give it a shot."

Already an astute business man, Rob began looking for ways to differentiate his business. "I noticed that there were a lot of vendors in our

area who sold lemonade. The norm of that time was they all served their lemonade in a 16-ounce squat cup with something like a wheat design on the outside. The only way you could buy a custom printed cup was to buy 50 cases with your specific design on them. Most of these guys would only use maybe 10 cases a season. They couldn't afford to buy 50 cases with "Johnny's lemonade" on it."

Rob goes on, "I thought wouldn't it be cool if I could come up with a universal design of a paper cup specifically for all these lemonade guys. So, I came up with a simple design with just the word lemonade repeated around the cup, but there's something cute about it. It's distinctive. Slow but sure I started picking up business in our local market because it was out of the ordinary."

Coming up with the extraordinary was where Rob excelled as he

discovered a means to take the still somewhat ordinary paper lemonade cup to the next level. Rob explains, "Bob Baker, one of my customers in Ohio, said he would like to print his lemonade design on a plastic cup. At the time, it seemed a little bit out of the ordinary because no one in the industry was using a plastic cup. It was just paper, paper, everywhere."

The Evolution of Our Lemonade Cup...



Circa 1980's Circa 1990's Circa 2000's

"When we came out with this cup with his name on it, I was surprised at how well it was received, especially by him. His sales were doing very well, and customers really seemed to like the look and feel of a plastic cup over paper. So, we took our design on that plastic cup, and we pushed the concept as an upsell. At the time, people were used to paying a certain price for a 32-ounce paper cup. While the plastic cup was probably double or triple that cost, my thinking on it was now instead of charging two dollars for a 32-ounce drink, you can get three or four dollars, only because of the perception of value to the customer. Now they had a plastic cup which could act as a souvenir cup as well as be used as a refill program. All these were new ideas at the time."

By the early 80's, Rob's ideas were doing so well in his local market that he realized it was time to expand. "I

"When I was growing up, I was always a real avid fan of going to fairs and playing arcade machines, especially pinball machines."





"We listen to our customer base, and sometimes they have some very unique ideas."



started hitting state fairs all over the place," he recalls. "I remember one particular year when I think I hit five state fairs on a two-week trip. I drove from Ohio as far as Iowa and every state fair in between passing out samples of these plastic cups. 'This is the new thing. It's the cool thing. It's an upsell. It's a win-win for you!' For the most part people had to agree that it was pretty cool. Those who didn't I said, 'Here, here's a sleeve. Try it!' Then they said, 'Man, you're right. These things sell like crazy!'"

By the time, Rob introduced his second design of lemonade cups, concessionaires had begun to recognize that the flashier packaging not only allowed them to upsell their product, it potentially brought new customers to their windows. "I use the terminology of a walking billboard," Rob laughs. "I used to go to these concessionaires, and I would walk 30 to 40 feet from their trailer. I would lift up their cup, and I would lift up my cup. I would ask, 'Which cup can you see this far away?' Mine, of course, hands down. So, when a customer is walking away from the stand, other people are going to see

it. Because there were lemons all over the cup, when people see it, by nature, they will say, 'Hey buddy, where did you get your lemonade cup?' Then they are directed to the lemon stand, four trailers down."

As more and more concessionaires became excited about the brand over the very generic offerings of their local distributors or Sam's Club, Rob continued to introduce the industry to even more innovative products created from the mindset that flash is cash. Rob shares, "We introduced the Next Generation bottle which was a clear bottle with a screw on lid that had a loop straw on it. It impacted the industry like I have never seen any product we have come out with in the past or even currently. No one had ever thought of serving a Pepsi or any kind of cold drink out of a souvenir bottle like that."

Rob continues, "Unfortunately, there was one manufacturer that could make the product, and they had limited capacity. Basically, I bought all he could produce. There was a time when I had a lot of people angry with me because they

might order 5,000 bottles which would be 50 cases, but the manufacturer only shipped me 200 cases. This left me in the predicament of how to divide 200 cases between all the concessionaires who ordered. It was crazy! Our company started getting phone calls from all over the place. I remember I got a call from Dave Campbell with Deggeller Attractions. I had never heard of this guy. He said, 'Hey, I want to get some of those Next Generation bottles from you.' I said, 'I'm in Ohio. How did you even hear about me?'"

Slowly but surely, Berk Concession Supply was established as a qualified supplier to the industry, and Rob made an important realization. "The more I started selling these cups, whether it was the custom printed lemonade cup or the Next Generation bottle, the more I realized that packaging is ultimately what sells the product."

As Rob continued to guide his company from being simply a qualified supplier to the industry to being the

trendsetter, he took his cues from other leaders in the industry. "Early on I often talked to Butch Netterfield or Dominic Palmieri from Ray Cammack Shows," Rob shares. "I have always looked up to those guys as being leaders and innovators. They always tried to do something unique and different from all of the competition."

Rob freely admits not all his bestselling products were his idea. "We listen to our customer base, and sometimes they have some very unique ideas. For example, one fellow asked if we could do a bottle with a handle on one side of it, but he asked if we could put a light at the bottom of the cup. The flash of the light products at night are just like a lightning bug. It just attracts people, and ultimately, that's what people want. They think, 'I'm going to bring in some of these lighted bottles and be one up on that guy three rows down from me who always steals my customers.' Not everyone buys into this concept because it costs a little bit extra to buy

some of this packaging, but ultimately, they see the return. It's typically quite overwhelming in their favor. They can make substantially more profit by using this unique packaging."

Beverage cups are not the only distinctive items Berk Concession Supply provides. Rob explains, "Another one of our claims to fame is the Bucket of Fries. At one time, French fries were only served out of small 12 or 16-ounce paper cups. Then I met Rick Snyder, a concessionaire from Pennsylvania, who had this great idea to serve fries in paper ice cream buckets that he bought from a local ice cream manufacturer. These buckets were double or triple the size of the paper cups, but he was able to charge five or seven dollars at a time when the market was at three or four dollars. So, then I came up with the idea of making it more convenient for a big family to order fries by offering a plastic bucket with a handle so it would be even easier to hold. In the beginning, it started, and

BERK
Concession Supply
800-323-3547
BerkBrands.com

THEMED DRINKWARE
Line of Products!

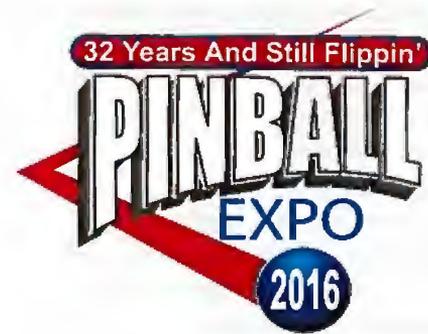
Call or Email Us for your FREE Catalog Today!



then it doubled and tripled in sales. It's crazy, but it's perceived value. Sometimes people don't even want the fries, but they want that crazy designed bucket."

Today Berk Concession Supply offers a complete line of packaging products for the amusement industry, and they can be purchased through popular distributors such as Fare Foods and Somerset Syrup, companies that recognized early on the tremendous potential of utilizing the Berk line to enhance the sales of their other products. According to Rob, however, for a complete line, his catalog tells all. "We keep adding to it," he laughs. "One time there was a high interest in décor for the trailers. One year in Gibtown, we were selling fake lemons on a rope or fake peppers or onions, something you could buy to doctor up your trailer. We had trusses set up with all these lemon ropes draped over them to the point it was like a jungle."

He continues, "I remember Bobby Pugh came down from Reithoffer Shows. He bought so much stuff, it was crazy. He bought strings of the onions, strings of the peppers, and strings of lemons for



his lemonade trailer. When you start visiting the fair circuit, and you see concessionaires like Bobby and others use this stuff, you see that it adds a nice little pizzazz to the look of their trailers."

As passionate as Rob is about his business and the amusement industry, he is equally passionate about the game that first drew him to the midway, pinball. He shares, "People who know me, know that I collect pinball machines. Back in 1985, I took that passion to a new level when I started a show called Pinball Expo. It was an opportunity or forum for people to meet fellow collectors and players. More than that, it gave people a chance to learn more about the

GO BALLISTIC! ORDER TODAY!

industry, including getting a tour of an actual operating pinball factory. Today, it's known by the world. We have attendees from Japan, Germany, Italy, Spain, all over the world."

Whether it's Pinball Expo or Berk Concession Supply, Rob Berk tends to do everything full blast including caring for his customers. "Berk Concession Supply is a family-owned business," he reminds. "Family-owned businesses tend to really care about their customers more than large corporations. The one thing I try to instill in our employees is the customer is always right. Our word is our bond, and our name is important. We carry it so that our customers will respect it and respect what we do. Most importantly, they feel confident in dealing with us."

With great passion and commitment and perhaps a good deal of intuition and a supple wrist, Rob Berk has certainly established himself as being a wizard at creating profits on the midway, not to mention, he sure plays a mean pinball. 🎮

