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Playing their cards right...



Not so long ago, Adam Martin and Dave Silver were stashing \$20 bills in a box so they could pay their \$600 rent and expenses. They were just a couple of kids selling sports cards to help pay their way through college -- the University at Buffalo for Martin, Rochester Institute of Technology for Silver. In the 16 years since Dave & Adam's Card World opened at the corner of Elmwood and Bird Avenues in Buffalo, things have changed dramatically.

In addition to their store at 2790 Sheridan Drive in the Town of Tonawanda, where they moved in November 1994, they now operate from a 26,000-square foot, four warehouse complex in Amherst. They are about to open a second store at Transit and Klein with plans in the works for additional stores in Orchard Park and/or Lancaster.

This May alone, the company sold about three million single cards—60 percent of them sports cards. Last year, they wrote New Orleans Saints running back Reggie Bush a check for a quarter-million dollars to represent him as his exclusive autograph distributor for one year.

This spring, they landed Minnesota Vikings rookie Adrian Peterson from Oklahoma, the first running back taken in April's draft.

"Even today, we still look at each other as little kids at heart," said Silver, a 37-year old from Lewiston who is two years younger than Martin. "We were both collector's as kids and you won't find bigger sports junkies than us" said Martin, who is from Buffalo: "We started going to card shows and asked each other, 'Why can't we do this?' without really knowing much about it. So we got resale certificates from New York [state] and started setting up at shows and selling our extra cards. It just went from there."

Humble Beginnings

Before they opened their first 500-square foot store in Buffalo, Martin and Silver began running ads in Sports Collector's Digest in 1988. "I decided to forego law school and open up a store to try to save some money," said Martin. "My parents thought I was nuts for a little while. I asked all of my best friends [to be partners], none of whom were interested. Then I asked Dave about it, but he had another semester of school to go. So I ran the store by myself for the first two months, then Dave came along and we opened our store on Sheridan in 1994. That [moving] made the store three times bigger."

They started growing their reputation about 1995. The next year, companies began inserting autographed cards into packages. "We started going to shows to buy those," said Silver. "When you got one autographed by Barry Sanders it was [worth] \$350. There were about 50 people wanting to buy them around the country. So we'd buy them for \$250 and sell them for \$350. We were out there very aggressively. That really got us moving. "We began to be known as one of the biggest dealers of those cards in the country. We had some big collectors around the world who wanted these incredible cards, so we came up with this great mailing list. Everyone we bought we had sold."

"Through that, we developed a good relationship with the manufacturers. They trusted us and liked us. It was only a matter of time until we started buying unopened boxes of cards by the pallets. Soon we were buying truckloads of merchandise from Topps and Upper Deck and Fleer."

Changing Times

Martin and Silver both agree that being quick to change with the times has been key to their growth. Much of their business was composed of mail orders before Ebay came along. In 1998, Dave & Adam's was the No. 1 seller in volume of online auctions on that site. "Then we said, 'Why continue putting everything on Ebay when we can just have a web site and do it ourselves,'" said Martin. "I hired my brother away from his computer job and told him to come over and build our web site (www.DaveAndAdamsStore.com). By 2000, we definitely dominated the Internet landscape for unopened boxes and cases."

It wasn't long before the pair realized they had to broaden their horizons when it came to inventory. Boxes of baseball and football cards now share warehouse space with Yu-Gi-Oh, X-files and Sopranos cards.

They began capitalizing on the frenzy for non-sport items like Pokemon cards in 1995 and '96 then Beanie Babies and now Webkinz—stuffed animals that come alive online and can sell for as much as \$1,200. Checky dog now gets the prime display in their store that used to be reserved for local heroes like Jim Kelly or Dominik Hasek. "If we can buy it at one price and sell it for more, that was fine with me," said Silver. "Overall, when you look at the big picture it's a collectible. You have to be willing to try new things."

"When we were selling Beanie Babies on a Saturday, we'd open at 10 and there would be people lined up outside the store at 8:30. Pokemon was worse. We were averaging three sales per minute during the holidays. We had lines 15 deep." Said store manager Chris Volpe: "I would have never have thought I'd be in the business of selling stuffed animals, but, now I've taken it on as my baby. You have to adapt to the times."

Growth Spurt

In 1998, the company employed seven or eight people. That grew to about 20 in 2001 and has tripled to 60 since then. When the new stores open, that total may hit triple digits.

Athletes, paid to autograph collectibles, make frequent appearances. Matthew Barnaby and Rob Johnson were two of the first; current Sabres like Brian Campbell continue the tradition today.

The Ridge Lea Road corporate office facility now includes separate departments for single card sales, shipping, product management, accounting, sales, customer service and management. Less than a decade ago, the company was run from a back room at the Sheridan store. Unopened boxes of cards now make up about 80 percent of their business, 60 percent of their warehouse there are 20 million or more single cards at any given time.

The pair has come a long way from hitting happy hours - mostly for the free food on trips to card shows they couldn't afford - to donating to causes such as Carly's Club, Kelly for Kids and Roswell Park.

"You almost have to be able to look into the future to be successful," said Martin. "You have to be lucky, but I'd honestly say it's about 80/20 hard work to luck for us. I still look forward to going into work every single day. Is it fun everyday? No. Just like any other company there is some stress and things you have to deal with. There's stress because maybe we're growing too quickly, faster than our building and current staff will allow. It's a terrific problem to have. "But as good as it gets, you always want to make it better. You always strive for greater customer satisfaction. We'd like to increase our international business. There are definitely things we still want to do."