

NOW & THEN

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GLOBAL

BUSINESSES IN OHIO'S AMISH COUNTRY CONNECT GLOBALLY

BRUCE STAMBAUGH



Jay Lehman, founder of Lehman's in Kidron, Ohio, still regularly interacts with customers. Photo courtesy Lehman's.

Global entrepreneurship is alive and well in Ohio's Amish country. As many as four million visitors tour the world's largest Amish population annually, and many come from other countries.

Located at the northernmost reaches of Ohio's official Appalachian region, seven businesses in the greater Holmes County area have joined forces to market their goods and services. Their individual and collective efforts are paying off.

Called The Best of Ohio's Amish Country, the businesses are all family-owned and operated. Most maintain a single retail store yet still attract business from around the world.

Lehman's in Kidron, Ohio, has an especially compelling story. In 1955, Jay Lehman started a hardware business for the local Amish residents who are the majority of the population around the small Swiss-heritage village. Today, Lehman's has thousands of customers around the world, and the Amish continue to be the beneficiaries.

"Now we are an international business still with just one retail store," said Glenda Lehman Ervin, vice president of marketing for Lehman's. She is Jay's daughter.

Jay, age eighty-three, still makes regular appearances

at the store. Although it hardly resembles the business he founded, its purpose remains the same.

The store originally began by selling non-electric items the Amish needed. An Amish precept is to remain off the electrical grid and to live as self-sufficiently within their community as possible. With that in mind, Jay created a store where they could shop locally for apple peelers, butter churns, oil lamps, and other non-electric items.

"Dad had the foresight to invest in the past," Glenda said.

Lehman's customer base has reached far beyond the local Amish community, with customers in all fifty states and over 100 countries.

How do they do that with one retail store located in a rural area? Most of their sales are generated via their webpage and their seasonal mail-order catalog.

"Much of the world's population lives a lot like the Amish," Glenda explained. "They don't have access to reliable or perhaps any electricity, so they need non-electric gadgets for everyday living. Most of our customers are 'preppers.'"

She defines that term as persons preparing for a day or year without traditional forms of power, such

as electricity. Other customer types include those interested in frugal living, people who want to live off the grid, gardeners, eco-friendly people, and those who have a penchant for the nostalgic. All of this expansion in Lehman's customer base has greatly helped the Amish.

"We have 300 vendors within a 20-mile radius," Glenda said, "and most of them are Amish."

With the products it offers, Lehman's is also able to help supply several charity organizations. Doctors Without Borders, the Peace Corps, and many missionary services all need non-electric materials to do their jobs in countries that continue to be underdeveloped by North American standards.

Lehman's isn't the only successful business in Ohio's Amish Appalachian region to have a humble beginning and a global audience. Homestead Furniture, an Amish-owned store in Mt. Hope, designs, manufactures, and sells handcrafted hardwood furniture.

Homestead began business in a 6,000-square-foot converted chicken coop in 1990. The business grew so rapidly that owner Ernest Hershberger built a new 27,000-square-foot retail store eleven years later.

Hershberger is Amish, so his business is off the grid. But that fact doesn't keep him out of touch with what customers want. He has a simple solution for pleasing them.

"We know what customers want because we ask them," Hershberger says. "We build exactly what they want using any wood, any style, and any color, to their exact specifications."

His store has furnished an entire house in Melbourne, Australia. How did a customer halfway around

the world discover a family-owned and operated furniture store in the middle of Amish country?

"He walked through the front doors," says Hershberger. Knowing the reputation of the Amish to be hard workers who make quality products at fair prices, the customer was in search of craftsmen who could build what he wanted.

Hershberger has shipped furniture to Canada, England, and China. Customers view examples of furniture collections online. A third party operates the website.

For Keim Lumber in Charm, Ohio, international business occurs in both purchasing and sales. Keim buys exotic woods from several continents. The wood is sold for specialty uses in furniture, customers' homes, and artistically, for applications such as crafting guitars, according to third-generation owner Bill Keim.

Keim's exports products, too. The company has sold a complete home package, including all the materials to build an entire home top to bottom, for a family in the Caribbean Islands.

Keim's facilities cover nearly 40 acres and total 635,000 square feet. A visitor from Perth, Australia, was so impressed with what he saw he called Keim's "the St. Peter's Basilica of woodworking."

P. Graham Dunn, manufacturer of inspirational plaques and gifts in Dalton, Ohio, also has its share of international visitors. Most of its global trade comes from distributors in Singapore, China, Australia, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom, according to sales manager Andy Yost.

"We make most of our global contacts at the International Christian Retail Show," Yost said. "Those

sales account for eight to ten percent of our annual sales."

Of course, tourists visiting Amish country need a place to stay and eat. Amish Door Village in Wilmot, Ohio, sufficiently provides the necessary hospitality. Amish Door Village has a restaurant, hotel, bakery, and gift shop all on its campus. Denise Garver, marketing manager for the business, said Amish Door hosts a good number of international guests every year.

In reviewing the guest book, Garver said she found visitors from several provinces in Canada and from overseas countries such as Norway, Iran, Jordan, New Zealand, England, and Australia.

Berlin, Ohio, where Nature's Food Market is located, is considered the center of Ohio's Amish country. Zedrick Clark, the store's owner, said he is amazed at how many international visitors the market attracts every year.

Clark said people from other nations are drawn to Amish country by the area's rolling fields and pastures, plentiful woodlots, horse-drawn buggies and implements, and friendliness.

Much like Nature's Food Market, Coblenz Chocolates in Walnut Creek, Ohio, brings in visitors from around the world who take a delicious piece of Holmes County along with them. Owner Jason Coblenz said citizens of Japan, China, and several European countries have been customers.

These seven family-operated businesses in Ohio's Amish country understand the importance of global entrepreneurship. As the response of international customers shows, the owners' efforts and products are greatly appreciated. ❖

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Bruce Stambaugh is a retired educator and free-lance writer. He lives with his wife, Neva, near Millersburg, Ohio.