

Michael Braxmeyer – Williams Brothers Supermarket

This is Kansas Profile. I'm Ron Wilson, director of the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development at Kansas State University.

How does a locally owned, small town grocery store compete in today's economy? Here's a formula: "I want to have the cleanest, friendliest store with good value and the best possible service," said Michael Braxmeyer, owner of Williams Brothers Supermarket in Atwood, Kansas. Along with a lot of hard work, that formula has enabled this store to compete. It's today's Kansas Profile.

Michael Braxmeyer's family has been involved in Williams Brothers Supermarket from its founding. His mother was a Williams – a first cousin to the two brothers who co-founded the store in Atwood in 1937.

In 1962, the last of the two co-founders passed away. Michael's parents then moved from Nebraska to Atwood to manage the store. Michael attended K-State, met his wife, and served in the military before commencing a career with K-Mart which took him to Des Moines, Chicago, and Milwaukee. By 1974, he and his wife had a daughter.

“We didn't want to raise our kids in a large city,” Michael said. They moved back to Atwood and joined the family business, Williams Brothers Supermarket. A son and another daughter were born in Atwood as well.

Michael found that his father enjoyed the people and the grocery business, but did not enjoy the increasing paperwork, regulations, and computers.

“My dad walked me back to the office, pointed at the office door and said, ‘I don't ever want to go in there,’” Michael said. So Michael picked up the back-office operations, learned from the department heads, and worked his way into store management.

“I swept the floor and stocked the shelves and learned from the people who were doing it,” Michael said. Today, Williams Brothers Supermarket has expanded to an 11,000 square foot store with 28 employees.

Michael recently participated in a food distribution dialogue hosted by K-State’s Center for Engagement and Community Development. Dr. David Procter, the director of the center, led the dialogue. One key issue is how locally owned rural grocery stores can compete in today’s economy.

No easy answers were found, but Michael Braxmeyer believes the key is found in value and service from local stores.

“You’re never going to be as big or have as many frills as the big box stores,” Michael said. “We want to be as clean and friendly as we can be and provide a good value for your dollar.”

“I heard a guy say one time, ‘I’ve invested in this business, I pay taxes, and you owe me your business because I’m local,’” Michael said. “But I don’t agree with that,” he added. “I believe you owe me your business because I earned it,” he said.

Michael goes the extra mile for his customers – and I mean that literally. His store provides home delivery of groceries, as well as a remarkable diversity of services within his store.

There's more than milk and eggs. Inside Williams Brothers Supermarket, one can find a sit-down deli, atm, stamps, money orders, notary public, UPS service, photocopier, dry cleaning, fax machine, Western Union, and even a laminating service. Wow. Such services are remarkable to find in a rural community like Atwood, population 1,258 people. Now, that's rural.

The store is even on the world wide web, with recipes, advertising specials, and online coupons at www.williamsbrosssupermarket.com. Michael also believes in giving back to his community, whether it is advertising for the football team or donating to local church benefits.

That's part of the reason that K-State's Center for Engagement and Community Development launched its rural grocery initiative.

“Local grocery stores represent a critical piece of the infrastructure sustaining America’s rural communities,” said Dr. Procter. “These stores are often the main provider of healthful food in town. They offer local jobs and provide significant tax revenue to the community. And stores like Atwood’s Williams Brothers Supermarket provide a wonderful place to see neighbors, meet friends, and catch up on local happenings.”

So how does a locally-owned, small-town grocery remain competitive? Good environment, good value, and great service. We salute Michael Braxmeyer of Williams Brothers Supermarket for developing this formula. For businesses which commit to that formula, I think good things are in store.

For the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development, this is Ron Wilson with Kansas Profile.