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Alone We Fade, Together We Burn

By Tim Reed

Pirate Ships and Independent Sales Reps

"The hearth industry is the last frontier of the sole proprietor."

—Andy Todd (former fireplace retailer and independent sales rep)

When I first heard these words, I was a 22-year-old scallywag drifting through early adulthood and trying to find something to hold onto.

I'd just moved to a new city and landed my first sales job after working as an installer for my girlfriend's dad in the small town where I grew up. Now, calling myself an installer is probably a bit too generous based on my track record of mediocre work and lack of professionalism, but I was desperate, broke, and really needed this job to work out.

And even though I didn't appreciate the wisdom of those words at the time, I've thought about them often in the years since and believe they're absolutely true.

Gone are the days of the local bookstore, the corner grocery store, and the neighborhood hardware store—they've all been (or are being) replaced by the cookie-cutter corporate copy whose only strategy is a race to the bottom.

Enter our industry.

The fireplace industry is like a bunch of pirate ships—scrappy, resourceful, and fiercely independent—who have found a blue ocean of opportunity and are making the most of it. Made up of misfits, dropouts, and nonconformists, this industry has given us a way of life that's truly unique to our world today.

Think about what most of your friends and neighbors do for work: They punch the clock for a corporation that wants them to do more work for less pay and is actively trying to automate their jobs away.

Now, I'm not saying things are perfect on our end—the seas are always choppy, and pirates are an unruly bunch—but we exist for something fundamentally different from providing shareholder value.

Our industry affords an independence and a way of life that few other industries do. We don't punch the clock for the "suits" upstairs. We're able to make a real impact with the work that we do. And, as much as is possible for anyone, we can create our own destiny if we're willing to show up every day and work hard.

This simply isn't true elsewhere.

We're the pirates—not the navy.

And it's critically important that we realize what we have, as well as the threat that we're under.

Threat 1: Ships Being Picked Off Left and Right

How many fireplace stores are in your town? And is that more or less than 15 years ago?

In my market, I can think of four independent retailers who have closed in that time span.

Next question: How many fireplaces (units, not dollars) did our industry sell last year? And is that more or less than 15 years ago?

All indications I've seen are that it's fewer—and significantly so.

Now, it's easy for this to get lost because our dollars continue to rise, but this isn't based on the market growing. Instead, it's based on our products getting more expensive.

And you may be in a market that's still full of retailers competing against each other, but I'd say that, generally speaking, independent retailers are closing their doors and aren't being replaced with independent retailers. Sure, it may be that an existing company opens a new location or a big-box store adds fireplaces to its repertoire, but that's consolidation—not growth.

Simply put, there are fewer pirate ships on the water than there were 15 years ago, and that's a problem.

Historically, retailers in our industry have made the mistake of believing that any rival company in their market is a threat, but this couldn't be further from the truth. When we consider the fact that most major markets in the United States have multibillion-dollar revenue potential for fireplaces, the retailer down the street isn't the problem. The lack of consumer awareness is.

I would venture to say that most people in North America living in a single-family home don't know what the term "gas insert" means, and that simple truth tells us all we need to know. How many more people would buy our products if they only knew that they existed? I'm guessing it's a lot. How do they hear about our products? From fireplace companies talking about them and installing them.

What we need are more retailers, not fewer.

More retailers will make more people aware of our products, which results in more people having our products installed in their homes, which results in them telling their friends and family about our products, which results in more people buying our products—and this is how the industry grows.

Yes, there's competition. But the ratio of sales that you lose to another local retailer versus total opportunities available is vastly in your favor.

This is a threat that we all need to be paying attention to. Because as our ships continue to get picked

off, our cost of goods will continue to rise—along with the cost of our marketing. And, if nothing is done, there will be a point where the entire model of business becomes unsustainable.

Threat 2: Fierce Independence Becoming Selfish Autonomy

The independence of our industry is a blessing and curse.

I'm incredibly thankful that, generally speaking, I get to do things the way that I want in my business. And I'd take all kinds of offense if someone tried to force me into a cookie-cutter box to make me just like the other companies around me.

In many ways, our independence is what's allowed our industry to be so scrappy and resourceful. It's also what's attracted so many of the great people to work in it who didn't fit into a standard corporate job.

And while I believe our fierce independence is a blessing that should be protected, it's easy for it to turn into selfish autonomy if we forget that we exist in an ecosystem that's bigger than ourselves.

Selfish autonomy takes a few different forms, but it often looks like spending inordinate amounts of time reinventing the wheel for every part of your business because you don't trust anyone else enough to help you. It can also look like exceptionalism—believing that your company is utterly unique and what works for other businesses won't work for you because your company is just too different. Finally, it can look like ignoring participation with the industry at large because, as one retailer recently told me, you're extremely happy with the results you've been getting on your own.

The problem is that selfish autonomy only works until it doesn't. At some point in time, if enough pirate ships get picked off, it's easy to go after the few that remain. The only way that we win is to stay united around a common cause, namely, the belief that our industry is more than any one business—it's a way of life that we must protect together.

And I see this more and more as time goes by: companies that have gotten fat and happy because their revenue continues to rise, paying no attention to their unit sales and sustainability shrinking away in equal measure.

It's up to us to come together and serve the greater good by participating in our local industry associations, advocating for our industry to legislators and regulators, and teaching our craft to the next generation that's coming up through the ranks.

Our fierce independence should be understood for the gift that it is—and leveraged to its full extent—but we must guard against it ever turning into selfish autonomy.

Because as we forsake the problems of our industry in favor of securing gain for ourselves, we cut off the very thing that makes that gain possible in the first place.

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Threat 3: The Navy Is Coming

More than anything else, this threat looms large over the horizon for every independent retailer in our industry.

For years, we've largely operated without the risk of outside disruption. Our products are just complicated enough, just obscure enough, just dangerous enough—and our industry just small enough—that

we haven't seen many outside players try to get involved.

But this is changing, and we run the risk of dying the death of a thousand cuts.

Because the navy's coming.

Now, the navy takes many forms—consolidation, corporate stores, private equity, e-commerce, big box, regulations—and none of them is evil in and of itself, but each one threatens the way of life of the independent retailer.

Again, it's not that their existence is wrong. (After all, strong competition is what makes every company better.) Instead, it's that our pirate ships aren't equipped to compete in this world if we think we'll be able to produce the resources to do it all by ourselves.

Here's what I mean.

You think that it's hard to compete against the independent retailer down the street? What happens when you have to go against a company owned by private equity that's chosen to lower margins and operate with negative cash flow for two years in order to choke out all local competition?

Or when a local initiative comes up to ban natural gas in your market, but you can't rally the troops to testify because there aren't any troops to rally?

My point is that most retailers aren't paying attention to the naval armadas that have been dispatched and are barreling toward them.

It's not that we can't survive it—far from it. The pirates will always be able to survive the navy as long as they stick together. Because the navy is big, and the navy is slow. Pirates, in contrast, are resourceful, scrappy, and fast. But we'll run out of resources if we don't combine forces.

I don't think most retailers see the threat that's upon them. Many retail owners in our industry are in their 60s and have no succession plan whatsoever. Many of them don't participate in local industry initiatives and events and aren't part of a network to find or grow someone to sell their business to. Many of them aren't paying attention to the changes in consumer behavior that have transpired over the last 10 years.

This simply isn't a recipe for success when you're approaching a naval blockade.

The way that independent retailers are going to win is to stay together and leverage the strengths they have that the navy doesn't.

And as much as it may seem like I'm against the navy, I'm not. In fact, I think that the navy in its own ways can create more opportunities for pirates like us to leverage—but only if we can stay one step ahead. And that can't happen when we aren't united.

Assemble the Pirate Council

At the end of the day, independent retailers in our industry are built around a common belief—an unspoken code—that goes something like this:

1. We are free to run our business in the way we see fit.
2. We treat our team members and customers in the way that we ourselves want to be treated, and we expect the same from them.

That's about it. Call it the Code of the Independent Retailer.

But this is profound in that it's a way of life that's much different from the rest of corporate America.

We don't exist to promote shareholder value. We don't exist to make a private group of investors money just for them to flip us in five years. We don't exist to pass market analytics on through our vertical integration.

We exist to serve our customers and live to fight another day.

Now, I'm not against scale, and I'm not against growth. I'm against growing old and fat in an ivory tower because we forgot what it was that drew us to

the sea in the first place. And I'm also against getting picked off one by one because we were too pig-headed to join forces to allow iron to sharpen iron.

As I see these threats bearing down on the independent retailers of our industry, it's more important than ever that we come together. Events like HPBExpo and the NCSG National Convention are ground zero for coming together around our common good. Just as important are serving in our local chapters and investing in relationships with other retailers in our industry.

If we look around, our ships are getting picked off left and right, our fierce independence is at risk of turning into selfish autonomy, and the navy is bearing down on us.

Yet, we can prevail if we stand together.

Yes, this takes effort—extreme effort. Yes, there's no immediate payoff—as is true with most good things. Yes, there's a cost—but the cost of complacency is far greater.

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And if we want this frontier to continue, it's up to us to preserve it.

It's time to lay aside our stubbornness, our selfishness, and our foolish pride.

It's time for us all to take a stand on something larger than ourselves. It's time we raise the banner.

It's time to gather everyone in our industry who follows the code—near and far—around the creed of our industry: Alone we fade, together we burn.

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