

BRICK

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By James Collins

If you were to take a helicopter ride over Manhattan, you would view thousands of roofs stretching from end to end and side to side of the island. They would present a thousand shades of gray or black separated by the avenues crisscrossing the island. They would look like dead, black, victory Gardens. Each house would require several ventilators and in a square block, there will be literally hundreds.

The ventilators were old steel boxes containing steel gears, which drove the ventilators in response to the temperature. Because of the saltwater environment surrounding Manhattan Island, these boxes were subject to rapid rusting and deterioration. Roofers had to change them on a regular basis and it was an ongoing activity. Irving Feldman was an engineer and owned a successful plastic manufacturing business. He had friends in the roofing business who advised him of this problem and he went out of his way to generate an improved ventilator box. He made the box out of aluminum which got rid of the rusting and deterioration external problem and he changed all the mechanical steel gears to an innovative plastic design which did not deteriorate and yet was very light and effective. Irv, as his friends called him, built a half dozen prototypes of his design, which he installed in his own building in lower Manhattan. After a full year of testing, he inspected the results of the aging process on the design and found no deleterious effects. Irv collected money from his friends and family and invested in the new business. He intended to replace the aging ventilator controls in all of Manhattan.

To be able to handle the expected demand Irv manufactured about a hundred of the units so that he could respond to short-term immediate needs. All the new boxes were assembled, inspected and laid out in rows on shelves in his new factory. Irv had priced his new item at a very competitive cost based on the fact that he would sell at least two hundred fifty units.

He now transitioned from manufacturing to marketing and contacted three roofing firms that he had dealt with. With his newest design box under his arm, Irv went to the office of each of the roofing firms to demonstrate his product, explain its advantages and demonstrate its very competitive cost. The first two firms told him they were not interested and turned him down without any explanation. Now Irv was getting nervous. The third firm was his most promising customer and he had saved him for last figuring he would work the bugs out of his presentation on the first two firms. Irv decided to take this vendor out to lunch and bring the demonstration unit with him to lunch. There would be no distractions and Irv could focus on the presentation and get answers to any problems that the customer might have.

After a very pleasant lunch with a couple of hefty drinks, Irv reached under the table pulled out his demonstration box put it on the table and started into his presentation. At the end of the discussion, Mickey, his customer, picked up the box turned it around, lifted it up and down and shook his head.

“Mickey you look distressed. What’s the problem? The box is great it has no deterioration because it’s made of aluminum. It does the job and you will never have to replace it.”

“Irv, I know this is your baby. I know you’ve been working on this for a year as you indicated in your discussion. But I can’t present this to my customers as a replacement for the unit on the existing roofs.”

“Why not? It does the job better than the one that’s up there now.”

“Irv I’m a roofer we work with tarpaper, hammers, crowbars and big pounding mallets. Everything we work with is substantial. This box is just too fragile. My roofers won’t be happy handling it and my customers will not be comfortable replacing the substantial box with this. I know it is better and I would love to handle it but I have to think of my customers and this will cause me to lose business. Sorry Irv but if you come back with a better design we will talk again.”

The engineer in Irv began to work overtime. He looked at the design from every aspect. He had made the box the same size as a replacement box so that the mounting brackets and screws would not have to be replaced and machined. As a result, the inside of the box, because of the new compressed design, has lots of excess room. Irv figured this was a positive. He thought and thought and modified the design. The solution Irv came up with was ingenious. He took a common red brick which weighed about 2 pounds, built a two aluminum straps to fit around the brick and attach it to the inside of the box in the area with the excess room. Then he went back to see Mike again.

As he walked into the office he took the now weighted box, placed a piece of cardboard on Mike’s desk, and put the box down with a ‘thump’.

“Mike I took your advice and redesigned the box. It functions identically to the previous design, has all the attributes I discussed but it has been ruggedized.”

Mike picked up the box, hefted it, placed it down firmly on the cardboard and smiled when he heard the ‘thump’.

“Irv, you hit the jackpot. This is a design I can sell to my customers because it feels like solid roofing material.”

Irv's business prospered and he branched out into many other designs. However, if you ever have reason to go up onto a roof of the Midtown Manhattan building and examine the ventilator box do not be surprised when you open it up to see it contains a red brick.

THE END