

Ways & Means

A gadgeteer's heaven for a less-than-perfect world

By Jeanne Whittaker
staff writer

THE SALES staff at Birmingham's new Ways & Means store is so used to hearing customers ask "Where were you when I really needed you?" that it's become a habit for them to strike up a chorus of the question posed by their astonished customers.

The genial pleasanties passing between the customers and sales people draws a chuckle from store co-founder Martin Citrin, who laughs in anticipation of the surprised and pleased reactions that occur when a customer comes face to face with the unusual array of merchandise in the four-week-old store.

"We are not saying that these products are unique, that they aren't found anywhere else in the world," says Citrin. "We said we are the world's first store of this type, and as far as we know we are."

Citrin's mini-department store, however, is a unique experience that can best be described as a gadgeteer's dream of heaven come true. Once a woman's apparel store located in the heart of downtown Birmingham, the store now merchandises "capability extenders," items that Citrin, his brother Toby, and a hand-picked group of medical, sports and health experts have hand-picked to enhance the lives of all less-than-perfect persons. Everyone, says Citrin, falls into that category.

"In reality," says Citrin, "few of us fall into the category of either absolute perfection or extreme disability. Up until now, most products were designed or marketed to a consumer perceived as either young, active and in perfect health, or disabled."

"While Ways & Means has products for people at either end of the spectrum, it's unique in that it is the first collection that recognizes a majority of us fall a bit short of perfection, and that all of us can use products to help with life's imperfect situations."

WHEN THE brothers decided four years ago that they wanted to get into the field of health care they brought with them a variety of experiences, including management and investment experience, plus first-hand knowledge of the field of health care. Citrin, a victim of polio in the late '40s, knows what it is like to have physical disabilities. Toby Citrin has served on a number of boards and commissions devoted to health care and maintenance. He also serves as an adjunct professor in the School of Public Health at the University of Michigan and has testified before the U.S. House of Representatives Select Committee on Aging.

The result of their research and plan-

ning, says Citrin, is that they have created for the first time a store that replaces the emphasis on disability with an emphasis on capability.

"This is not a specific store for the handicapped, although many of the products have specific applications for the handicapped person," he said. "Ways & Means is also fun; an experience that lends itself to comments such as, 'Well, for goodness sake, isn't that a clever idea?' It is an idea that has found its place in a nation addicted to the concept of 'better mousetraps.'"

The store specializes in products that can help people perform everyday tasks more quickly, efficiently or with greater ease," said Citrin, adding, "People come in to buy things for all sorts of reasons that we never thought about."

An example, he says, is a one-handed tray coated with a non-slip product. As easy to carry as a shopping bag, the English import item was included on the 1,000 item inventory because its usefulness to one-handed persons was recognized by a Ways & Means panel made up of experts, including an orthopedist who specializes in sports medicine, a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist with rheumatoid arthritis, and sports figures such as Charlie Gehringer, who, says Citrin, "helps give us some focus."

The tray, however, has proved to be particularly popular with pregnant women, says Citrin. "They tell us they know they will have to hold the baby in one arm." Also successful, but not necessarily with the people it was designed for, says Citrin, is a pillow designed to ease the discomfort of wheelchair-bound persons. The pillow, fitted with an internal layer of gel that distributes weight across the entire surface of the seat, is being snapped up by customers bound for the football stadium.

Another useful item, says Citrin, is a mirror designed by a Michigan inventor for his severely physically handicapped wife. Mounted on a flexible, chrome-plated freestanding pedestal the mirror looks like a Paul Bunyan-sized dentist's hand tool.

"WE DIDN'T get into this as a philanthropic service," said Citrin. "We want to extend everyone's capabilities. But, there are times that we are providing a real service."

Service, he says, comes in a variety of disguises. In his case it is a bent-handled Swedish bath brush and an adult-size tricycle with hand pedals instead of a handbar.

For others it might be stylish table cutlery fashioned for fingers that have lost their grip or flexibility, a hand-made plate setting of Royal Doulton china with plates fashioned with a lip to keep food from spilling onto the ta-

blecloth or, possibly, the deck of a rocking boat.

It also might be a light weight, fashionably molded plastic wine glass suitable for a festive table setting, colorful ceramic whole hand grip coffee mugs, tennis racquets or hammers fitted with ergonomically contoured handles to fit the natural contour of the hand, a saw grip handled knife, or a kitchen timer to wear about the neck so that its wearer can mind the stove while moving about the house.

Some of the most successful items in the store are as amusing as they are useful, says Citrin; among them a feather duster with a 20-foot telescope-style handle, and a dust mop with a hinged mop handle.

With 1000 items available at the store, says Citrin, it is impossible to enumerate all of the extension capability items and their applications. Still, he said, everything that passes evaluation by the expert panel is judged for being the best designed item of its kind, for the attractiveness of its appearance, and for its extension capabilities.

"Every capability of an extended feature is looked at," he explains. "We are looking for more convenience, more quickly with less stress."

Citrin says that much of the initial fascination with the store's merchandise stems from a growing realization that aids for the handicapped can be both useful for everyone, and attractive in appearance, too.

"Much of what we sell is imported from overseas where they seem to be doing a better design job," he said. Government funding, he adds, has made it possible for manufacturers in countries such as England, Scandinavia, Germany and Italy to spend money

to research and produce products for a clientele that was virtually ignored in the U.S. before Ways & Means opened in November.

HE ADDS that as word spreads that Ways & Means has created a market in the U.S. they are receiving an increasing number of items for evaluation which have definite eye appeal as well as multiple capabilities.

"I don't know that there is any one item that caught my eye more than any other," Citrin said. "What particularly pleases me is that we were able to put together an inventory that delivers on

what we promised."

Ways & Means is at 229 West Maple, Birmingham. The store is operated by Sentry Drug Stores Inc., which will introduce "Capability Centers," offering 300-400 capability products in many of its area drugstores. All area Sentry stores will also feature a Ways & Means catalog desk from which customers can order items from the Ways & Means Capability Collection.

"The focus," concluded Citrin, "is to replace an emphasis on disability with

an emphasis on capability."

So far the dividends from the foundation of Ways & Means are many, including laughter, pleasure, surprise, and even a few tears of relief from customers who have discovered something that will make their own or a loved one's life not only easier but more pleasant.

Said Citrin, something as simple as being able to eat off a decent piece of fine china once again can cause a grown man to cry with pleasure. He knows, he says, because Ways & Means and Royal Doulton made it happen.

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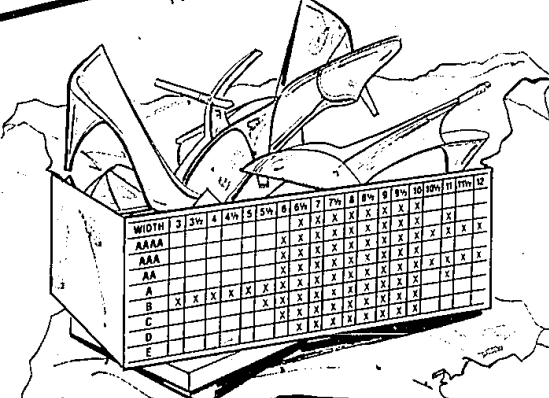
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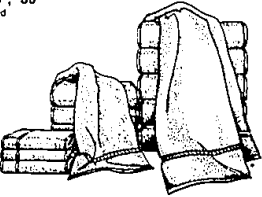
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