

Ideas in Practice



100 Years of Experience: Priceless

Bell's Nurseries Ltd. first opened its doors in 1956. Founded by Dutch immigrant Adrian Bell and his wife, Katie, Bell's has continued to grow in both size and market-share. Today, nearly 300 acres and up to 130 employees are involved in the production of woody ornamentals, fruit trees, perennials and other nursery plants. The vast majority of the sales are wholesale and mostly shipped within the Pacific Northwest, although in the last decade sales have expanded into the Midwest as well. The future didn't always look so bright for the Bell family, however. When Adrian died of cancer unexpectedly in 1982, his 24-year old son, John, was left to run the nursery.

John recognized his own inexperience and realized that in order to stay in business, he would need advice and assistance from others. Prior to his father's death, John had attended a farm management seminar and had learned about advisory councils. He found out that an advisory council's main function is to act as a sounding board. In addition to this, he realized that members could provide support, advice, and even act as devil's advocate. Advisors, who are often retired business executives, can propose new business opportunities or suggest ways to expand or diversify the existing business. They can offer invaluable instruction on everything from finance and personnel management to strategic planning and succession planning.

When Adrian died of cancer unexpectedly in 1982, his 24-year old son, John, was left to run the nursery.

Wanting to continue the success of Bell's in producing the highest quality nursery stock possible, John brought in three retired, local businessmen to sit on Bell's Nurseries' advisory council. He chose men who, although not from his particular line of business, shared his values and who had been successful in their own right. Between them they provided Bell with over 100 years worth of business experience. They've advised him on land purchases, capital expenditures, and contract negotiations, as well as everything in between. They have held Bell accountable to his decisions, and have often required him to justify his plans to them. While the advisors hold no official power in the organization, for the most part John has taken the advice they've offered.

As Bell became more confident, the meetings shifted from being held every month to every quarter. Today, John has doubled the size of his father's business and has set trends in both innovative production and environmental issues, but he has no intention of dismantling the council. In his own words, the members offer a "depth of management expertise that's impossible for one individual to accumulate."

In fact, it is those 100 years of experience that have allowed this family enterprise to remain in the family.