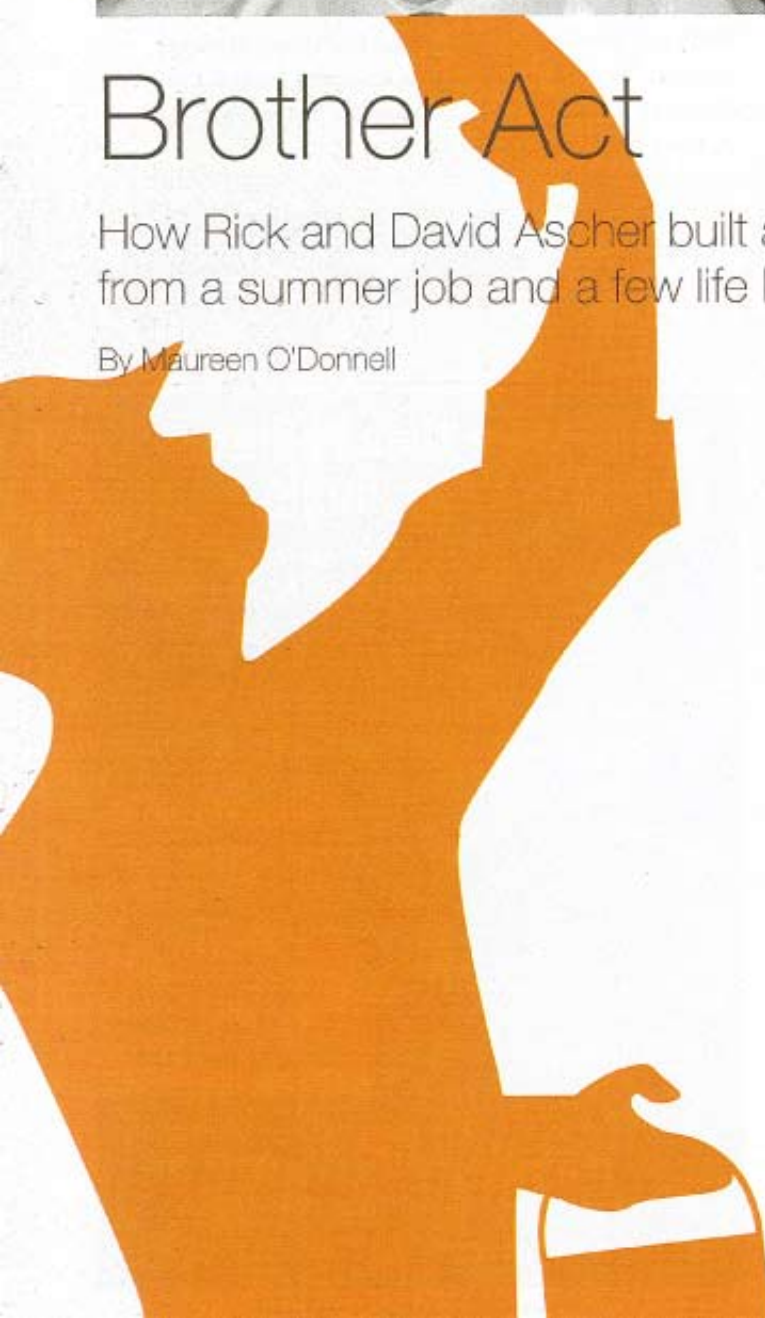


Rick Ascher (left) & David Ascher

Brother Act

How Rick and David Ascher built a painting empire from a summer job and a few life lessons

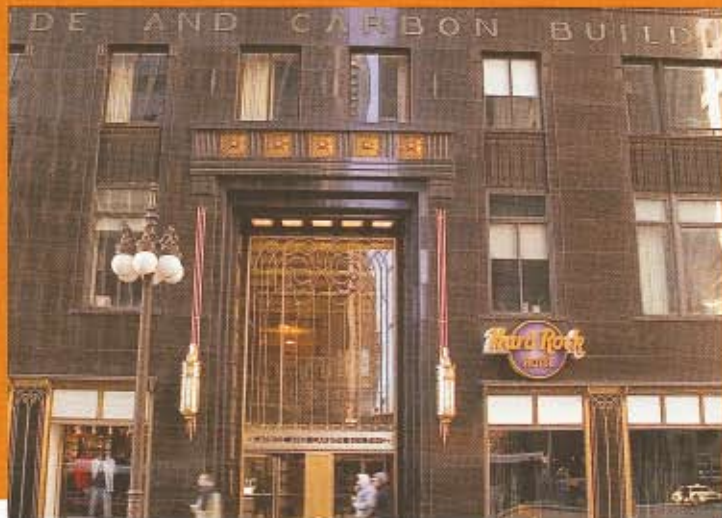
By Maureen O'Donnell



It was 1979: the days of disco and economic recession. Rick Ascher was 34, and restless. He was selling commercial painting jobs, but feeling his old entrepreneurial itch. He called his brother David, 29, who was selling life insurance.

“I said, ‘David, I’m leaving. I want you to start a business with me.’”

In “less than a second,” David agreed. And so, with \$25,000 in savings and one summer of college painting experience between them, the brothers decided to start a painting company. Corporate headquarters: Rick’s den.



Photos: Ascher Brothers

The Ascher Brothers' client portfolio reads like a Who's Who of 21st Century Commerce. Their projects have included work at Soldier Field (left) and the Hard Rock Hotel in Chicago.

That was then...

Today, Ascher Brothers bills itself as "America's Painting Contractor," with more than 300 painters and \$40 million in business annually.

Its client portfolio reads like a Who's Who of 21st-Century Commerce: Banana Republic. Starbucks. Victoria's Secret. BP Amoco.

Then there's the FBI, Northwestern University and legendary venues like Soldier Field. Lots of high-end residential, too.

Over the years, the den has given way to new digs. Today, Ascher Brothers occupies more than 30,000 square feet of prime space on Chicago's Kennedy Expressway, overlooking some of the city's most prominent landmarks – and, now, Ascher Brothers clients.

On the current to-do list: painting the Trump International Hotel & Tower, a new luxury residential development in downtown Chicago. David has even been golfing with The Donald.

Three little words

Rick Ascher attributes his company's success to drive, honesty, good salespeople and – surprisingly — three little words: "I'm not ready."

"Don't get in over your head. Don't promise more than you can get done," he explains in his office, where a paint-splotted painter's cap shares space with a miniature 2005 White Sox World Series trophy.

The advice may sound impossibly quaint in a cut-throat world, but the Aschers stick to it. Low-bidding your way into a series of big jobs you can't handle is not a recipe for lasting success, they say.

"People know that if we say we're going to do something, we're going to get it done," says Rick. "My brother and I have always done that."

Life lessons, cold calls

What the Aschers lacked in contracting experience at the start, they made up for with other knowledge.

They learned hard work in a family business that once ran a chain of Chicago movie theaters. They gleaned marketing tips from student jobs selling shoes and birth-

**"Don't get in over your head.
Don't promise more than you
can get done."**

- Ascher 101

day cakes. Caddying taught them the importance of honesty; sales, tenacity.

David became the salesman. "I pounded the streets all day," he recalls. "I made cold calls on general contractors, asking them if we could bid on their contracts."

Adds the big brother: "He'd go to job sites, even though he didn't know what he was looking at."

David would ask for blueprints, then bring them back to Rick to see if they could do the job.

Their first winter in Chicago, "we had no business," recalls Rick, who had two young daughters at the time.

Nibbles and networking

Slowly, however, jobs began to break. Working from home kept their prices competitive. David would tell prospects, "'Please give us an opportunity' – and sometimes, they did."

When condo conversions started hitting Chicago, the Aschers got a couple jobs painting units. Then came an offer to do a huge, dark, old home that its elderly owners had never painted.

"We had four or five guys there all winter," says Rick. "That kept us alive."

see **BROTHER ACT** on next page

BROTHER ACT from last page

They networked with interior designers and small general contractors, building their brand and reputation through word of mouth. The payoff: bigger jobs and better painters.

Success bred success. Clients and painters brought in more contacts, including salespeople to pitch bigger business. A new niche developed: commercial interiors.

The make-or-break job

About three years in, the Aschers landed their first big gig — and challenge. The job: painting and wallcovering for the storied Fairmont Chicago Hotel, host to dignitaries and celebrities from Elton John to former French President Jacques Chirac.

"We had it all planned out how we were going to do this job," Rick recalls in a "famous last words" tone. "We thought we could do the job with 20 painters."

Of course, that didn't happen.

"The exterior was marble, and they had a problem with the grout. Because of that, most of the drywall on the inside got soaked. It was a huge problem, so they [the hotel and other trades] had to tear everything down" to replace the drywall.

The mess left the original job schedule in smithereens, but the hotel was determined to reopen on time. That compressed the Aschers' deadline and, rather than the 20 painters they had budgeted, "we needed 60 or 70," says Rick.

In the end, the Aschers needed about \$1 million to finish the job — a surprise that, oddly, had a silver lining.

By scrambling to negotiate a huge extension to their line of credit, the Aschers completed the job. In the end, they say, the project that could have crushed their fledgling firm wound up strengthening it — both financially and in its ability to manage a crisis.

From Playboy to Soldier Field

Over time, the Aschers developed other "name" clients, including Charlie Trotter's, the Chicago restaurant that opened in 1987 and blossomed into a national and international brand — with world-class ratings, cookbooks, foods and TV shows. As

Trotter's reach grew, so did the Aschers'.

They also painted the wooden seats at the old Comiskey Park, then home to Chicago's White Sox. (They still have forest-green chairs from the ballpark in their offices.) When the new Comiskey gave way to U.S. Cellular Field, the Aschers painted everything from the roof deck to the offices underneath.

Currently, an Ascher crew travels around the country to spruce up Crate & Barrel stores — "nice-size jobs" that take about a month, the brothers say. And even in the current housing slump, the Aschers keep busy with residential construction. In Chicago these days, that means condominiums.

The power of 'good people'

The Aschers credit their painters and their 13 salespeople with much of their success. The loyalty cuts both ways: Some employees have been with the company more than 20 years — a lifetime for this high-turnover industry.

"Ninety-nine percent [of our success] is our sales guys, knocking on doors, meeting people," Rick says.

Chicago's union heritage gets the credit for the painting talent. The city has the most union painters in the country, the Aschers say. That means high standards, including a high school education, strong apprenticeship programs, drug and alcohol screening, and continuing education and expertise in hazardous materials, safety, CPR and working in confined spaces.

"It's a way higher caliber," Rick says.

Industry colleagues agree. "They surround themselves with good people," says Ron O'Toole of ICI Glidden, which supplies Ascher Brothers with paint and sundries.

Good rep, good business

In an industry that rests on relationships, the Aschers — neither "yellers" nor "everything's-a-problem kind of people" — stand out, says O'Toole.

How can he tell? At some companies, workers waylay O'Toole and ask if he knows who else is hiring. Not at Ascher Brothers.

Ascher Brothers' Top 10 Tips

Do...

1. Come to work early and stay late.
2. Talk to all employees every day to find out what is on their agenda.
3. Have a positive attitude.
4. Get to know your customers.
5. Treat everyone with respect.

Don't...

1. Cut corners.
2. Get greedy.
3. Ignore your first impression.
4. Promise something and not deliver.
5. EVER LIE.

"They treat their employees with a lot of respect," agrees Alfred Lewis, Midwestern division director for national accounts at Sherwin-Williams.

That treatment extends to suppliers, who say the Aschers deal fairly and pay on time – a reputation that pays off, time and again, in the bottom line.

From the supplier side: "A rep might not want to give [a company with a negative reputation] the same price as good as they did in the past," says O'Toole. "They don't want to go that extra step and go to that job site."

And from the contractor's side: "If we have an order for one gallon of paint at 2 o'clock in the afternoon, it's there," says Rick Ascher.

Buses and birthday cakes

At Ascher, the bosses arrive early and stay late. Each has "a very good work ethic," says David – and an entrepreneur's soul.

Rick was hatching business ideas as an accounting major at Miami University of Ohio. When he noticed that out-of-town students were stuck driving into and out of Oxford, Ohio, he found a travel agent.

"We had this idea," he recalls. "I found out I could rent a plane."

Soon, he was chartering planes to fly students home for holidays and arranging airfare deals for spring break in Florida. He also chartered buses: For about \$125, students got round-trip service home to New York.

Next came a birthday-cake business he bought from a frat brother. Rick sent letters to all the students' parents, offering to supply cakes for their kids' birthdays. He would go to a local bakery, order five or more cakes, then deliver them to dorm rooms.

Meanwhile, David majored in business at the University of Missouri. He sold shoes and worked in concessions at Ravinia Park, an outdoor music festival north of Chicago.

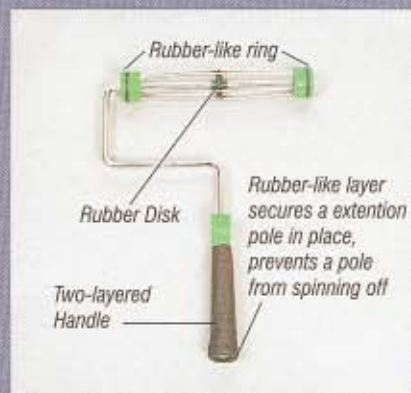
Off campus, he was picking up life lessons as a caddy at Sunset Valley Golf Course in Highland Park, Ill., the Chicago suburb where the Aschers grew up.

"We learned a lot about etiquette and sportsmanship and fair play and being honest," David says.

Speaking of golf, and business, and life, he adds: "You call penalties on yourself. It's not like you're waiting for a referee. It's a gentleman's game." **pwc**

Maureen O'Donnell is a longtime Chicago journalist. Contact her at rosati11@comcast.net.

How about this frame?



1. Rubber-like rings minimize amount of paint leaking into a core by sealing gap between end caps of a frame and a roller cover.
2. A rubber-like disk prevents wires from sagging in by propping up a cage of a frame.
3. Upper part rubber-like plastic layer of a handle minimizes fatigue of the hand.

Unique Features on Genuine Lamb Skin Roller Cover



1. Very high-density skin from Merino lamb absorbing more paint than any other roller covers.
2. Very durable inner plastic core with rubber-like stoppers to prevent a roller cover from slipping off frames of different diameter and minimize amount of paint leaking into a core.



Mini-Rollers Made of Genuine Lamb Skin

For inquiry on other painting tools

Call **1-888-304-0221**

Sella Corp: 200 N. Crescent Way, Unit B, Anaheim, CA 92801