

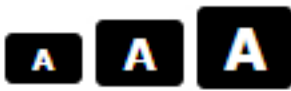
90 years in, Abt still runs on one rule

GROWTH OWNERSHIP By Zack Needles | September 1, 2026

How a G3 Chicago electronics and appliance retailer scaled up without ever opening a second location.



Abt's atrium. Photo: Abt



Mike Abt was going to be a doctor. He'd already finished his first year of medical school. Then, on his way through Chicago, he stopped to see his father, who was still scheduling next-day appliance deliveries by hand, sorting index cards in what the family called the milk crate. "I'm going to get you computerized, and then I'm leaving," Mike told him. "I'll give you a year."

That was nearly four decades ago. Mike never left. Neither did his brother Jon, who'd been working in music marketing in Los Angeles when Mike called in the late '90s to ask what he thought of the website he'd just put up. "I think you need some help," Jon told him and flew back to build out Abt's first e-commerce platform.

This year, the company they now run alongside two other brothers as co-presidents turns 90. Abt, the largest independently owned, single-location retailer of appliances, electronics, furniture and home goods in the country, has grown from a small radio store on Chicago's Northwest Side into a nearly 1-million-square-foot destination in Glenview, Ill.



Abt store, circa 1955. Photo: Abt.

Just Say Yes

The founding, as Mike tells it, started with his grandmother, Jewel. His grandfather Dave was working for someone else and gambling on the side; her brothers ran a fruit business and didn't want a woman involved. So she saved \$800 and told Dave they'd start their own. In 1936, they opened a radio store. "It didn't grow very fast," Mike says. "It was a very small business for a long time."



Mike Abt

Growth came later, and deliberately. Mike and Jon describe a company that has spent 90 years insourcing rather than farming out, including handling its own deliveries and installations and deploying its own service technicians. "We build our own displays in our store. We build out our own technology," Jon says. "We're not afraid to try new things, and if we fail, we say, 'OK, we tried it. What can we do to make this better?'"

The company's answer to nearly every operational question, in other words, is to keep it in the family, literally and figuratively. Employees are treated the same way. "We consider our employees

all family," Jon says.

That shows up most directly in what Mike calls the company's real operating principle, posted on signs throughout the store and, he says, photographed by visiting business owners more than anything else on the premises: say yes to any reasonable request. There's no employee manual to speak of. When a customer asks for something unusual, the goal is for the employee handling it to decide on the spot rather than escalate to a higher-level manager. "It takes, usually, an employee six months or a year before they will say 'yes,'" Mike says of new employees' initial trepidation around embracing this philosophy. "We want them to decide right there what the answer is: 'Yes.'"



Jon Abt

Nearly 90% of Abt's business now comes from repeat customers and referrals — the return, the brothers say, on decades of treating a bad experience as something to fix on the spot rather than argue about. "You turn a wrong into a right, they're your customer for life," Jon says. "That's really how we've grown our business over the last 90 years."

While "say yes to the customer" is Abt's guiding principle, there is one other non-negotiable, which, according to Mike, traces back to his father Bob: never lie. Get caught doing it, and you're gone, brother or not. "No brother would ever lie to me, ever," he says. "That was built into us as little kids."

'You Need to Grow or Die'



Abt store, circa 2016. Photo: Abt.

Mike has aimed for 8% growth annually for most of his 38 years at the company, a target his father pushed for well before Mike was convinced of it himself. "I thought, 'Hey, we're a nice size, we're good,'" Mike says. "My dad's like, 'Nah, you've got to grow.' It's true — you need to grow or die." Compounded over 90 years, that number is most of the explanation for how what started as a radio store became what it is now: a 430,000-square-foot warehouse expansion built to compete on shipping speed with the Amazons of the world; a 30,000-square-foot furniture and mattress showroom; Abt Air, a proprietary expedited shipping operation now reaching 40 markets; a 30,000-square-foot recycling center that handles 95% of the company's waste; and Abt University, its internal training program.

Then there's Ask Bolt, the AI shopping assistant the company has rolled out on the customer-facing side, alongside AI tools handling everything from merchandising to legal work on the back end. Jon, who along with his brothers relies on a chief technology officer outside the family to run point on the technology, says employee anxiety about AI has been a natural part of the rollout — but one the company has tried to head off directly. "In a 90-year history here, we've never had a round of layoffs," he says. "We try to reaffirm for them that 'You're not going to lose your job. We're just trying to give you tools to make your job easier.'"

Decisions like that don't go through committee. With four brothers as co-presidents and no board to answer to, Abt's model for making decisions relies on votes, but also includes permission to fail. "If no one believes in it but you, go ahead and do it on your own," Mike says of this philosophy, citing his own recent push to expand the company's presence on Amazon over some of his brothers' initial objections. "If it works, great. If it doesn't, we're going to eat you up and you're done, and we'll try the next thing."

Their father, who died more than a decade ago, also still gets a vote. "When we're voting, we'll say, 'What does dad think?'" Mike says. "We still remember our history, where we came from. But we do try to go in the right direction, whatever that is."



Bob Abt

A fourth generation has now started entering the business — cousins, rather than the brothers who grew up together in one household with one set of expectations. Jon expects the transition to be trickier than the one his own generation navigated. "This next generation grew up in four different households," he says. "They all love each other, which is nice. But half of them don't seem to want to get in the business. It'll be interesting."

But trying to force them into the family business would run counter to everything that made the transition from G2 to G3 a success. "Just like Mike and I, do what you want to do. Do what makes you happy," he says of his advice to the NextGens. "You've got to have a job where you enjoy waking up and are excited to go to work."

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