

BUSINESS PROFILE

Amazing Abt-itude

Abt Electronics has used its family ways to protect and serve

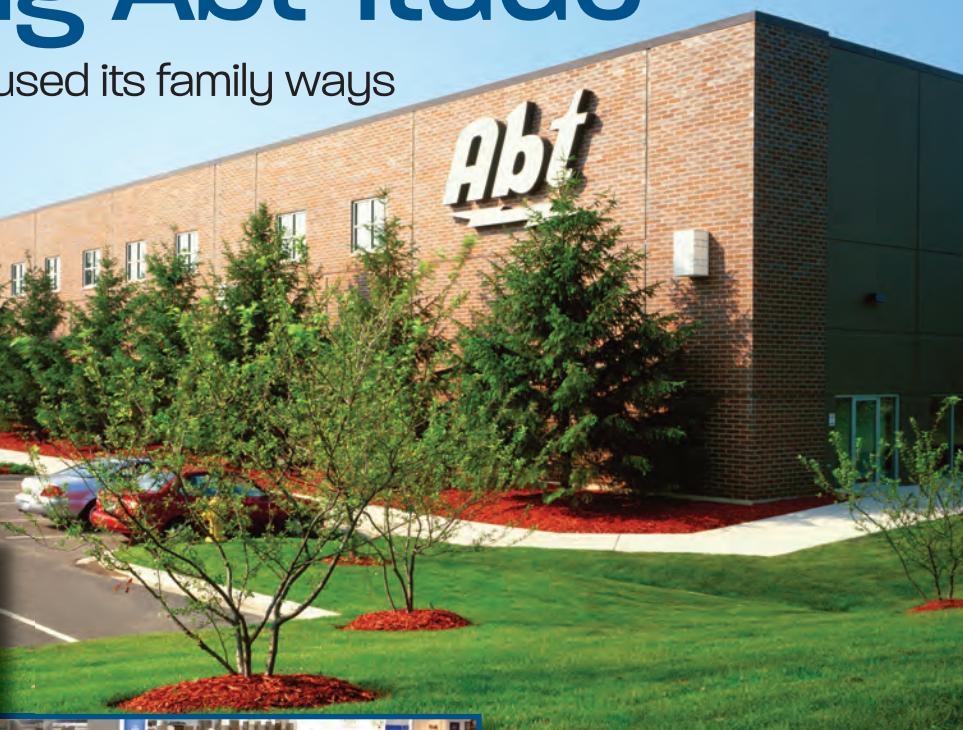


■ BY MITCHELL KRUGEL

Federal, state and local law enforcement agencies have come to Abt Electronics in Glenview to further their crime-fighting prowess and proficiency. The Secret Service, Postal Police, Chicago Police Department Financial Crimes Unit, Illinois State Police, Cook County Regional Organized Crime Task Force and a plethora of suburban Chicago departments have come to this renowned oasis of the best in making-life-better merchandise to learn the latest about dealing with identity theft, credit card fraud and other similar crimes.

But even those who have been to the Abt compound, as many Illinois Cops have because of the company's generous support of law enforcement, might not believe what's going on inside the walls of this 350,000-square-foot facility. There are 21 family members and more than 1,200 employees presenting kitchen, laundry, home-comfort and outdoors appliances; audio and video; cameras, camcorders and other assorted portable electronics, communication devices; computers; mobile electronics; bedroom, kitchen, office and outdoor furniture; cooking accessories, power tools; plumbing supplies; luggage; gaming, of course; and even gourmet food items, serving up to 25,000 customers on a given weekend and saying yes to any reasonable request.

All this has grown from the mom-and-pop store, Abt Radios



The Abt Electronics mega store in Glenview features all kinds of appliances and other merchandise you might not expect.

that first opened the doors of its Logan Square store in Chicago in 1936.

"We still like to call ourselves a mom-and-pop store," says Jon Abt, second oldest of the four Abt brothers who have inherited operations from Grandpa Dave and Grandma Jewel Abt, and their father, Bob, the reigning patriarch of an operational marvel that runs more efficiently and more safely than a lot of small cities.

"Everyone asks, 'What's the secret?'" adds Jon, who handles the company marketing and website operations. "We've built our business on word-of-mouth and customers having good experiences. We're a fourth-generation business with fourth-generation customers. We try to say yes to any reasonable request, and that's really it."

The Abt complex features a security system with more than 300 cameras and personnel that would make Samuel Gerard envious. And to think this all started when Jewel, who was tossed out of her family's produce business because she was a woman, convinced Dave to leave his job at Goldblatt's Department Store, and start their own business.

They put down \$800 and opened a store at the corner of Wolfram and Milwaukee in Chicago's Logan Square. Jon submits that the company grew organically from that point when Abt had just one employee. How big and how quickly Abt grew is probably not the key point here. That Dave and Jewel have an honorary street named after them perhaps speaks volumes about the tradition, legacy and reputation Grandpa and Grandma established.



Following 36 years in Chicago, Abt migrated north with a lot of its customer base. Only from 1972-74 did the family operate and own more than one location, so organic growth led to outgrowing three locations before landing in Glenview in 2001 with that palatial facility you can't help but notice as you drive north toward Willow Road on Interstate 294.

Technological advancements, of course, contributed to some of the growth. The onset of the computer age, cell phones and the video-gaming age created new product lines. But there was more than that. After all, there were no dishwashers and such appliances in the 30s and 40s, but Abt nonetheless continued to emerge as a leading name in the industry.

Perhaps it's the name that makes the difference. Mike, Jon and brothers Ricky and Billy each never really wanted to join the family business, according to Jon. Oh, they all worked there as teens, toting boxes in the warehouse, cleaning the bathrooms and other tasks before working on the selling floor. All the brothers were required to go to college, and at one point it looked like Bob was going to run out of sons before finding one to carry on.

Michael, for example, went to medical school and worked as a ski instructor in Colorado before coming home. Jon spent 14 years working in Los Angeles in the music business. When Abt first started in e-commerce, Jon consulted on the construction of a website. Michael convinced him to come back, and now internet sales represent a quarter of annual sales.

Michael has become the product innovator and works with finance operations; he has moved Abt into such product lines as watches, mattresses and fitness equipment. Ricky works with the outside personnel and is a big part of the company's cutting-edge security operation. Bill works with the buyers and is what Jon calls "a master merchandiser."

"We are always redoing our displays, expanding or putting something new in," Jon comments. "We want our customers to be wowed. We want it to be a real experience when you come into the store."

Customers who want to be wowed should drop by Abt to view the array of antique appliances and goods on display. See some appliances from the 1940s as well as the first Mac computers from the 80s, an early-model projection TV and "some other really funny things," Jon adds.

Abt has wowed up to 25,000 customers on a weekend. Three times a year, the company hosts a customer appreciation weekend when patrons are invited in to take advantage of the most special of special deals. This is a weekend that Mike Lopez lives for.

Lopez is Abt's Director of Investigations and the company's



security maven. On the most recent customer service weekend – March 15 and 16 – Lopez had 30 security officers on-site working the floor, the parking lot, the large merchandise pick-up area and the premises. The Glenview Police Department assisted with directing traffic.

This weekend goes off without incident, or very few. There will be virtually no shoplifting, and they might catch some credit-card fraud. What Lopez and his team will do for sure is protect these customers from identity theft that you know hits his colleagues at Walmart, Sears, Best Buy and other megastores.

When Lopez started with Abt in 1997, he began what has become known as controlled buys with controlled deliveries. With the help of different law enforcement agencies, Lopez and an Abt employee would make a delivery to somebody they suspected of fraud or identity theft. Ricky even went out on some of these adventures dressed as an Abt driver.

By 2007, Abt was a member of the Chicago Metropolitan Identity Fraud Task Force. By 2010, Abt had become such a leader in snuffing out identity theft that the Illinois Crime Prevention Association came to the store to train officers there in the latest and greatest techniques.

"The word has gotten out about our operations," said Lopez, who is a licensed private detective and is married to an Illinois State Trooper. "We did a tour of the Cook County jail about three or four months ago. The acting superintendent told us that they heard about our company there. He said, 'they know how you fight fraud and they know to stay away.'"

Lopez says that his team has worked local, regional and federal cases that value anywhere from \$500 to \$50,000. But it's the crime prevention that he is most proud of. Abt has built its surveillance operation from eight screens to more than 300 screens. So if somebody comes in and uses a stolen credit card, the system can track the person, the license plate on the car he or she was driving and in many cases see the person's face.

"If something happens, we're watching," Lopez adds. "It provides a real sense of security not only for our customers but for our employees as well."

The Abts aren't sure they have built a model for security, a model for successful retail or even a model for the department store of the new millennium. They are sure that their customer service is second to none and that Abt is a good place to work. The Chicago Tribune verified as much naming Abt as a best place to work for companies with more than 1,000 employees.

If there is one growth aspect that should really wow customers, it is this: Including grandchildren, there are now 21 family members working in the family business down to the youngest daughters who serve cookies in the atrium.

And if you think that brings a smile to your face, imagine what it would do for Grandpa Dave and Grandma Jewel. ❤

