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Website, Twitter, YouTube help store attract wide range of customers seeking old-fashioned goods

## Lehman's goes high-tech to sell low-tech products

By Betty Lin Fisher

**Beacon Journal business writer**  
**KIDRON:** An Amish horse and buggy can often be seen at the hitching rail at the Lehman's store while a variety of cars and tour buses are in the parking lot. Customers flock to browse and buy old-fashioned, **BeaconFirst** nonelectric products from the store founded by Jay Lehman in 1955 to serve the Amish community.

Goods for sale include oil lamps, a wooden marble track and butter churners.

Walking through the

42,000-square-foot store whisks customers back to a simpler time. Shoppers might not think at all of modern conveniences such as the Internet, QR codes (square bar codes scanned with a smart phone that take you to a website) or Facebook and Twitter.

Yet, these days the low-tech superstore employs all of those high-tech ways to make a sale.

"You have to meet people where they are," said Lehman's President Galen Lehman, the son of Jay Lehman, 82, who still serves as chairman of the company and comes in daily

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Lehman's posts videos on YouTube to demonstrate products for customers. One video received more than 38,000 hits.

### Lehman's

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to interact with customers. Galen started working at the store as a teen and is now responsible for day-to-day operations.

"Over the years, for example, the total number of Amish customers we've had has increased slightly, but as a percentage of our total sales has dropped dramatically. New customers have found us because of our technology we're using," said Lehman.

"I probably like to meet people that we're a low-tech company. Why should we be using high tech? It's like a split personality," he said.

**YouTube videos a hit**

It started because Jay Lehman never wanted to say no to customers, said his son. People asked him for weird things like a nonelectric refrigerator, so he looked around until he found a way to do it, Galen Lehman said. Eventually, it turned into requests for a website and YouTube videos that demonstrate various products.

A Lehman's video of an employee churning butter has received more than 38,000 hits on YouTube.

"She's just churning butter," said Glenda Lehman Ervin, daughter of Jay Lehman, who serves as vice president of marketing and returned to the family business after years at a large corporation. Two other siblings are not involved with the company and the children of Galen and Glenda are too young to be discussing whether they'll ever take over, said Ervin.

The videos have become a hit and a way to reach customers, she said.

"If someone is 25 years old, how do I get him interested in a ring nut or a noodle maker? You make a video on YouTube," she said.

Galen Lehman said an astonishing number of customers are high-tech oriented who, after a day of work, "when they go home at night, they want the satisfaction of dirt in their fingernails or blisters on their palms... the kind of things their grandparents did every day." But there are also the Amish customers, who have no interest in technology.

Lehman's specializes in selling new, but old-fashioned nonelectric products you probably thought they stopped making years ago, said Ervin.

Some mistakenly think the company sells antiques. Ervin said all products are new, historically accurate replicas. The company makes products themselves and also buys merchandise from vendors in the U.S. and abroad.

As Amish men who live a few miles from Lehman's make hickory rocking chairs,

"He doesn't want to tweek" about his rockers, said Ervin. "He wants to stay at home to make his hickory rockers. We will buy his supply."

So Lehman's is helping the Amish by selling their goods and offering them the need for their lifestyle. For instance, besides having wood stoves, there are the traditional Amish stoves given to a couple when they marry. But there are also old-fashioned landing electric stoves.

Buying and selling the rocking chair from the Amish craftsman helps both Lehman's and the craftsman, Ervin said.

"I've so, not only is he making hickory rockers, but he's teaching his sons and preserving the past," she said.

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Lehman's attracts a wide variety of customers, including Amish families and people who simply enjoy old-fashioned products.



Glenda Lehman Ervin, the vice president of marketing for Lehman's, shows off locally handmade baskets sold at the store. Lehman's Facebook page has more than 15,000 fans.

The high-tech touches at Lehman's include a Facebook page with more than 11,000 fans, 146 YouTube videos of demonstrations and events,

more than 2,400 followers on Galen Lehman's Twitter account, QR codes in print ads can take customers with smart phones directly to a website with more information. Ervin wants to bring the QR codes

to the store to allow customers to scan for information as they shop.

"We have everything you need to live without electricity for heat, food, light and water. It's a one-stop shop, just like it was 100 years ago," she said.

Lehman's often gets national attention during power blackouts and natural disasters and got a big boost during the pres-

YXZ worries in 1999.

But its customers can be found worldwide, ranging from people who have no electricity or septic systems in their homes to those who are simply fond of old-fashioned products.

"There's a lot of people in the U.S. who choose to live without electricity. We have a man who lives in a town in rural West Virginia who rode his

bike to town, to the library to order from Lehman's," said Ervin.

**Customer loyalty**

Sales through the company website and catalog account for 60 percent of revenues. The family-owned company does not disclose sales figures.

"For many years, we were a store with a catalog. Now we're a direct sales company with a store," said Ervin.

The store gets 200,000 visitors a year and estimates that it sends out 4,000 to 5,000 packages each week from online sales. There are slightly more than 200 employees, including seasonal workers.

Ervin said when Lehman's thinks about competition, there are other places that sell similar things, but not in the same manner or in the same volume.

"The family doesn't try to compete with the modern big-box retailers.

"We're going to do what they don't want to do," Ervin said.

"Once they're interested in our products, they are very loyal," Galen Lehman said of shoppers. "If we can find the customer, then we can survive the future, even if high-tech completely takes over the world. We'll be here for the people who want to do things the old-fashioned way."

Ervin is a member of the board of 200-2000, a national organization that promotes the use of non-electric products. She is also a member of the board of the Amish Heritage Museum in West Virginia who rode his

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