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Lawrence Chalfin of Samuelson Furniture: 5 Things You Need To Run A Highly Successful Family Business



Stay true to who you are as a person and company. Throughout the 47 years of my career, I have transitioned our company three separate times into different markets. Each transition was a test of our commitment to the standards of high quality, design and integrity, which we were successful in maintaining. Setting a strong foundation and identity provides opportunities to pursue new endeavors without losing who you are.

As a part of our series about 5 Things You Need To Run A Highly Successful Family Business, I had the pleasure of interviewing Lawrence Chalfin.



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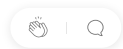
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Lawrence Chalfin is president of Samuelson Furniture, the only fourth-generation family-owned company dedicated to the hospitality and senior living sectors. Under Larry's leadership, Samuelson Furniture provides beautiful and functional furniture for 3.5-, 4- and 5-Star projects all over the world including luxurious brands such as Rosewood Hotels, Disney Worldwide, Hyatt, Hilton Hotels & Resorts and Intercontinental. Unparalleled dedication sets Samuelson Furniture apart from its competitors; the team leads by example in the hospitality and senior living manufacturing market through three principal values: quality, design, and integrity. In 2021, Larry received the hospitality manufacturing industry's most prestigious accolade: NEWH's Icon of Industry, recognizing his 47 years of innovative work and commitment to community.

Thank you so much for joining us in this interview series! Before we dive in, our readers would love to learn a bit more about you. Can you tell us a story about what brought you to this specific career path?

I grew up in the family business — running around the factory from a young age and watching my father and all of the skilled craftsmen at work instilled in me a passion for the industry early on in life. Inspired by my grandfather and father, I joined the family business in 1974 after completing my college education at NYU and Julliard. Though I studied classical voice throughout my education, the family business was always part of who I was and who I was destined to be.

With guidance and support from my father, I helped shift the company's focus from an OEM supplier of unfinished, hand carved reproduction furniture frames—providing for companies like Baker, Henredon and fine showrooms—towards custom finished products serving the high-end residential market as well as seating and accent furniture for hospitality. We continued to institute change within the family business and in 2002 transitioned the company into a hospitality-only provider of premium casegoods and seating to satisfy the need for high caliber, custom furniture in hospitality properties.

Can you tell us a bit about your family business and your role in it?

In 1935, my grandfather and father, Harry and Samuel Chalfin founded the Invincible Parlor Frame Company, which is now known as Samuelson Furniture. Back in the day, they manufactured chair and sofa frames for the local upholstery trade. My father used to tell stories of when two club chairs and a sofa frame sold for \$6.75, and orders could be lost over the cost of a nickel or a dime. Flash forward to today, my son, Executive Vice President Michael Chalfin, and I run the company (the only fourth generation, family owned business serving the hospitality and assisted living sectors).

We are a family-run business to our core; over the years, we have had many family members step up and contribute to our company's future and forward-looking vision. My sister, Ruth, and her husband, Howard, work with us in sales; my sister, Vicki, and her husband, Steve, worked with us prior to establishing their own sales company, and most recently, my youngest son, David, joined our team.

Samuelson Furniture distributes to the international market and global design community, servicing the world's finest hotels, senior living environments, timeshares, restaurants, country clubs and corporate environments. Our products can be described as European-inspired design combined with an American sensibility. We constantly seek to present clients with forward-thinking design and innovative features, while maintaining our traditional craftsmanship and preserving the meaningful design approach that reflects our long-standing heritage.

My day-to-day responsibilities are always changing based on the industry's needs, new projects, and product launches. I regularly travel abroad with my son, Executive Vice President Michael Chalfin, visiting our partners and reinforcing our supply chain relationships to uphold our standard of quality. When we're not on a cross-country venture, we host designers and other hospitality professionals at our Paterson, New Jersey headquarters. We tour our guests through the Samuelson Furniture showroom (which recently underwent a full renovation and redesign) and on-site factory. We also give visitors demonstrations, providing them the opportunity to get hands-on experience with our products and materials so that they can better grasp the quality, innovation, and craftsmanship we put into each piece.

Can you share the most interesting story that happened to you since you began this career?

One instance that particularly stands out in my mind is a time I was delivering a presentation to about a dozen people at a major interior design firm. During the meeting, the group began discussing the many issues that they had with people within their organization; for a moment, they seemed to forget I was in the room. Shortly after, they all realized I was standing there, hearing about their internal company issues from the end of the conference table. In that moment, all I could think to say was that while I understood their frustration, I did not have a single "assh\$#%" that worked for me. They were astonished at my statement, but we had a laugh together and moved on with the presentation.

I reflected upon that moment on my drive home, realizing how true my statement actually was. When I got back, I told my son Michael about what happened and how impactful the concept was. Inspired by that interaction, we decided to develop a [NO ASSH\\$#%™ video](#) telling our story as a company and expressing the positive culture we have developed here. Shortly after, we followed the video with a second: [NO ASSH\\$#%™ the Musical](#). This policy, while combined with our sense of humor, represents a serious message about our brand and how we operate both internally and externally. Today, we're proud to be known in the industry as the NO ASSH\$#%™ company!

Can you share a story about the funniest mistake you made when you were first starting? Can you tell us what lesson you learned from that?

Earlier on in my career my father would introduce me to local trade clients in the New York metropolitan area. One day I went to meet a designer that curated the most buttoned-down, perfect showroom I had ever stepped foot in; needless to say I was intimidated. Although I was surrounded by furniture my entire life, at that time I didn't know the specific periods of design or the distinction between different styles just yet. I had a furniture catalog that I kept in my briefcase at all times so that I could easily reference our products throughout every meeting. When I sat down and began talking with the designer, they asked me if I had a particular bergere chair and I had no idea what that was, I had never heard that term before. Sweating through my shirt, I frantically flipped through the catalog trying to figure out what they were looking for and as I was flipping through the pages (pretending to look for the style they had mentioned), I told them to point out anything in particular that they liked along the way—a classic act of stalling. As funny as that story is to look back on now, it taught me the true value of "fake it til' you make it." From then on, you can bet I knew the name of every design that we had to offer.

What do you think makes your company stand out? Can you share a story?

The true standout factor of Samuelson Furniture is the community we have built not only within our organization, but in the industry as a whole. We are a people-first company, whether that be reflected through our user-centric product design, project collaborations, or the internal growth of staff. Our company's

foundation of quality, service, integrity, and innovation is reflected in each member of our team, many of whom have been with us for decades.

Additionally, when it comes to our approach to hospitality and assisted living, we know that furniture is not an afterthought in the guest and community member experience — it is a key part of an environment. We have developed modular casegoods and seating concepts with interchangeable componentry that allows designers to customize solutions that best fit their projects. Our talented team is always innovating products to deliver an impactful experience, whether it be built-in bluetooth technology, surface charging, automated wardrobes, locking drawer boxes to replace in-room safes, or integrated USBs and outlets. We want the end-user to be intrigued by the style and functionality of the furniture. Our 87+ years of manufacturing experience lends valuable insight to design interpretation and solutions, providing in-house CAD design, drawings, model making and concept development. Through talented wood working, exceptional finishes, and the finest quality of upholstery, our team executes products that constantly stay ahead of the design trends, setting a high standard for taste and quality that designers can aspire to when conceptualizing their projects.

Are you working on any exciting new projects now? How do you think that will help people?

Last year, we launched our first collection for assisted living environments, *Living by Samuelson*: a unique furniture line handcrafted with upscale design elements that are aimed to enhance the lifestyle experiences of community members. We invested years of extensive research into the everyday needs of seniors in order to design practical products that prioritize and balance accessibility and ergonomics while offering a high style aesthetic. Our main goal is to make positive impacts through the built environment with beautiful, highly functional product solutions that improve the day-to-day lives of people.

The *Living by Samuelson* collection features two new product innovations that promote the wellness and empowerment of end users: CATCH and Sound by Samuelson. CATCH by Samuelson completely transforms a chair's functionality, making it not only a great design piece for any space, but an accessible and practical solution for the common issue of "walker traffic" in common areas. The patented hardware enables a walker to hang on the back of a chair resulting in the reduction of clutter in shared spaces. This provides the community member with peace of mind about their belongings when dining, socializing, or relaxing. While walker traffic may appear to be a minor inconvenience, eliminating clutter impacts the safety of residents while navigating a space. Additionally, CATCH greatly empowers residents by further enhancing their independence, providing them with direct access to their personal items and mobility devices.

Sound by Samuelson is a patent-pending Bluetooth technology that is built directly into some of our seating products. The design does not use commonly-found directional firing speakers, but rather high-grade technology that turns the chair itself into the speaker, providing a private and pleasant sound experience. This innovation eliminates the universal problem of invasive earbuds without compromising on accessibility. By enhancing the experience of music therapy or other wellness-related applications, Sound by Samuelson can also be utilized for therapeutic purposes, such as memory care or soothing sounds to relax residents.

None of us are able to achieve success without some help along the way. Is there a particular person who you are grateful towards who helped get you to where you are? Can you share a story about that?

I wouldn't be successful without the love and support of my entire family and their profound impact on our journey as Samuelson Furniture. My wife Laurie and I have been married for 42 years, and her support while I was putting in long

hours or traveling for the business, as well as her personal contributions to Samuelson Furniture, have helped to make us the vibrant community we are today.

Everything truly began with my parents; not a day goes by that I don't think of them. When I'm faced with a problem, I think, "what would my father do?" and arguably even more important, "what would my mother have to say about it?" My mother was an interior designer, and I would frequently tag along with her to antique shops, she taught me an eye for style and design that continues to inform my work today. My father taught me everything he knew about the business—he understood the importance of quality design and deep-rooted relationships that set the foundations for my values leading Samuelson Furniture.

Additionally, my second most important mentor was Carlo Giorgetti, the owner of the world class Italian furniture manufacturer Giorgetti. He taught me the importance of process, metrics and pushing the market forward.

These people, among many others, make me beyond grateful to be a part of this business with a commitment and love for each other as well as for our craft.

How have you used your success to bring goodness to the world?

We're constantly seeking new opportunities to give back to the communities that have given us so much; whether that be local to Paterson or the hospitality industry at large. Most recently, we partnered with a New Jersey assisted living facility, Daughters of Miriam, to donate a product from the Sound by Samuelson collection. This will provide them an opportunity to assess the use of this technology in various aspects of their community members' lives. This long-standing organization offers high-quality care to North Jersey's assisted living community, and we're honored to be able to support their cause through product donation.

Additionally, we have donated products to numerous social initiatives through organizations such as Give Kids the World Village, Habitat for Humanity International, and the city of Paterson for the youth training program—totaling over half a million dollars in contributions over the years. We are a community-driven business, and we want these values to be instilled in our employees as well as woven through the fabric of who we are as an organization.

How do you define a family business? How is a family business different from a regular business?

I consider it a great privilege to own and operate a business, especially with four generations of family ownership. Though Samuelson Furniture is certainly a family affair, we consider our "family" to stretch far beyond our bloodline. We treat our team members as extended family; many of them have been with us for decades and are also multi-generational with the company. It brings so much joy to us to see other fathers, sons, mothers, daughters, and even cousins working with each other, drawn together by a common bond and the importance of relationships.

Our model maker has been with us for 55 years, our head finisher 42 years, our design director 34 years, and our executive assistant 24 years. Our longstanding relationships and careers with our employees are a testament to the culture we have worked so hard to build; one that fosters inclusivity and positivity. I think that a family business enables a company to be run with kindness and a personal touch that is much different than those driven by the "board room" mentality.

In your opinion or experience, what are the unique advantages that family owned businesses have?

While a for-profit business always needs to be managed with an eye on the bottom line, a family-owned business can be more balanced, with an eye on the common good. At Samuelson Furniture, we do what we do because we have a passion for the craft and all of the lives it touches. Public companies, or those with private equity investors, are generally driven by the needs of the shareholders, and top line growth to create a greater worth to sell the company. A family business can be more patient and look at the long term rewards of the strategic decisions that they make. The human-centric nature of family-owned businesses truly makes the experience stand out, allowing the entire company to connect over a common bond and passion rather than a sole reliance on capital.

What are the unique drawbacks or blindspots that family owned businesses have?

Running a family business can be challenging when separating business issues from family issues. For everyone, work is a major aspect of life, and with a family business, that is even more so. Sitting down at the dinner table and talking about “what we did at work today” is much more involved than in a typical career. The subject can be very personal, so in these instances business leadership has to be combined with parental leadership and a very deft hand. Additionally, there needs to be a continual effort to keep a work-life balance — taking the time to disconnect from business and reconnect as people and as a family; it is critical and should not be overlooked.

What are some of the common mistakes you have seen family businesses make? What would you recommend to avoid those errors?

One of the biggest challenges of a family business is recognizing when additional skill from outside the family is required for the company to grow or remain profitable. Identifying the abilities of family members and changing needs are critical in ensuring the proper professionals are on board to make goals realistically achievable. Every effort should be made for family members to understand that the addition of key staff is not a threat, but is rather a smart business move aimed to enhance the capabilities and success of the business.

What advice would you give to other CEOs or founders of family businesses to help their employees to thrive?

A seemingly small gesture like a hand placed on a shoulder accompanied by “nice job” can have incredible impact. In addition, I found that keeping my door open for our team members to speak openly about concerns that they have creates meaningful trust. While we have a management team in place, should an employee feel that they are not being heard, they are free to come to me to discuss. Establishing that direct line of communication with each employee is so important in developing healthy working relationships. I always want to know what’s happening within the company to continually strive towards improvement and harmony among all members of our team. Simply put: I try to create a safe environment for everyone at every level. I believe that openness is the biggest reason for our stable workforce throughout the years, encouraging each employee to be vocal about their concerns in order for them to be addressed effectively.

How do you define “Leadership”? Can you explain what you mean with a story or example?

At Samuelson Furniture, we define our leadership on the principles of positivity and collaboration, something that every employee here values. As a relationship-driven company, we want to ensure that we are viewed as a respected model in the industry, which shines through in the kindness, passion, and optimism of our team. I believe a single individual with a bad attitude can bring an entire organization down, which is why we implemented our trademarked NO

ASSH\$#%™ policy. While we do put a comical spin on it, the meaning remains true to our moral code, as it steers us clear of developing a bad company culture. I maintain this policy both internally and externally—we want our staff to interact with partners and customers that carry like values and hold the utmost integrity when working together.

Here is our main question. What are the “5 Things You Need To Run A Highly Successful Family Business”? Please share a story or example for each.

1. **Stay true to who you are as a person and company.** Throughout the 47 years of my career, I have transitioned our company three separate times into different markets. Each transition was a test of our commitment to the standards of high quality, design and integrity, which we were successful in maintaining. Setting a strong foundation and identity provides opportunities to pursue new endeavors without losing who you are.
2. **Value relationships of all kinds.** Employees, suppliers, clients, and anyone else involved in the day-to-day operations of business should all be treated with the same respect and thoughtfulness that you expect for yourself. Treating people with kindness goes a long way in maintaining healthy relationships throughout the industry.
3. **Have patience.** Today's world is so accustomed to immediate results. Don't click send so quickly—let your ideas and responses breathe, think them through to ensure you're making the right choices. Success, particularly as it relates to transition and company building, requires a long-term outlook and patience to let things come to fruition. Everything worthwhile takes time.
4. **Be open to the input of others and pay attention to the process.** Keeping an open mind has brought some of the best ideas to Samuelson Furniture. Listen to the ideas of your team and inspire creativity by maintaining a safe environment.
5. **Keep a sense of humor.** Hopefully you love what you do, so have fun doing it with the people you're surrounded by!

Can you please give us your favorite “Life Lesson Quote”? Can you share how that was relevant to you in your life?

My life mantra is “GID: Get it done.” Growing up, my mother would always say it, and it's stuck with me throughout the years. It's short and sweet, with a direct meaning: in order to succeed, you have to roll up your sleeves and put in the hard work to ensure things are done right. Additionally, anyone who knows me knows that I love by the phrase “Don't fu#% it up.” And while it may seem humorous, the message behind it all is consistent: be patient and respect those around you. Remain open minded and accepting of ideas and opinions others bring to the table. There is always more to learn. It also doesn't hurt to add in a little humor every now and then — just “don't fu#% it up!”

We are very blessed that some of the biggest names in Business, VC funding, Sports, and Entertainment read this column. Is there a person in the world, or in the US with whom you would love to have a private breakfast or lunch with, and why? He or she might just see this if we tag them. :-)

If I could sit down and have a meal with anyone, it would be James Taylor. I've always loved music, and his songs have been a common thread throughout my life, a soundtrack to all of the important moments. Through his music, it feels like he's taken me along the journey of life, and that's the most beautiful thing about music; it brings people together through common experiences, even if they've never met.

You are a person of great influence. If you could inspire a movement that would bring the most amount of good to the most amount of people, what would that be? You never know what your idea can trigger. :-)

As a furniture provider to major hotels, I have often thought about what happens to the items removed from guest rooms when they're renovated. Sometimes that furniture is sold in the aftermarket, but frequently it is discarded by the ownership for little or no money. Wouldn't it be wonderful to get that furniture into the hands of people that need it? Many of those items could be put to great use for victims of natural disasters or those with the need to furnish their homes. I believe there is an opportunity for hotel owners to partner with other organizations to donate these goods and create an opportunity to give products a new life with people who truly appreciate them.

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Thank you so much for joining us. This was very inspirational.