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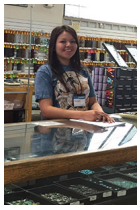

Thunderbird Supply Company started in a motel as a side job. There was down time in the motel season, so Don Cosper, owner of the Thunderbird Motel would buy turquoise, cut and cab it and sell it out of the motel.

Since then, Thunderbird has grown into a thriving business with locations in Gallup, Albuquerque and Flagstaff. The operation includes retail, wholesale and mail order for local silversmiths and crafters as well as for jewelry dealers around the United States and countries around the world.

Danny Thomason, general manager, has been with Thunderbird for 37 years. He says he worked in all areas of the business before he became the general manager. He speaks fondly of the business as a family owned business.

"Don has always stressed that customer service, you go the extra mile," Thomason said. Cosper has also taught him that the success of a business are employees.

How employees are treated makes a difference in how they treat their customers. Thomason says Thunderbird excels in customer service in all areas: retail, wholesale and silversmiths.

Leo Torrez, front sales manager, is also a long-timer. He has been with the company 21 year and said his staff has very little turnover. Many of his employees have been with the company more than five years.

"Thunderbird is a good company to work for," he said.

Thomason and Torrez have both seen three generations of silversmiths shop at Thunderbird.

Thomason proudly said, "One of the things I've seen, because I've been here since 1978, our customers children grow up and they actually become silversmiths. They've gotten into the same trade and these are the same kids that were on the counter, they brought them in in their bassinets and you see them grow up."

Asked about business trends over the years, Thomason said, "Since 1978 we've seen the spike of silver in the early 1990's. When we saw $50-$55 silver. We've seen the highs of the Southwestern style jewelry and turquoise through the years."

But 2007 was a bad year for the industry and it has taken a long time for business to come back. Thomason said just like any business there are highs and lows.

"Thunderbird is in a really good place, he said. "We're strong in the market here locally, as well as in the region."

After 44 years in business, a few things have changed at Thunderbird. They have added beading and stringing supplies to their long list of items for sale. They no longer design and print a catalog. Everything is online now. They have moved from a small building into the large one they occupy today and they have added two stores.

They currently have about 10,000 items in the store. Torrez says that is one of the harder things to train because there is so much for a new employee to learn.

Naomi Chee, on her second day at work, said she has a lot to learn but "everyone is really helpful when I have a question."

Thunderbird also makes an effort to give back to the community. This year alone, Torrez said they have donated to the Community Food Pantry, Big Brothers Big Sisters and Veterans Helping Veterans. Their next fundraiser will be for the benefit of the National Indian Youth Leadership Project.

A big part of Thunderbird's marketing includes a calendar highlighting Native American models. In one weekend, they can give out up to 400 calendars. There were 83 applicants for the six spots on the 2015 calendar. The models must be beautiful, but they must also be able to relate to people and help promote the Thunderbird Supply business model. Thunderbird will start the process of selecting their 2016 calendar models in September.

Asked about his plans for staying with the company, Thomason said, "I still find it exciting. I still find it a challenge."

When asked why the public should shop at Thunderbird, Thomason said, because we are competitively priced. He jokingly added, and because they have the best popcorn in town.