

## Never Give Up and Other Lessons Hotelier Mark Hamister Learned Before Age 18

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In honor of The Hamister Group's upcoming 30 year anniversary, I would like to share some didactic stories from the company's pre-history. My passion for excellence began to develop when I was still in junior high school. Although my style and methods have matured since then, the experiences below continue to influence my professional outlook and management style.

I hope that these anecdotes will provide some fun insight and encouragement to my co-workers, friends of The Hamister Group, aspiring young people, and anyone who is interested in corporate beginnings.

I learned how to be a persistent pain in the rear at a very young age. When I was 15 years old I bought a used gas-powered mower and started cutting neighborhood lawns. It was always breaking down, so my dad taught me how to fix engines. I became so good at engine repair that my neighbors started hiring me to fix their mowers.

I decided to expand my business by placing a very expensive advertisement in a local paper, the Kenmore Record Advertiser. It was a 4', one-column block and it cost me \$20-a huge sum of money for a teenager in 1966. But the editor refused to print it: the first word was SEX in huge, bold letters (underneath it read something like, 'now that I have your attention, let me tell you about my engine repair service . . .'). I revisited the editor's office 3 times during the course the next few weeks and called him just as many times, demanding to know why he declined publication. It wasn't false advertising, since I admitted right away that I wasn't selling sex. I asked why he was limiting my freedom of speech since he, as an editor, would not like to be the object of censorship.

In the end he gave in and ran the ad exactly as I wanted it. I'm not quite sure whether I convinced him with my free speech arguments or whether he just wanted to get rid of me; but I got more than 25 customers from that single advertisement--so many that I couldn't keep up with the work. I earned enough money to buy a 1960, vintage red Corvair when I turned 16.

During this time I was simultaneously working on my great Chef D'Oeuvre, a complete guide to outboard engine emergency repairs. 'The Book,' as I affectionately called it, was a 150-page, typed trouble-shooting manual, complete with professional-looking diagrams, the key specifications of the most common outboard motors, and a technical glossary. It was a tremendous undertaking for a young kid, especially in the days before the Internet. Convinced that it would make me famous, I sent it to numerous publishing houses. The only response I received was from a New York City publisher called Pageant Press. When a representative showed up at my Buffalo home and asked my dad for a \$5,000 check (before the visit they were unaware that I was under 18), we quickly figured out that they were vanity publishers. My 15 year-old ego was crushed.

It wasn't a wasted effort, of course, because I learned how to organize my thoughts and communicate them to others. The experience also taught me that I had to find out as much as I could about companies before sitting down and talking with them. And boat engine service, I later found, has many similarities with health care management (my first line of business as an adult). Boaters can find themselves stranded if their engine breaks down; the lives of health care customers can be endangered if they do not receive proper care. You have to get both right the first time because what you do seriously affects your customers' quality of life. Now, as a hotelier, I continue to understand that I have serious responsibilities: if hotels do not provide quality service, they can sabotage a critical business trip or ruin a much-needed vacation.

As soon as I got the Corvair I landed a job at Smith Boys Marina on the Niagara River. I was pumping gas one Saturday afternoon when a distraught customer asked me to help him fix his engine. He had planned on spending the whole weekend on his boat, only to find that it wouldn't start. I said that I would be happy to take a look, even though I wasn't a trained mechanic. The float in his carburetor was stuck-a very simple problem-so I took the carburetor lid off, freed up the float, and got the engine working again. The ecstatic look on the customer's face has remained in my mind ever since. At an important moment I chose not to say, 'I'm just a gas boy and that's not in my job description.' I encourage all of my co-workers to go the extra mile to help our customers. Sometimes very simple things can make people's day.

My next job was working in Maintenance and Repairs at JAFCO Marina. During my second year there I had my appendix out. A few weeks after surgery I was back at work, but I still wasn't supposed to lift anything heavy. One of the other mechanics put a 50 lb. car battery on a cart and told me to wheel it out and install it in a boat. While I was on my way across the marina my boss caught sight of me and came running, asking why I was pulling such a heavy load. 'Because it's my job,' I answered. He took the cart from me, hauled it to its destination, and, only after he had lifted it into place, told me that I could hook it up. He was a tough character sometimes, but he took care of his staff and put their health above his business. He taught me that sometimes even the boss has to help employees do their job.

That was my last year in high school, when I had to make applications for college. My Guidance Counselor was a very positive and enlightened individual, highly qualified to give critical advice to fragile teenagers. Among other things, she told me that: I was a screw-up who would never amount to anything; that her time was reserved for people who had a chance; and that I should forget about college and 'learn how to dig ditches.' She refused to help me research colleges or fill out applications. So I did it myself and was accepted to Rochester Institute of Technology, which was and is a very good school.

My Guidance Counselor taught me a valuable lesson: I should never give up, no matter what the obstacles. The reality is that not every college would have accepted me. I received lots of rejections. But I also found one that would: my interviewer at Rochester told me that she was impressed by my determination to succeed. I tell all young people that they must find any honest way to achieve their dreams. Never take no for an answer.

Mark Hamister is the CEO of The Hamister Group, Inc. and The Hamister Hospitality Group, LLC, a rapidly growing hotel management company. The Hamister Group is actively seeking hotel acquisitions and management contracts in the United States. For more details, please see our web sites: [www.hamisterhospitality.com](http://www.hamisterhospitality.com) and [www.hamistergroup.com](http://www.hamistergroup.com). Please feel free to send comments or questions to Mark at: [chairman@hamistergroup.com](mailto:chairman@hamistergroup.com).

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