

# The Classic difference in ownership

*There is an adjustment period after selling a business*

By Ben Shipper IV



Ben Shipper IV, CERP, is vice president of Classic Party Rentals - Chicago, Countryside, Ill. He can be reached at (708) 485-8010, or e-mail [biv@classicpartyrentals.com](mailto:biv@classicpartyrentals.com)

It is somewhat overwhelming to even think about selling a business, let alone a fourth-generation family-owned business that had grown through mergers and acquisitions. Yet last December, we sold Chicago Party Rental to Classic Party Rentals.

Our decision to sell the company created much interest and many questions in our industry since many of you started out the same way I did. Many of us began as a small family rental business, which then evolved in size and scope as the industry grew and became more sophisticated.

As the former president of Chicago Party Rental, I am now vice president of Classic Party Rentals - Chicago. As my title explains, I went from running a single rental company to becoming an employee of the largest special event rental company in the United States with around 40 locations nationwide. Many continue to ask me how the transition and adjustment is going, so I'm taking this opportunity to share my experiences with you.

In 2003, after 35 years as a family-owned business, we merged with Braun Event & Tent and then bought Events Chicago along with a few other linen, prop and décor companies. Not only did we grow through acquisitions, we also were buying new inventory every year.

We expanded our linen inventory of solids to include more than 250 specialty prints and fabrics, continued to buy the latest in tables, chairs, tabletop items and expanded our HVAC capabilities. Probably our largest investment came with the big surge of interest in clearspan structures. We recognized early on that these structures were the way of the future while adding even more value to our national rental program.

Yes, we tried to grow with the industry and keep up with what was new and exciting. With this comes a certain amount of responsibility — overseeing more than 200,000 sq. ft. of warehouse space in three locations, servicing about 2,000 events each year, managing 300 employees and maintaining somewhere around 100 vehicles that travel throughout the country.

The rental business is a wonderful industry and allowed us to create value, but converting that value to liquidity can be challenging.

There simply comes a time when you realize it takes just as much thought to sell a business as it does to run one. We were very fortunate our partners were all in agreement that the company should be sold not only for ourselves, but for the overall good of the company and its employees. It was time to turn it over to a higher level of management in order to continue to see it grow and prosper.

Selling Chicago Party Rental was not an admission of failure or defeat, but rather a great way to leave a legacy of what we all created.

Choosing who should buy your company is one of the most challenging decisions an owner will ever make. The decision to sell to Classic Party Rentals was agreed upon because they had a proven track record and could provide a stable environment for our employees.

After making the decision to sell to Classic, we've seen a lot of changes with the transition, some more obvious than others. We've mastered a new computer system, finally understand the term "stb" (shortages, theft and breakage), have heard more about branding than I ever imagined, have access to a greater depth of even more rental equipment and realize there is a growing pool of professionals of which I can now call on for guidance, support, wisdom and vision. Talk about a learning curve.

While I realize we are still relatively new to the Classic family, we are becoming more comfortable by the day. What was a new procedure a few months ago is now a routine habit for all of us. Sure, some days are easier than others and there are still times when a bit of nostalgia hits — like when the company sign outside the building was changed.

If we could go back in time, would we have done anything differently? My answer would have to be, "No." We continue to learn some things with the new Classic structure and June was the largest sales month in the history of the Chicago office.

One thing that hasn't changed with Classic is that our customers' needs always come first. We have an incredible opportunity to keep learning about the next stage of a growing business by being a part of a dynamic, established organization. Selling may not be the right decision for everyone, but it certainly was for us. **RM**