

# GROWERTALKS

## Features

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## The Scrappiness of Gemplers

Chris Beytes



“I’m remarkably better at my job today than I was three years ago,” proclaims Carl Atwell, the new “owner, president and janitor” of Gemplers Farm & Home Supply Company.

Well, not proclaims, actually, because Carl continues self-effacingly, “It doesn’t mean I’m good at my job, but I’m remarkably better than I was three years ago.”

*Pictured: Carl and Tracy Atwell, the scrappy new owners of Gemplers.*

That’s the three years Carl and his wife, Tracy, have owned the Wisconsin catalog and e-commerce company that provides commercial-grade tools, equipment, safety supplies, clothing and footwear to customers in agriculture, landscape, nursery, greenhouse, public works and skilled trades. In that time, Carl has learned first-hand about owner-operator “scrappiness”—a trait he admired in the founders and previous owners of Gemplers. It’s a trait he himself has come to represent—perhaps without even knowing it!

What is scrappiness?

“You have to just keep going and you have to just keep figuring things out,” he explains. “There isn’t a manual for that. It’s just grit and trial and error and it’s experience and it’s luck—it’s all those things.”

It’s what his farm, and nursery and landscape customers do every day, every season, and it’s part of “Gemplers Way,” too (which states, “It’s not about being right, it’s about getting it right.”)

Carl, who earned an MBA at the University of Kansas, took over the online catalog company after many years at Sprint and Lands’ End, where he learned customer service, branding and e-commerce, among other skills. Why did he take the plunge and become an owner/operator?

“I guess I just wanted to get back to something that was more about tangible things that actually help people,” he answers.

He grew up in Wisconsin and knew the brand—“Not well,” he admits, “but I knew it and I knew it had authentic heritage.”

Also, his grandfather and now cousins run Albert Lea Seed in Albert Lea, Minnesota, so perhaps serving the agricultural community is in his genes.

## **A history of scrappiness**

Gemplers' scrappiness starts with the company's founder, Bill Gempler, a Wisconsin cheesemaker-turned-tire salesman. Bill didn't start a mail-order catalog company in 1939—he started a tire-repair business, and a humble one at that, in a former barber shop in Monroe, Wisconsin (the Swiss cheese capital of the USA!). Realizing that farmers were busy, and that it was difficult to bring a tractor tire into town for repair, he made it a mobile business, driving out to the farm to serve his customers, bringing convenience to rural America. That's scrappiness.

Bill's son, Harris, continued in his father's customer service footsteps, but with the addition of modern technology: an airplane. Harris's daughter, Terry, relayed the story to Carl that her dad would load her and her brother in his small airplane and fly, barnstormer style, out into the countryside to serve their farm customers. Scrappy!

In 1984, the Gempler family sold the tire sales and repair business (which now consisted of two multi-bay service centers) to businessman Steve Schecht. But times were tough and business slowed. Desperate, he decided to attend the Wisconsin Dairy Expo and hand out a sales flyer to the farmers, promoting his tires via mail order. They responded favorably, so in 1986 he sold the tire stores and started the catalog version of Gempler's\*.

He asked his customers, "What else do you need?" That led to tire repair tools, clothing, footwear, safety gear and so on. The Gempler's catalog grew and the monthly tome became required reading, Carl says.

"Something that you left in the restroom and read it cover to cover ... like the Sears Roebuck catalog, but for farmers." More scrappiness.

The Gempler's story takes a turn in 2000 when Steve bought little-known Minnesota tool business Duluth Trading Company (creator of the "Bucket Boss"), primarily to acquire its mailing list. But Steve saw potential in Duluth Trading that he apparently didn't see in Gempler's because in 2003 he sold Gempler's to Lab Safety Supply, a division of industrial supply giant Grainger. And in 2014, Grainger sold Gempler's to another giant, outdoor power equipment company Ariens.



As Carl describes Gempler's dwindling presence among all these other brands, "Something that was kind of special and unique and knew what it was about got lost in big-company land."

*Pictured: Bill Gempler and his son, Harris (kneeling), visiting with farm customer John Brugger, Jr. At the time, farmers represented 90% of Gempler's customers.*

The first sign of Gempler's return to scrappiness came about three months after Carl bought the company. He had to get an all-new website software system up and running—an enormous undertaking. In the process, "Things got goofed up," he admits. In the heart of their peak season, orders were being put on hold instead of flowing to the warehouse for shipping. The phones started to light up. Instead of 400 calls a day, they were getting 2,000, all from customers wanting to know where their much-needed products were.

A war room was set up, everyone was in a panic, and then Carl had an idea—a scrappy one: he'd record a message for customers who are on hold.

"No marketing person told me what to say. I just recorded the message. And it was: 'Hey, this is Carl. My wife and I just bought the business. We implemented these new systems and everything is completely goofed up, and I apologize. Just know that we're working to get this sorted out.' Something like that, no more scripted than that, and with all the ums and uhs left in."

Did his scrappy idea work?

"To this day, customers still come up to me at trade shows and say, 'Are you the guy? I was so pissed at you that you'd screwed up my order. But I thought about what courage that took and I just felt sorry for you. Once you explained what was going on I calmed down a bit and we got it figured out.'"

Carl's lessons in scrappiness continued when the pandemic hit in March 2020.

"I was still really new in my job and it was concerning, for sure," he recalls. "What's happening in the world? But I knew that if I closed the doors, there's no way to survive."

The office and call center staff were able to work from home, but the distribution center employees had to stay on the job. He wanted to be there beside them, "grabbing a broom" (another tenet of the Gemplers Way), so he closed the Mt. Horeb headquarters and went to the Janesville distribution center and rolled up his sleeves.

"That turned out to be the best three months of my career because now I'm understanding the business from a different level," he said. "I know what it's like to pick product—and that means actually putting my hands on the product, I'm not looking at it on a spreadsheet. And I'm thinking 'If we carry this, why don't we carry that?' Or if I'm in shipping and I'm looking at where the packages are being sent, I'm like, 'That's cool, that guy just ordered that. Well, maybe that means we should pay more attention to this.'"

As much as Carl has learned in his first three years of running Gemplers, he'll be the first to admit he's still just like his owner/operator customers—making mistakes, fixing them, moving on.

"We're a decent-sized company," he says. "We have scale, we have inventory, we have systems, we have all these things, but at the end of the day, we're trying to find our way like you're trying to find your way. We're trying to treat people the way we want to be treated. We're pulling for you and we hope you're pulling for us."

If you call in to Gemplers today and find yourself on hold, you can hear Carl telling you, in a scrappy sort of way, what his company stands for:

"Hi. My name is Carl. I'm the owner, president and janitor of Gemplers. My wife and I bought the company three years ago, and we are a family owned, fiercely independent company. We're the anti-big-box, large-conglomerate kind of place. We love what we get to do and we have a passion for serving customers. If you have thoughts, feedback, or perhaps even an idea, please email me at [carl@gemplers.com](mailto:carl@gemplers.com). That's Carl with a "C" at [gemplers.com](http://gemplers.com). Thanks for allowing us to serve you." **GT**

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*\*They dropped the apostrophe in Gemplers about 18 months ago "just to be as approachable on as many fronts as possible," Carl explained. "Same reason I use [carl@gemplers.com](mailto:carl@gemplers.com)."*