
Meet Joe Hanselman

The owner of the Taconic Valley Lawn & Garden discusses 26 years of risks and reward.

Interview by Howard Van Lenten



The slogan for Agway is “Brands you trust. People who know...”. Joe Hanselman first joined Agway in 1970, with the last 26 years in the drivers seat in his landmark Hillsdale store. He’s seen a lot of change over time, and he has learned the importance of adapting in order to remain successful. Let’s hear the whole story:

Q: Joe, how long have you been in business here in Hillsdale?

A: It was 26 years, March 1st, that I bought the store and settled in the area.

Q: And before that?

A: Well, I grew up in Hoosick Falls, and after that, I like to say I grew up in the school of hard knocks, learning as I went along. I joined Agway

in 1970 and over the next 18 years, managed six different stores for them

Q: What attracted you to Agway?

A: I wanted to be a store manager and they offered a great training program where I learned the basics.

Q: How did you happen to end up in Hillsdale?

A: I had managed the Agway store in Millerton for two years, then left to work for a different company when I heard this store was up for sale. That was in 1987. The store was built the year before, but it wasn’t working out for the owner. For the first nine years I had a partner but for 17 years, I’ve been on my own.

Q: What do you like best about business?

A: I love helping people. But to do that, you have to know a lot about the day to day problems they have, be it in the home or garden so you can recommend the right solution. Someone will come in and say, “Do you have such and such,” and I’ll say, “No, but I can get it for you.” People like that kind of service, they get to know you and trust you and that’s very satisfying.”

Q: What do you like least?

A: Managing the expenses. Retail is full of risk, figuring out what someone wants. Over the 26 years, things we have gotten into and out of, it’s mind boggling. Years ago, we had a good pond treatment business, but that dried up with the new environmental. So you have to try something and if it doesn’t work, get out of it and try something else. When we started out, we had a 3,600 square foot building and now it’s 6,000 square feet.

Q: So you must be doing something right. But you’re in what has to be a very seasonal business. How do you survive in the down months?

A: [*Laughing*] I wish I had the answer. Everybody thinks I’m a millionaire when they see all the cars in the spring, but lots of months the lot is almost empty. Here, I’ll show you.

[Joe takes a piece of paper makes a drawing that looks like a teepee.]

The peak here at the top? That’s Memorial Day weekend. Everything else is either a lead up to that or downhill. So we try to balance it out as best we can. That’s why we started selling hunting licenses and ammunition. It was a nice seasonal business within an otherwise slow season. But now, with the new laws restricting sales of ammunition, it might kill our hunting business, and I’ll have to come up with something to fill the gap.

Q. How badly were you hit by the recession?

A: Big ticket items took a big hit. We used to sell lots of outdoor furniture, but people just topped making big expenditures for that. When the economy drops you have to go into something else to make up the difference.

Q: How has the business changed over the years?

A: The farm business has virtually disappeared in the immediate area, but we do see lots of backyard farmers, guy wants to grow some fruit trees and raise some chickens, people really interested in organics. Actually, sales have been pretty much the same year to year because we’ve adapted. When we started selling plants, for example, we had one greenhouse. Now we have two and a half, one dedicated entirely to organically grown plants.

Q: What do you think sets you apart from the competition?

A. Basically, if you walk into a similar stores, what they have is lawn and garden and pet supplies. We carry everything from soup to nuts. Granted, we don't carry a full hardware line, but for the average home owner, we have the basic plumbing and electrical supplies, a good selection of tools, and we're open seven days a week.

Q: What keeps you motivated?

A: It's the people. I have a great staff. I have great customers. I was in the Orlando airport this year and a woman comes up to me and says, "Taconic Valley." I didn't have a Taconic Valley shirt on or anything, so I said, "You've got me at a disadvantage." And she said, "I'm from Red Hook, I come up every year to buy plants." She just recognized me. That kind of thing makes me smile.

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Caption for the photo

Joe Hanselman, owner of Taconic Valley Lawn and Garden ~

Plants, shrubs, bulbs, fertilizer, garden tools, hardware, bird feed, pet food and pet supplies.