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Strike a deal

Dear Jill,

I recently gave a one-month notice to leave my job. My boss has asked me to help her interview my replacement. I respect and like my boss. However, I would rather not do this interviewing since I don't have a positive opinion about this organization. Last year the company was bought by a larger company and it just keeps getting worse. That's why I'm leaving.

ASK JILL



JILL MCGILLEN

I want to leave in good stead since I have worked here for several years. Still, I am inclined to say no to her request because I feel I cannot be honest with the person who will be taking my job.

The dilemma is that I have always been a top salesperson and want to get a good referral for future employers. I feel compelled to help my boss so that I leave with a good reputation.... but my conscience tells me otherwise. Suggestions?

— K

Dear K,

These days very little is allowed to be told to future employers in a referral check-up. Typically the HR representative from the former company will tell the time worked and the title of the person employed, such as, "This person was a sales representative employed from June 2003 to June 2007." Liability laws have become so stringent that the former employer can no longer answer the question, "Would you hire this person again?" without fear of reprisal from the former employee. So there isn't need to worry about a bad referral. And if you want a good referral you should obtain a referral letter from your manager before you leave.

Your manager needs your help, and you need hers. Strike a deal. Tell her that you would be happy to help interview future replacements under two conditions:

- 1) First, the questions that you will answer must be scripted and given to you before the interview. That way you won't be put on the spot and asked to either be untruthful or jeopardize your boss's chance to hire a good replacement. As to your conscience, consider that different people perceive job conditions differently. The conditions that make you unhappy may not bother someone else. You mention that you like and respect your boss...you can convey this with examples of why. An important issue for any potential hire to consider is the specific

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At Work With: Jay Palm, Saddle maker

By JoAnna Rodriguez

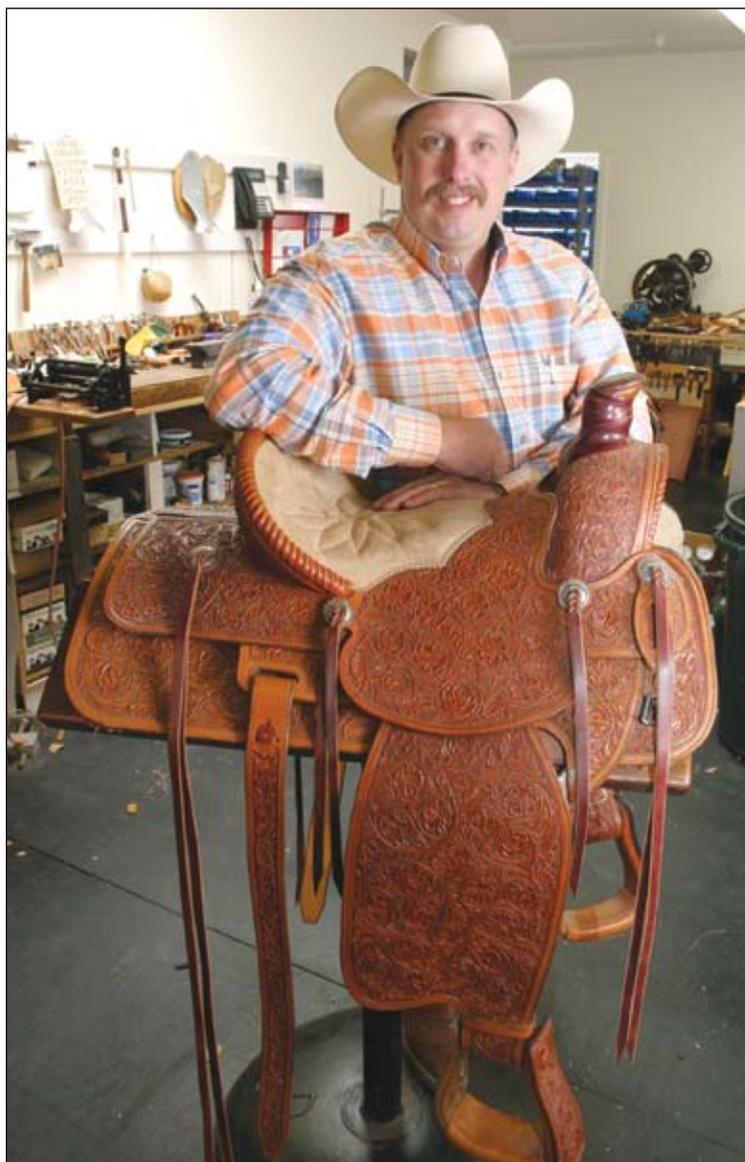


PHOTO BY JIM CHAPMAN

JAY PALM invests at least 40 hours in every saddle he makes, and he's been creating saddles for a quarter century.

TO Jay Palm, saddles are not a simple matter. Each component, from the framework to the seat, must be perfectly matched to the rider. There is no skimping when it comes to materials. For 25 years the owner of Jay Palm's Saddle Shop has been crafting custom saddles and there's nothing he'd rather be doing. "I get up in the morning and can't wait to get to work," he said.

How did you get into saddle making?

In high school they asked us to think of careers that interested us. Looking at my dad's career making saddles and looking at how there were fewer and fewer saddle makers, I thought that might be an interesting direction to head in. And my dad, Jim Palm, was great to learn from because he was very good at what he did and had quite a following. I still use [saddle] patterns handed down from my dad.

How did your father learn the craft?

He loved the cowboy life and was in rodeos for a time when he started building chaps. That's what really got him into the saddle business. He apprenticed under Walt Goldsmith, who was a saddle god of sorts in California, and worked at a custom saddle company in Santa Rosa before opening his own shop. He started making saddles in his 20s.

What's the difference between custom saddles and factory-built saddles?

Any time you purchase a factory saddle you lose craftsmanship and quality. Each factory has a different way of building saddles, but in general the saddle is going to be assembled at different stations. One person will put on the horn, which is at the front of the saddle, and that's all they'll do all day, and someone else will put the riggings on, which attach to the horse, and the next guy will put the seat on. They have quotas they have to meet and you lose attention to detail.

When I build a saddle I see the whole thing through. Factory-made saddles are still saddles and they still do the job, but they just aren't as nice as a custom-made saddle. It's like buying a Gucci purse. You look at how it is stitched together, the materials that are used, how it is shaped, the eye appeal. And if you take care of it, it will last. A knock off may look the same — if you don't look too closely — but the stitching falls apart, the hardware falls off, the straps break and the leather cracks.

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Jay Palm

Job title:
Saddle maker

Place of employment:
Jay Palm's Saddle Shop

Years on the job: 25

If you would like to appear in "At Work," contact us at AtWork@angnewspapers.com.



PHOTOS BY JIM CHAPMAN/BAY AREA NEWS GROUP

Making a saddle starts with a framework, then adding various components including padding and hand carved tooling to decorate the visible leather portions.

— AT WORK continued from page 1

What's the process that you go through to build a saddle?

First I consider what you'll do with the saddle. For example, if someone is ranching and doing a lot of heavy roping, we may want to beef up the tree — or saddle framework — and make it a little heavier. If a woman is barrel racing she'll want a light saddle and we'll cut thinner leather and use different shapes of leather so we can get the weight down. I'll also look at the type of horse that you're riding and what you do and don't like in other saddles. Based on that I'll decide on a tree that fits you and your horse the best and then I'll start building the saddle, incorporating custom options like saddle shape, padding and tooling, which is handcarved decoration on the leather.

How long does it take to make a saddle?

It's pretty much a 40-hour job for a basic saddle. If it's being tooled then the whole thing has to be taken apart, tooled and put back together. The tooling is very time consuming and can easily add 25 hours to the job.

What is one of the challenges of the business?

Having an inventory. Most saddle

makers will have a one- or two-year waiting list to build a saddle. I know a couple guys who are five years out. My waiting list is 12 to 18 months. But for people who don't want to wait, it's good to have a spec saddle.

What do you like most about your work?

I enjoy tooling. It is very time consuming, but I love it. It's a craft and you have to be creative. I'll never forget when my dad was working on a saddle and the leather he was using had a branding mark. He worked it into the tooling. I've done things like turn scratches into the center of a leaf.

How much do saddles cost?

The average cost for a custom saddle is \$3,000-\$4,000 and the average cost for a factory-made saddle is \$1,000-\$3,000. We also have entry-level saddles for \$400 that are made out of fabric instead of leather. Not everybody's budget allows for a leather saddle.

How many custom saddle makers are there in California?

Probably a dozen who are making their living at it — where they wake up in the morning and put their boots on they go out to the shop and build saddles. But every town has a guy who does repairs or builds one or two

saddles a year. It's something anyone can get into. You buy some tools, buy some leather and you take a chance.

Why are there so few full-time saddle makers?

Today, the guys who ride for a living are few. You don't have the numbers like you used to. I could probably make a living just building saddles, but it would be hard and that's why I also have a Western store. We're a full service saddle shop that sells clothes, hats, boots, but then we have a repair shop where we are building saddles every day. Making saddles is a second career for many people because it takes time to build a reputation. I'm lucky because my dad was respected and people knew his name.

How would someone learn to make saddles?

Today, it's probably a lot easier than 20 years ago because there are how-to videos on making saddles. There are also a couple trade schools like Sierra Saddlery School in Las Cruces, New Mexico. Or you camp out with a saddle maker and learn the tricks of the trade. When my dad was learning you'd apprentice at a shop and they'd start you out at the bottom sweeping the floors. Then they'd put you on something like building bridles. The first thing they made him do is braid

roping reins. It's a long and tedious job and no one likes to do it, but it was a way to weed out who didn't have their heart in it.

What would help a saddle maker succeed?

You need to build a reputation. And that can take a couple years, which is why you need to have some way to survive when you are first getting going. And you need business sense. You have to take care of your customers and in today's day and age that's just about all we have against chain stores. You also have to be a people person and be versatile. Working with leather you have to have a little imagination.

How much could someone make in the business?

You can make as much as you want — the sky's the limit — but the key is how many you can sell and how many you can produce. If you can profit \$1,000 a saddle and build one a week, that's pretty good. It's not a get-rich-quick business. You have to love what you do. I get up in the morning and can't wait to get to work.

Jay Palm's Saddle Shop is located at 5701 Old Redwood Highway, Petaluma. For more information visit www.jaypalm.com or call 707-795-5189.

ASK JILL

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- 2) details about their new boss. Perhaps more importantly, make sure that you receive your referral letter before meeting with potential hires. This will ensure that the letter gets written.

It is in your manager's best interest to make sure that you transfer as much knowledge as possible before you depart, especially since you were there "several years." If you were in her place you would probably be asking for the same things. Try to comply with her requests while also making sure to get what you need in order to feel good before exiting the company.

Real integrity and professionalism shine most brightly when they are least expected. After giving notice, many workers lose interest in their jobs in spite of still being paid for their remaining time at work. The way we leave a job affects the way we remember (and are remembered in) that job. A good ending increases the chance of making a good beginning elsewhere.

Dear Jill,

I am an internal company trainer looking for good videos to use in classes. The topics are communication, management and leadership. There are several catalogs that I have reviewed and the DVDs are very expensive. Do you have any reasonably-priced and effective DVDs that you could recommend?

— N

Dear N,

I like two catalogs published by Kantola Productions: Stanford Executive Briefings and Kantola Productions Training Solutions. The Stanford Briefings, geared toward executive leadership, are presented by well-respected leaders in their fields (Bill Gates, Libby Sartain, Jack Zenger, etc.) and professors from top schools including The Stanford School of Business. Kantola's Training Solutions are high quality dramatizations of business issues such as sexual harassment, leadership, management and communications. Visit kantola.com.

Jill McGillen is president of NEXT TURN Consulting. Send questions to askjill@nextturnconsulting.com. For additional work advice go to www.nextturnconsulting.com.