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Behind the Brand

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Reduce, reuse, renew

By Lisa Karl

One of the things you realize when you are moving from one home to another -- or one office space to another -- is that you've more than likely accumulated a lot of things. Maybe that sofa is getting old or won't fit into your new home. If you don't want to move it, you probably will try to call some charities to see if they'll take it. The problem is, different charities have different guidelines for what they will take. For bigger items, most charities require that the items be moved outside or into a garage.

"What I realized early on was people were sensitive to the fact of where their furniture was going," says Colin Wheeler, president of 123 Junk. "So I changed the game plan, because you have to respond to the market."

The idea for 123 Junk germinated during Wheeler's first post-college job as a sales person for a large moving company. Time and time again, his customers were looking to get rid of things they didn't want to pay to move. Wheeler reached out to some local hauling companies, but couldn't seem to get a relationship going.

"I was 23 at the time and had nothing to lose, so I became a junk man," Wheeler says, grinning.



Colin Wheeler, president of 123 Junk, stands in front of one of four trucks in his fleet. The company has two full-time staff employees and seven part-time employees, who average about 30 hours a week. "During busier times -- like in the summer -- we hire more workers, usually college students," Wheeler says.

For the first year, 123 Junk hauled unwanted items to the landfill. As Wheeler and his employees took away usable furniture, appliances and the like, customers kept asking, "What do you do with this stuff?" Wheeler realized he needed a good answer to that question, so he began to develop a plan to donate usable items to local charities. It seemed like a good solution. 123 Junk could reduce its landfill fees, customers could get tax write-offs, and charities would benefit from usable items. The concept would also set the company apart from its competitors and give it a marketing edge. The objective was to match a charity near the job site, but Wheeler ran into many of the problems his customers had. Each charity has its own rules and guidelines on donations and hours of operation, and trying to deal with all of those led to inefficient use of time and resources. "We would spend half a day driving around from charity to charity just to live up to our promises to donate," Wheeler says.

Developing a hub system

As the company grew, Wheeler brought on Zach Johnson as his business development manager. Johnson took over the charity angle, meeting with different organizations and developing relationships. He reached out to the Habitat for Humanity ReStore, which sells items donated by businesses and individuals at a discount to the general public, with proceeds benefiting Habitat for Humanity's core mission.

With the ReStore, 123 Junk developed a donation system around a central location, a rented storage pod at the Recycling and Disposal Center in Fairfax County (the landfill). Once the company is done with a job, the employees take the trucks to the landfill, transfer donatable items to the pod and dump the rest. 123 Junk informs ReStore -- and other charitable and recycling partners -- that there are items available. Those organizations will go pick up the items and leave the receipts. From there, 123 Junk collects the receipts and mails them to their customers. "It's our hub," Wheeler says. "It's absolutely crucial in saving time."



Left: Joe Drewer and Colin Wheeler load unwanted furniture from a townhouse in Sterling onto a 123 Junk flatbed truck. Using flatbed trucks allows the company to carry more per load and saves their customers money. Center: Almost 230 million tons of trash are generated each year in the United States. These books will have another life, either recycled or donated to a charity, which will use the profits from their sale to help those in need. Right: James Snowden manages the Habitat for Humanity ReStore in Chantilly. 123 Junk is a sustaining partner of the ReStore, donating used items in good condition for resale. "The goal is to keep as much as possible out of the landfills," says Colin Wheeler, president of 123 Junk.

Good for the environment, good for people

At a recent job site in Sterling, Wheeler consulted with Terri Robinson, a Realtor with RE/MAX Select Properties. Wheeler took notes as Robinson went room to room in a townhouse, telling him what would go and what would stay. When the property is ready to go on the market, it will be decluttered so it can be staged and listed.

Many of Robinson's clients are aware that things need to be removed, and some others need the subject brought up a little more delicately. She doesn't hesitate to recommend 123 Junk, as she sees how careful the workers are inside someone's home. "They take a lot of care with the property," she says. "They may be hauling junk, but they don't treat the things and the house like junk."

Robinson met Wheeler through another agent in her office. Wheeler even came to her RE/MAX office and spoke to all of the agents about the services they offer. Robinson is impressed with the green aspect of the company. "They don't just take it to the dump," she says. "They sort through it and decide what can be donated."

The company's pricing also impresses her. Robinson says the charge is by the truckload -- not by the hour. In addition, because 123 Junk uses flatbed trucks, items can be piled vertically, saving room and money for her clients.

Partnering to recycle and reuse

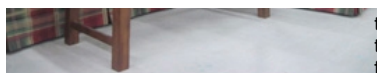
The Habitat for Humanity ReStore in Chantilly is filled with household furniture, appliances -- even toilets. "A lot of contractors come here first," manager James Snowden says. "We have great prices."

The ReStore will take donations at their location or pick them up. "The donations have to be left outside or in a garage," Snowden says. "We can't go inside a house. If someone has something they can't get outside, I tell them to call 123 Junk."



The donations from 123 Junk fill a need for ReStore. In order to make money, the ReStore needs to do one or two pickups a day. 123 Junk fills the gap during slow times. ReStore simply goes to the storage pod at the landfill and takes the items to the store. "This is another avenue for them to get rid of their stuff and reduce their fees at the landfill, and it's good for our mission," Snowden says.

The pickups from 123 Junk generate anywhere from \$5 to \$1,000 when resold by the ReStore. Snowden comments that the items from 123 Junk tend to be of very good quality. "A lot of the stuff we get from



Items like this desk and couch are sold at the Habitat for Humanity ReStore. The proceeds from these sales go to support Habitat's mission of providing affordable housing to Northern Virginia residents. Keeping the items out of landfills benefits the environment, the charity and the buyers of the furniture.

them sells quickly,' he says. "We had an almost new black refrigerator that sold right away, and a teak desk that sold almost before it got to the floor."

Those dollars are crucial in supporting the mission of Habitat for Humanity: to build safe, decent and affordable homes for low-income families in Northern Virginia. Wheeler is proud that 123 Junk is a sustaining business partner of Habitat for Humanity Northern Virginia's ReStore in Chantilly.

123 Junk also recycles metals and electronics through partners such as Potomac Metals, Davis Industries, Potomac E-Scrap, and others. TVs, video games, cell phone, computers and other electronics are either recycled or refurbished.

Wheeler's long-term goal for 123 Junk is to add donation hubs throughout Northern Virginia. Currently the company donates or recycles about half of what it collects. Wheeler and Johnson are always looking for ways to grow that percentage. Wheeler notes it's important to keep what they add to landfills at a minimum and says, "We aim to be the leader of the eco-movement in the junk industry."

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