

## Family structure aids decision-making

When the Brenners get together to talk about buying a new oven or refrigerator, they're more likely to make a decision over a quick bagel and coffee than around a conference table.

Quick decisions are just one advantage experts say a family business has over another kind of company.

"When we want to do something, like buy a new oven, we just hold a meeting and decide to do it," Joe Brenner says. "There are no committees to go through and nobody's approval to get."

The three brothers and their sister have never formally divided up the duties in the kosher bakery started by their father. But each has a clear idea of who's in charge of what.

"Joe, we let him be the boss," Itsey Brenner, 67, says of his youngest brother, Joe, 58. "Me, I like the baking part and Charlie likes to count the money." Their sister, Yetta, handles retail sales.

They have learned to play on each other's strengths and weaknesses.

"Joe is the gutsy one," says his brother, Charlie. "He'll say, 'Let's do this or let's do that,' like when we decided to buy new ovens from Holland. "Itsey is the conservative one and I try to go along with the both of them."

The Brenners have faced every possible family conflict. There was the son of one of the brothers who wanted to be part of the business but couldn't handle the job. There was the former spouse who meddled so much the brothers finally struck a formal agreement that wives would have no part in the business.

The Brenners find the solution to most disagreements is compromise. The reason they make two types of rye bread, one soft and the other hard, is because they couldn't all agree on which way it should be made.

The business has been in the family since 1903, when Abe Brenner would hitch up his horse and buggy and deliver his fresh-baked bread house to house. All eight children worked in the bakery, Joe recalls, but today only a few third-generation Brenners are active.

"The business is so much more involved today," Joe Brenner says. "Things are so complex. We have over 50 employees, a wholesale operation, a retail outlet and a delicatessen. There's so much involved, it's hard to say if one person could take it over."

The Brenners say they depend as much on longtime employees, including a former son-in-law, as they do their own family members.

Family conflicts over the years have simmered, but always seemed to cool off before they reached the boiling point. The son that wasn't working out quit the



Joe, Yetta, Charlie and Itsey Brenner run Brenner Bros. Bakery and Delicatessen.

Vic Condiotti / Seattle Times

business before his uncles were forced to insist something be done. Other times, they frankly admit it has been easier to let problems with nieces or nephews slide by.

"I think you tend to be a little more lax when family is involved," Joe Brenner says. "But every parent knows more about his son than anyone else does."

The Brenners must make a decision soon about the bakery's future. They've been approached in the past about selling, but always resisted.

"It's clear that there will have to be some decisions made and it may be easier for the children to become stockholders rather than operators," Joe says. "I can't really see my own son coming in here and enjoying and doing a lot of what I do."