

Acting their age

BY TIM MORAN

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Slavery still existed in the United States, David Livingstone was exploring the Zambezi River, and the Wells Fargo & Co. freight service was brand new when an attorney named Sidney Davy Miller opened a practice on Jefferson Avenue.

The newly proclaimed republic of Hawaii had just been annexed by the United States, and a baby named Cole Porter was taking his first breaths when watchmaker Joseph Lachman went into business at Michigan Avenue and Junction.

Today, in an age when familiar names are disappearing in mergers or losing out to brash young competitors, those companies are still in business.

Miller, Canfield, Paddock and Stone plc (1862) is Michigan's second-largest law firm. Lachman and Co. Trophies (1893) is

under fourth-generation management. Marathon Linen Services Inc. (1918) today provides uniforms and linens to Detroit businesses, hotels and restaurants.

They're only a few among Detroit's older companies, many of which are past the century mark and still others beyond 150 years in business. And in their experience, age can be a two-edged sword, an advantage in some aspects of marketing but one that must be handled carefully.

Advertising agencies know longevity can be a boon or a curse, said Steve Brown, executive vice president and general manager of the Detroit operations of the advertising agency J. Walter Thompson. The agency has a long Detroit history, beginning with an office in the Kresge Building in 1909. Today the agency is the second-largest in Detroit, with 550 people reporting to its Michigan offices at 500 Woodward Ave.

"My first assessment would be, if they've been in business for that long, they've been

successful," Brown said of long-lasting businesses as clients.

"On the down side, I would ask how flexible they are and adaptable to change — changes in their customer base, competitors, changes in technology and its impacts."

Long-established businesses can carry their years gracefully, their principals say.

"We're really very proud to have been here as long as we have, to have been as stable a member of the Detroit business community and legal community as we have, and we feel that gives us a real practice advantage," said Beverly Burns, deputy CEO of Miller, Canfield.

But it's important, she said, to make sure clients learn about longevity after they've chosen the firm for its work.

Longevity can be an extremely important marketing tool when your business is generational in its focus, said Carrie Lachman Lenchner, president of Lachman Enterprises Inc. The corporation runs Lachman and Co. Trophies, a 6,000-square-foot showroom and shop catering to high-end custom trophies and executive promotional items.

"He eventually changed to a full-fledged jewelry store; then we branched out into corporate gifts and eventually into corporate awards."

Lachman's uses longevity to reinforce its importance as a point of stability for customers, Lenchner said. While the company notes "Since 1893" in its advertising, longevity helps more in word-of-mouth connections.



Joseph Lachman's children — Ben, Julius, Mike, Barney and Annie — stand in front of the original storefront. Photo courtesy of Lachman and Co.