



## FAMILY BUSINESS

*Rule No. 9 for Living Happy, Happy, Happy*  
It's Cheaper to Hire Your Relatives  
(Unless You Don't Like 'Em)

**P**eople ask me all the time about the early days of Duck Commander, when it was just Pa, Kay, the boys, and me trying to learn how to operate a heavy lathe and build duck calls in a small woodshop outside our home. I'm sure that at various times Kay and everyone else assumed I was crazy, and they were probably right.

Like my childhood, our company started from humble, humble beginnings. When we first started fishing the Ouachita River, it was so slow you might see two buzzards fighting over an inner tube! When we ran out of roadkill to bait our nets, the buzzards fought over anything else they could find! After we launched Duck Commander, our first year of sales totaled only eight thousand dollars. I told Kay, "I know I have a master's degree, but I'm gonna stay the course on this one. I think this will work. If the Al-

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mighty is with us, it will work.” It was just like when I persuaded her to move out next to the river, so I could give up my teaching job to become a commercial fisherman. I told her then, “If you get me a place on the river, I’ll fish the river. I’ll be the smartest commercial fisherman out there.”

Of course, everybody laughed at us in the early days. People would come by our house and say, “Let me get this right: you have a master’s degree from Louisiana Tech University, you could’ve played professional football, but you turned that down so you could do *what?*”

I always told them that I was fishing the river and following my dream. I got seventy cents a pound on the catfish and thirty cents a pound on the buffalo, which wasn’t a bad living. I was determined to see it through until the duck call business was big enough to support us, and then I would hang my fishing nets up for good. A lot of my friends tell me they thought I was a complete idiot.

Now I ask them, “Well, it’s forty years since you thought I was an idiot; what about now?” Now they’re calling me a genius! Boy, it took forty years for them to turn, but now they finally say, “That old guy ain’t as dumb as he looks.”

I remember making a speech somewhere and a man walking up to me after I was finished. He said, “Mr. Robertson, I’ll tell

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you what I got out of that speech: You're kind of like one of them old Airedale terrier dogs. You ain't as dumb as you look!"

I told the guy, "Man, I appreciate those words of wisdom."

I laughed at that one; that was a good one.

I might not be the most intelligent guy on Earth, but I always had the wherewithal, determination, and work ethic to turn my business into a success, or at least to make it profitable enough to feed and care for my family, which is really all I ever wanted.

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When the serious work started at Duck Commander, I installed a shed roof on the south side of our workshop to shelter a heavy-duty table saw my brother Tommy loaned me to help get the business going. Shavings and sawdust always covered the floor in untidy piles. In one area were cedar shavings, which were cut while we made the end-piece blanks of the duck calls. In another pile was the walnut residue sheared off the call barrels, which I turned on the lathe inside my shop. Several cedar and walnut logs, the woods from which the original Duck Commander calls were made, were piled up in front.

But the most noticeable addition, and the first thing visitors saw when they came to our house, was the roughly lettered sign

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that proclaimed DUCK COMMANDER WORLDWIDE. I took an old board, painted it white, and lettered it with black. Then I nailed it up at an angle, which I did for a little bit of show (remember what I said about being dramatic?). People would come out to our house, see the sign above the shop door, and walk around wondering, “What have you got out there?” More than four decades later the sign still hangs in front of our property.

Obviously, there was a lot of learning on the job, including enough errors and corrections to drive me nearly mad. But it didn't take us long to get a production line going, and Alan, Jase, Willie, Kay, and Pa were my crew. Our assembly line was out on the porch of our house, which was screened in at the time. Pa was always helping me. Willie was the youngest, so his job was to sweep up the sawdust in the shop. My oldest son, Alan, was given a little more responsibility—he used a band saw to cut the ends of the calls. Then I ran a drill press to set up and calibrate the end pieces.

Jase and Willie also dipped the calls in polyurethane and dried them on nails, which wasn't a very fun job. They hung the calls on a piece of plywood, eight feet by four feet, which leaned against one of the big pine trees in our yard. Neat rows of four-inch finishing nails were driven into the plywood, about two inches apart, from top to bottom. They'd open a five-gallon bucket of polyurethane, insert their fingers into the ends of duck-

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call barrels until they had four on each hand, then dip them into the thick liquid—submerging a little of their fingers to make sure the resin coated the barrels completely. With a light touch so as not to mar the finish, they worked each one off their fingers as they placed them carefully and separately on protruding nails. Then they repeated the operation until the entire board was filled with shiny, coated duck-call barrels drying in the open air.

It was a very tedious job, and a big one for boys who were so young, but it was all part of our quest to build the best duck calls in the industry. The dipping ensured a smooth, clear, permanent coat of resin that protected the wood. Sometimes, there would be one little rough spot at the mouthpiece end where the barrel touched a nail. When that happened, it had to be sanded smooth before the call could be sold. Once the calls were dry, the boys sanded them down to a fine finish. I think my boys were a little embarrassed going to school with their fingers stained brown from tung oil, but it was one of the hazards of the job. There were always rows of hard tung-oil drippings in our yard, and the trunks of the trees were covered in tung oil. The especially bad part for them was when I figured out that the more you sanded and dipped the calls, the shinier they were. That meant even more dipping!

Last, and most important, I blew every single call to make sure it sounded like a duck. From day one, I was convinced my

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duck call sounded more like a live duck than anything else on the market, and I wanted to make sure my products were always perfect. A small flaw in appearance wasn't critical, but not so in sound. It had to sound like a mallard hen, which was the standard I established for my calls. Duck Commander still follows that same principle today. A faulty call was either fixed or rejected. We used the rejects as fire starters in our wood heater for years.

Another early problem we had to overcome was packaging. We didn't have any! In fact, I didn't even have my name on the calls. I went up to the paper mill in West Monroe, and they built me sheets of flat boxes we could cut out and then fold it into shape, in which a duck call would fit neatly. The boxes were plain white with no writing on them.

Armed with my first boxed duck calls, I left home to flood the market. The first sale of Duck Commander calls was to Gene Lutz of Gene's Sporting Goods in Monroe, and the next was to Harold Katz in Alexandria, Louisiana. Then I drove over to Lorant's Sporting Goods in Shreveport, Louisiana, a reputable old hunting store that had been in business for years. I walked in and was able to see Mr. Lorant, the owner. I put my boxed duck calls on the counter and asked him, "How many of these duck calls do you want?"

Lorant picked up a couple and looked them over. Then he

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looked up at me dubiously and asked, “You want me to buy these?”

“Yeah, put them on the market,” I told him. “They’re Duck Commanders, and I’m going into the business.”

He looked at them again and said, “Where’s the name on them? You don’t have any printing on your box?”

“Nah, they’ll find out who I am,” I replied.

Lorant paused a minute, then said to me in all seriousness, “Son, let me give you some advice: get some printing on your boxes. You have to have some printing on your box. You are not going to do any good with that.”

Then Lorant told me he’d buy six of them. It was the beginning of a good relationship. Once we started building them, Lorant went on to sell thousands—tens of thousands of dollars’ worth.

I took Lorant’s advice to heart, and our packaging became a priority. We had an attractive box printed, which was covered with a transparent plastic top that showcased the duck call. Visible through the top of the box when it was placed properly on a shelf was the duck call and its now-famous logo: a mallard drake with wings cupped and legs lowered, looking down to the land. There was even an attractive sticker affixed to the barrel of the duck call. The first logo drawings were printed in gold on a green



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background. “Duck Commander,” “Phil Robertson,” and my Luna, Louisiana, address were easily visible.

Over the next few years, many evenings were spent inside our house, with me blowing Duck Commanders and the rest of the family cutting boxes, folding them, and filling them with the approved calls. No one was exempt from folding boxes. If you came to our house, you were probably going to participate in packaging—after eating one of Kay’s delicious home-cooked meals, of course. It was a sociable time, and everyone talked and enjoyed it as they worked, while tuning out my duck-call blowing. Eventually, I also pressed my brothers into service, and each took his turn on the lathe at one time or another, using the templates to turn out barrels and end pieces.

Even in the early days of the operation, I was planning for our future. As the early Duck Commanders were being built, I carefully measured the calls that sounded just like I wanted with micrometers and calipers, recording and saving the dimensions for the time when we would build molded plastic calls. My database was eventually used to design a uniform product that eliminated the flaws inherent in wood.

But even today, many waterfowl hunters still prefer the wooden calls, and sometimes their sound is superior. At one point, we were doing well enough that I wanted to recall the first

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calls we made because they were so crude looking. They weren't nearly as well done as the newer ones—either wood or plastic. I just wanted to get them out of sight. Some of them looked pretty ragged, and I figured they would hurt future sales. Using a list Kay kept of our customers, we sent out a letter offering them a new Duck Commander if they would send their old one back to us.

I was amazed. The offer was met with suspicion as to what we were up to. Hunters from all over were calling or writing to say they wouldn't part with their calls for anything. They told us they were the "originals," and they weren't going to give them up. We were surprised how quickly we'd established brand loyalty among our customers.

The early marketing of Duck Commander depended strictly on me, although I enlisted my brother Tommy to call on some stores in the East Texas area where he lived. I traveled in a four-state area, driving through Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Texas. I stopped in each town I passed through, calling on small sporting goods stores, hardware stores, five-and-dime stores—any business that looked like it might have an interest in selling duck calls. I did it from an old blue and white Ford Fairlane 500 that Kay inherited from Nannie. While Alan was driving it one time, a delivery truck sideswiped it, and the whole left side—fender,

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door, and back panel—was gone. Neither vehicle stopped, and I chose to ignore the accident. But the Ford still ran well and was carrying the first Duck Commanders to market.

I had one big selling tool—besides my loveable personality and redneck charm, that is. I made a recording of live mallard ducks calling and then added the sound of me blowing on a Duck Commander as a comparison. I tried to sell the idea that I was closer to sounding like a duck than anyone in the world.

My approach was successful. After we sold \$8,000 worth of Duck Commanders the first year, we sold \$13,500 the second year. The next year, we sold \$22,000. I told Kay, “We are now rolling.” The next year we sold about \$35,000. We didn’t hit six figures until about ten years after we started, but the business grew bigger every year.

Out of that first year’s sales, I made about a dollar on each duck call. We were selling them to the stores for \$4.27 wholesale. I figured they cost me about \$3.20 total, after paying Mr. Earhart to build them, travel, paperwork, and all. We did a lot better when we began to build them ourselves.

About the third year after I started, I decided I was going about the selling all wrong. I felt I needed to go to Stuttgart, Arkansas, the duck capital of the world. I had been driving around trying to interest these little old sporting goods stores. I needed to raise my sights and become a little more ambitious. So I took my

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tape and cassette player, climbed in the old Ford, and headed for Stuttgart, 185 miles away. I pulled up in front of the only sporting goods store in town, a little bitty place.

I got out with my tape recorder, the live ducks comparison, and some duck calls strung around my neck.

I walked into the store and there were two guys sitting at a table. I was about to learn they were world-champion duck callers, who just happened to be sitting in the store. The fellow behind the counter asked me if he could help me.

“Is this the duck capital of the world?” I asked him.

“You’re here,” he said with a proud smile on his face.

“Well, I figure this is where I need to start,” I told him. “Now, here’s the deal. I have a duck call here—hanging around my neck. It’s closer to a duck than any duck call that has ever been made. Do y’all want to hear it?”

They all looked at each other and kind of grinned.

“Let me guess,” the guy behind the counter said. “You’re out of Louisiana?”

“That’s where I’m from,” I said.

“Blow that thing,” the guy told me.

I blew one of the calls around my neck, concentrating on the plain, simple sound of the mallard hen with no frills. I under-



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stood I was blowing for an audience conditioned by duck-calling contests, which often featured forty-note high calls that not only taxed a caller's lung power but also made the rafters ring. The "lonesome hen" call blown by contestants would make you weep. They could make a duck call talk. But I was making the outlandish claim that they didn't sound like a duck.

They listened. Then they chuckled, kind of laughed. They were still chuckling when the guy behind the counter picked up my duck call, blew on it, and said, "I see your problem with this duck call right off the bat."

"What's the problem?" I asked him.

"Air leaks a little bit around here," he told me. "You've got an air leak."

"That's the way it's designed," I responded. "Air leaks and all, it's still closer to a duck than anybody's."

I turned to the men at the table and asked if they duck-hunted.

"Yeah, we do a little duck-hunting," one of them told me.

"These guys are world-champion duck callers," explained the man behind the counter, with the proper amount of respect in his voice.

"Well, good night!" I exclaimed. "Boys, let's have us a contest right here. Get your duck calls and get up here. We'll tape your duck calls beside that of these live ducks. I've already got mine on

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it. We'll listen to the ducks, then all the calls. Then we'll just vote on it. Whoever is closest to a duck wins!"

The guy behind the counter looked at me and said, "You see that door there? Hit it!"

He ran me out of there! But as I was driving out of town, frustrated and still fuming over my reception in a little nondescript sporting goods store, I saw a beer joint with about fifteen cars parked around it. On an impulse, I wheeled my car into the parking lot, squealing to a stop.

I walked in the door and hollered, "Hey!"

The customers were all sitting around drinking beer. They turned and looked at me.

"Is there a duck caller in the house?" I asked loudly.

They all looked at me like they were deaf.

"Is there anybody in here who can blow a duck call?" I asked again.

Several of the customers pointed to a man sitting and quietly having a beer. He looked around at me.

"Come out here, I want to show you a duck call that I built," I told him. "I want you to tell me how I can sell these things up here. They just ran me out of the sporting goods store down there."

"They did?" the man asked with bewilderment in his voice. "Yeah, let me listen to it."

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He went outside with me. I blew my call for him.

“Son, let me tell you something,” the man told me. “I’ve been blowing duck calls for a long time. My hunting call is a Yentzen—until now. How much you want for one of them things?”

“Ten dollars,” I told him.

“I want one right now,” he said.

“No, I’m going to give it to you,” I told him.

The man invited me to his house. I introduced myself to him and followed him back through town.

“Robertson, let me tell you something,” he told me later. “These guys up here are making big money selling these world-championship duck calls. They don’t want any ten-dollar duck calls up here in their way. To them, they’re so far above you. What they are going to tell you is that unless you win the world championship blowing like they did, you’re never going to sell any duck calls.”

“But their calls don’t sound like ducks,” I told him.

“I know they don’t,” he replied. “But they have a deal going here, a clique, and they’re making big money.”

“So what do you think I should do?” I asked him.

“Aw, you’ll sell duck calls,” he replied. “You’ll end up selling way more than they will. I’ve heard a lot of duck calls. But I’ve never heard one that sounded closer to a duck than that. That thing is a duck! These guides up here, the ones that hunt, they’ll

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buy them. So will all serious duck hunters. You're just going to have to stay the course."

You know what? I don't remember the man's name; I only recall that he was a rice farmer. But his advice and encouragement carried me a long way over the next few years. About ten years later, when I developed a mallard drake call, a few of them were ordered by that little sporting goods store in Stuttgart. I guess they finally realized my call sounded like a duck.

The guy behind the counter in that store wasn't the only one who had doubts about the Duck Commanders. It probably took me twenty-five years to convince the duck-calling world that there is a difference between meat calling and contest calling.

The Duck Commander has come a long way. But it hasn't been easy.

Somehow, we stayed the course and it turned out. There is a God, and He blessed us because we did what was right—we loved Him, we loved our neighbor, and we hunted ducks. He is real and what He said He would do is what happened. He said, you love Me and do what's right, and I'll bless you—so much so that your barns will be full, packed full, tapped down, and running over. I only know that either our success came from Him or

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I was one of the luckiest souls that ever came along with a little idea. All I can say is it's one or the other, but I'm leaning toward the Almighty doing exactly what He said He would do.

The Almighty blessed us, and Duck Commander did work, just like He said it would. Yes, it took a long, long time for us to get to where we are today. But even before our success, and long before *Duck Dynasty* came along, everybody was happy, happy, happy. In other words, it wasn't like my love for the Almighty was contingent upon whether the blessings came or not. My prayer was always: "Lord, if You bless me, I'll thank You; but if You don't, I'll be thankful for what I have. I have plenty. I'm in good shape." Even before our success came along, we had air-conditioning, color TV, hot water, and a bathtub. We had everything we needed. When I was a boy, we didn't even have bathtubs or commodes, but I was still as happy and content as I am today. As long as I was doing what God said was right and living my life for Him, I knew everything would work out in the end—one way or another.