

How one little guy holds on



Main St. mainstays Rick Smith and his sister, Sharon Brontoli, owners of P.C. Smith & Son.

to patrons like Everett Vail, who has shopped there since 1956, it looks like a fifth generation will one day run the business that Rick Smith's great-great grandfather founded. "Some things are more important than price," says Vail, who like many regulars sometimes drops by to say hello or share a box of doughnuts.

P.C. Smith & Son competes by

In a battle between David and Goliath, the smart money usually backs the big guy. But when *Lowe's* and *Home Depot* opened stores a few miles from the P.C. Smith & Son Hardware store in Saugerties, N.Y., co-owner Rick Smith became determined to buck the odds.

While the store lost sales of big-ticket items like power tools and garden equipment, it didn't lose customers. And now, thanks

playing off its strengths. "They're huge, with a humongous selection and low prices," Smith says of the big competitors. "We're a convenient, small-town hardware store."

With the help of True Serve, the cooperative that supplies much of the store's merchandise, Smith's keeps tabs on the competition's prices for key items like nuts, bolts, and plumbing and electrical supplies. "We're not going to beat *Lowe's* or *Home Depot*, but we want to be in the ballpark," Smith says.

Smith's also competes by stocking odd or hard-to-find items—things like kerosene-heater wicks or 1960s-style cabinet knobs. If someone comes in for one and you have it, you've made a customer for life, Smith says. And he had the foresight to buy adjacent property to provide customer parking.

It's impossible to imagine *Home Depot* allowing a customer to walk out without paying, but it's no big deal at Smith's.

"If a guy's in a hurry, he'll hold up the item and say, 'Rick, did you get that?'" says Smith. Or a customer may pick up a 50 cent item and say, "I'll take care of it next time." Invariably they do.

Over the past 20 years, the number of independent hardware stores has declined by more than 10 percent, to around 21,000.

Source: National Retail Hardware Association