When Debbie Schaeffer’s grandmother, Beatrice, asked her to “come into the business and see if you like it,” Schaeffer never imagined she’d one day take on—and outlast—the likes of Sears, Circuit City and a hhgregg superstore. The “business,” Mrs. G Appliances, was founded in 1935 in Trenton, N.J., as a plumbing supplier by Schaeffer’s beloved grandparents, Abe and Beatrice Greenberg, the Mrs. G, though the sunny logo bears granddaughter Debbie’s face.

A civil engineer by profession, Schaeffer had enjoyed being part of teams for commercial and residential construction projects in New York City and the Garden State, she had taken time off in the 1990s after the birth of her twin daughters until they entered kindergarten. By 2000, Schaeffer explained, “My parents had retired from the store and my grandfather had passed away for quite some time. My grandmother was in her early 80s.

“I was always close with my grandmother;” said Schaeffer fondly. It was the close bond they shared that propelled Schaeffer to not only take her grandmother up on her offer to “dip your toes in the water” at the store, but to dive in.

Schaeffer’s first big idea: to invest in high end appliance brands such as Viking, Sub-Zero, Wolf and Thermador. It was important, however, to remain loyal to the store’s first generation of customers. That meant the everyday brands were still front and center, and the premium brands were marketed to a new customer base: kitchen designers, contractors, architects and developers—a world Schaeffer knew well.

Next, she launched the store’s first website, ensuring it was search engine optimized—a concept still in its infancy in the early 2000s. And as social media platforms began to emerge in the mid-2000s and blogging gained in popularity, Schaeffer made sure Mrs. G was ever-present, joining the conversation.

Today, Mrs. G is a regional icon, situated in historic Lawrence Township, N.J., between New York and Philadelphia. The 12,000-square-foot, state of the art showroom is tour-worthy, featuring a Jenn-Air community kitchen for special events and cooking demos with guest chefs. Here, Schaeffer shares the “secret sauce” of Mrs. G’s success.
Q: Give us a sense of the market in 2000 when you took over the store for your grandmother.

Debbie Schaeffer (DS): Best Buy, Home Depot and Lowes were opening several stores all over our delivery radius, which squeezed our market share. I needed Mrs. G to stand out among the competition. None of the big box stores were carrying high end appliance brands.

Q: With the introduction of premium appliances, how did you market to two distinct customer segments?

DS: On the core side, we used traditional marketing tools to promote our sales: flyers through our buying group (NECO Alliance), radio, newspaper and cable advertising. On the high-end appliance side, I took an active role, knocking on doors of architects, kitchen designers, contractors. We also held sponsored events in-store to draw people in. We had judges before the Cooking Channel! We were doing cooking competitions sponsored by restaurants, a regional grocer (the Wegmans’ Chef Series) and the brands themselves. My grandmother was having fun; she saw a whole new customer base and enjoyed having all the nice brands. People were talking about Mrs. G’s again. This really set us apart from the competition.
Q: What did digital marketing look like at that time?

DS: By 2001, I got someone through the newspaper to design a website. I was conscious of the importance of SEO (search engine optimization) and hired a company that specialized in it, so it was a strong website back then. Around 2009, people were saying Twitter seemed to be a good place for business and that I should go on it, so I did—with 140 characters! It didn’t take long before I realized people on it really connected, so then I got on Facebook and started blogging, too.

As these social networks have grown and evolved, they’ve gotten more complicated, but it was easy early on. Today, we’re on Instagram, Facebook, Pinterest and LinkedIn, which is like a billboard. On every social site I advertise differently. We’re still getting more return on investment on Facebook.

Q: When did RWS enter the digital picture for Mrs. G’s?

DS: About nine years ago. I had been following RWS and WebFronts® for quite some time, but I was afraid to lose my SEO—that held me back. When I made the move to Level 4 from my trusted SEO person, we worked through the transition. I was a late bloomer to WebFronts. Now, I look forward to seeing Jennie (Jennie Gilbert, RWS COO) at conventions. It’s like I have a key to a box...there’s always something new like the latest software in beta we can try.

Recently, after a meeting with Jennie, we added ‘On Display’ buttons and ‘In Stock’ warehouse quantities to all our products on the site. She also recommended adding “How to Measure” videos that I just made for each item on the product pages. I came home on a Tuesday, and the changes were up and running by Thursday morning!

The Mrs. G team loves our new site improvements. What the RWS team is able to do is amazing for an independent community business that only markets 30 miles from the store—brilliant!

Q: Any tips on how you’re using RWS software?

DS: I think customer reviews are hands down most important to our business. First off, you’re lucky if someone takes the time to post a review. With WebFronts® Review™, we definitely have more people posting reviews on the store. I get the alerts and immediately respond, or within 24 hours. Reviews have to be fresh, and it’s important to respond with kindness and appreciation. Get the facts first before you respond. The key is to remind the customers to post a review, so we always have to ask. Also, make sure the customer includes the name of the person they were working with.
Q: What’s your advice to other independent retailers in the current market?

DS: Any retailer needs to look at what’s going on. The fact that Sears, our No. 1 competitor, closed can happen to any brick and mortar. You must have a great in-store experience for the customer, but that experience also has to resonate online—it has to show and feel like your showroom. It’s a lot of work, but you have to be in that digital space, keeping it fluid. Like a river that’s constantly moving, you have to add to it (your digital presence).

We all must provide an outstanding customer experience before, during and especially after the sale. More than 75 percent of negative reviews are from the ‘after the sale’ experience.

Q: Mrs. G will be 85 years young in 2020. What comes to mind when you think about the store’s history in your family?

DS: It’s a beautiful legacy. There’s not a day that goes by without someone coming in the store and giving me a story about my grandmother. They want to tell me they remember my grandmother. It’s a wonderful legacy within the community; her memory stays alive. My grandmother would be proud.