

[Can You Learn Client Development from a Popcorn Hallway Store and a Hot Dog Trailer?](#)

By [Cordell Parvin](#) on November 9th, 2012

I learn a lot about marketing and client development from other businesses. In this post I want to share stories about two of my favorite places when I grew up in Lombard, Illinois.

The two spots were literally a hallway and a trailer. They both are in business 50 plus years later. One has stayed exactly as it was. The other now has 48 restaurants. Why did these two businesses survive and thrive when so many others failed?

I loved the popcorn at [The Little Popcorn Store](#) in Wheaton. The store was, and still is, in a four foot wide hallway. I can't remember how my mom and dad discovered it, but we drove 5 plus miles to Wheaton just to get a bag of popcorn. We could have bought popcorn closer to home. But, the Wheaton popcorn was unique and different. It was my favorite.



When I was a teenager my group traveled to Wheaton just about every week just to get their popcorn. Next time I visit Chicago, I want to go back to Wheaton, just to see if the popcorn is really as good as I remember. There are many wonderful reviews. Here is an excerpt from one:

Seventy-five cents buys you a white paper bag filled enough light, irresistible white popcorn to share with a few friends, though I admit to scarfing down more than two-thirds of the stuff. It's made by an old-school hand-cranking method and seasoned with nothing more than a bit of salt and a proprietary oil blend. I WANT MORE NOWWWWWWWW.

Chicago has long been known for its Italian beef sandwiches. You can read about the history and even get a recipe to make them at home from [Chicago Italian Beef Sandwich](#). (Note: the peppers and the bread in the recipe. These are two very important ingredients.)

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In 1963, when I was a sophomore in high school, the first Portillo's opened on North Ave in Villa Park. It was in a trailer. I can't remember if Portillo's served Italian Beef sandwiches when it first opened. But, I do remember the hotdogs. My friends and I could have gotten hotdogs closer to home, but we chose to drive to Portillo's because we thought their hotdogs were the best. Here is a description from the [Portillo's website](#).



The first Portillo's hot dog stand known as "The Dog House" opened in 1963 on North Avenue in Villa Park. Owner and founder Dick Portillo invested \$1,100 into a 6' x 12' trailer without a bathroom or running water. To get the water he needed, he ran 250 feet of garden hose from a nearby building into the trailer.

There are now 48 restaurants in 3 states, plus a catering and shipping division. I have never met Dick Portillo, but I am in awe of what he has accomplished. Just imagine starting with one hotdog trailer and growing it to 48 restaurants. (I have ordered Italian Beef and had it shipped to me here in Dallas. You can order from Portillo's [Shipping Page](#) on their website). When I attended my 45th high school reunion in 2010, a group of us chose Portillo's for the one lunch we had together.

What is the client development point in these stories? Clearly, the Wheaton Popcorn Store and Portillo's stand out from the crowd to the degree that customers will drive past competitors to eat at their establishments. Your clients, referral sources and others will remember you if you stand out in the crowd. What is unique about your legal work? What is unique about the way you serve clients? What are you doing that will cause your clients to recommend you to others?

Beyond that, consider that the Popcorn Store owners chose to stick with just one hallway store in Wheaton, while Portillo's has expanded throughout Chicagoland and the US-two very different approaches.

Cordell M. Parvin built a national construction practice during his 35 years practicing law. At Jenkins & Gilchrist, Mr. Parvin was the Construction Law Practice Group Leader and was also responsible for the firm's attorney development practice. While there he taught client development and created a coaching program for junior partners. In 2005, Mr. Parvin left the firm and started Cordell Parvin LLC. He now works with lawyers and law firms on career development and planning and client development. He is the co-author of *Say Ciao to Chow Mein: Conquering Career Burnout* and other books for lawyers. To learn more visit his Web site, www.cordellparvin.com or contact him at cparvin@cordellparvin.com.