FAMILY BUSINESS

John Ringling grew up in a large family in Baraboo, Wisconsin. He and his brothers joined the entertainment industry as performers: some played music, others jugged, and John performed as a clown! Eventually, John and four of his brothers created Ringling Brothers Circus. When they acquired Barnum & Bailey in 1907, it became one of the world’s most successful entertainment organizations, “the greatest show on earth.”

While managing the circus, each of the five brothers had their own specific roles:

- **Al Ringling** was the equestrian director, which means he chose acts for the Big Top and sideshow.
- **Otto Ringling** was in charge of finances and controlled the money spent by the circus.
- **Alf T. Ringling** ran the press department and made sure the circus was prominently featured in local newspapers.
- **Charles Ringling** was in charge of advertising and served as an administrator of the whole crew, including performers and workers alike.
- **John Ringling** managed routing and transportation arrangements.

Did you know?

John Ringling was the second youngest in a family of seven brothers and one sister.

John’s success with the circus and entrepreneurial skills helped to make him, in the Roaring Twenties, one of the richest men in America with an estimated worth of nearly $200 million.

In 1948, the Museum’s first Director, A. Everett ‘Chick’ Austin, Jr., used Ringling memorabilia to open the first Circus Museum.
Learning Extension: Try it Out!

The Ringling brothers ran their circus together as a family, and each man brought a special skill set to his own job. In this activity, we challenge you to come up with a family business of your own!

If your family was going to start a business, what would it be? Think about things that your family is good at. How could you transform those skills into a company that could make you money?

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What would you name your business? The Ringling Brothers Circus had a straightforward name, telling us who ran the company and what it was.

What job in your business would each member of your family do? The Ringling brothers each had a specific job that they took care of for their business. Each one got that job because he had a special set of skills that made it a good fit for him. What skills does each member of your family have? How could they bring those skills into your business?

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