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## What's-trending seller Showcase opens store at Eastview; Batavia is chain's distribution hub

⚠ By: Kevin Oklobzija O November 15, 2022



Exterior view of the Showcase store in Eastview Mall. (Photo submitted)

The concept in some ways seems like a complete business dichotomy.

If items are trending with the Gen Z crowd on social media, why would you need a bricks-and-mortar location to sell them?

But Showcase, a Canadian-based retailer with an ever-growing United States presence, is proving that a combination of technological savvy with old-fashioned retail concepts can lead to success.

Showcase christened its Eastview Mall store last week, one of 31 locations for the brand that have opened, or will open, in the Northeast, Mid-Atlantic and Midwest before year's end.

The store's constantly-changing inventory is based solely on real-time data analysis of current trends on all social media platforms. Those products are then either sourced or made in-house and quickly shipped across the network of retail outlets.



Kulkarni

"If Canada is about one-tenth the size of the United States and can support 109 stores, then the U.S. should be able to support 1,000," Showcase CEO Samir Kulkarni said.

And for a retailer for which time is truly of the essence, an efficient distribution network is critical. Which is why the Showcase distribution center in Batavia is an integral part of the success equation. Trucks are loaded with products in the Genesee County city and shipped to stores from Maine to Maryland to Michigan.

Bricks-and-mortar is hardly dead for Showcase. Or even waning. Instead, it's thriving because the brand relies on retail outlets to do just what the name implies: showcase cutting-edge products to induce a sale. Showcase committed to a 10-year lease with Eastview Mall owner Wilmorite.

"People may have seen or heard about a product but they want to see it or try it before they buy it," Kulkarni said.

He said that was very much the case with the weighted blanket, which debuted in Showcase stores in 2016.

"People saw them and wanted to know, 'What does it feel like? Is it comfortable? Do I feel warm and cozy underneath one?' "Kulkarni said. "They're still a top seller today."

The brand's general concept isn't new. Selling trendy items was popular in malls and airports for decades in the form of retailers Sharper Image, Spencer's and Brookstone.

"You never knew what you were going to see in those stores next," Kulkarni said.

Showcase, however, has taken the concept to a new level by featuring what's hot today, not what may have been popular last month or last year.

"It's like Christmas every day," Kulkarni said.

When Amin Jivraj launched the brand in 1994 in Edmonton, Alberta, Showcase had some similarities to the As Seen On TV stores that populated malls across North America. But today, Showcase isn't trying to target consumers that are channel surfing with the TV remote. Their target demographic is on TikTok, Instagram and Snapchat.



Interior of Showcase, featuring the latest trending items on social media. (Photo provided)

"We sell hardly any As Seen On TV product in our Canadian stores and none in our U.S. stores," Kulkarni said. "We're after the Gen Z crowd, the TikTok crowd, instead of the traditional infomercial crowd."

They chase that audience through a data platform developed internally, reacting in real time to what their algorithms are telling them about what's trending on social media platforms.

They then take action when data says a certain product will sell. Even if they themselves aren't so sure.

"If you're asking whether we scratch our heads on some trends? Yes, we do," Kulkarni said.
"But sometimes there is an emotion or connection that people feel with an item so we will react immediately to source the product.

"We have an extremely nimble supply chain. Fifty percent of our products are designed inhouse and we can bring it to market in as little as 16 days."

He admits that there is a significant spend on air freight "but we can't afford to wait on oceans, ships and trucks," he said.

The store could stock anything from home goods and comfy footwear to fidgets and freezedried candy. "We're agnostic regarding categories," Kulkarni said. "Other retailers tend to stay in their lane. We don't. One day our top product is a \$10 toy and the next day it's a \$300 high-tech beauty device."

They have their own social media presence, driving consumers to their stores and e-commerce site with their own videos or live-shopping events. Former TV chef Danny Boome, a Rochester resident, is the face of Showcase. Every 48 hours, he's on some social media platform to discuss what's trending and provide demonstrations, Kulkarni said.

The company's major warehouse is in Brampton, Ontario, while the 147,000-square-foot warehouse in Batavia can support up to 150 stores, Kulkarni said.

They came upon the Batavia industrial space by happenstance. Showcase's sister company, Koolatron, has operations on Commerce Drive, manufacturing and distributing refrigerators and appliances from the location.

"An employee looked out the window just as the sign was being hammered into the ground across the street, saying the property was available," Kulkarni said.

It was only appropriate, since timing is everything for Showcase.

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