

THE RECORD SMALL
BUSINESS

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SECTION E

Son shows dad the way

Sensing that change was coming, young retailer made strategic move

By CHUCK HOWITT
RECORD STAFF

Moe Visram laughs about it now, but when he was 14 he wasn't smiling.

He wanted to be out skateboarding, playing video games, doing whatever his friends were doing — anything but working in his dad's clothing store.

Yet he dutifully toiled away at Sam Visram's Just For Him clothing shop in the Highland Hills Mall in Kitchener.

Even after high school, Moe didn't think haberdashery was the career for him. He enrolled in economics and commerce at the University of Guelph, then switched to Conestoga College and graduated in 2004 with a diploma in construction engineering.

All the while, he helped out at Just For Him to earn spending money.

Even Sam was skeptical about whether Moe belonged in the business. He had survived tough times in retail and knew it wasn't for the faint of heart.

Then everything changed. Finally deciding the apparel business was "just for him," Moe, 26, plunged in with a new level of commitment.

And as it turned out, it was Moe who saw the crucial decisions that had to be made when a crisis came two years ago.

In the early 2000s, the mall owner, Loblaw Cos. Ltd., was looking to reposition itself in the competitive grocery and retail market. Ongoing renovations and rumours that the mall's supermarket would expand were raising stress levels for the smaller tenants and driving away customers.

"There was construction going on all the time," Moe says.

He worried Just For Him would be forced out.

Moving, however, was the last thing on Sam's wish list. Approaching 60, he was thinking more about retirement.

"I was on dad's case for a couple of years," Moe says. "I kept telling him, 'We've got to find a new location.'"

Standing outside the store entrance one day, Moe was approached by one of Just For Him's regular customers and they struck up a conversation. Moe related his frustrations about how things were going at the Highland Hills Mall.

The customer was Anne Voisin, of the same Voisin family that had just built the open-concept Sunrise Centre shopping complex at Ottawa Street South and Fischer-Hallman Road.

Given a contact name, Moe met an agent for the new centre and learned a unit had just become available.

TRENDS FOR MEN
Address: Sunrise Centre, 1400 Ottawa St. S., Kitchener.
Founded: 1993.
Employees: 4.
Web: Under construction.

"Everything fell into place," he says, and the Visrams opened a new store in October 2005. Two weeks before it opened, Loblaw advised they had six months to leave Highland Hills.

The new store was given a new name, Trends For Men.

That was partly to reflect that Sam had transferred ownership to his son. In addition, the rights to the name Just For Him could not be simply transferred to Moe. Sam's brother Karim has his own Just For Him shop at the Stanley Park Mall in Kitchener and his brother Nick has a Just For Him shop in Stratford.

Moe calls Trends For Men a "full service men's store." At 2,700 square feet, it has more than twice the space of the old Highland Hills Mall shop.

The store also stocks more quality lines, Sam notes.

Young guys now like to look more dressed up, he says. Show a customer a \$20 pair of jeans and he's not interested. Show a \$150 pair and his eyes light up.

Trends For Men has three full-time employees and one part-timer. Brendan Greenlay, the third full-timer, has been with the Visrams for six years.

"We all have very different tastes," Moe says.

He says the store has clothing lines it likes to stick with, but also tries to offer styles that are not available at other local competitors.

"People need a reason to come to your store alone."

He adds that Trends For Men stands out from chain-store



Full-time staff members at the Trends for Men clothing store in Kitchener's Sunrise Centre are (from left) Moe Visram, Sam Visram and Brendan Greenlay. At its old location, the shop was called Just For Him.

competitors because the staff members are involved in all aspects of the business and have a broader knowledge of the industry.

The most effective marketing tool is word-of-mouth recommendations, Moe says. The store also keeps a list of its regular customers and lets them know when special sales are taking place.

The Visrams won't reveal annual revenues, but say business at the new site has been good.

Using knowledge gained in his Conestoga College studies, Moe was able to save money by acting as his own general contractor in preparing the shop's

Sunrise Centre space.

With help from store suppliers, he compiled a list of other shops to look at for possible designs. He saw one he liked in Oakville and hired the designer.

But the estimate came in at three times his budget.

Turning to Sam's list of customers, Moe found three different subcontractors who agreed to bid on the project. Their participation lowered the price substantially, although it still came in above budget.

The Visrams financed the renovations in part with a bank loan. It was paid back by February 2006, four months after the Sunrise Centre store opened.

Sam was so impressed with Moe's work in handling the move to Sunrise Centre that he now wants him to open more stores.

Moe isn't so sure. "If the right opportunity comes along, then we'll expand. If not, I'm happy to focus on what we have here."

As for Sam, who is celebrating 30 years in the business this year, he has changed his mind about retiring. His wife died three years ago and the new store has rekindled his interest in the business.

"I don't want to stay home alone," he says.
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LOCAL SCENE

WLU business school acquires Arizona link

Wilfrid Laurier University business students and faculty may soon be doing some of their studies in Arizona.

Laurier's school of business and economics recently signed an agreement of mutual co-operation with Arizona State University's school of global management and leadership.

The aim is to develop business graduates "conversant in both Canadian and American business languages," WLU's business dean Ginny Dybenko said in a news release.

In addition to exchange programs, the partnership will include collaborative teaching, knowledge transfer and research. The two universities also hope to bring a Mexican school into the partnership.

Factbook about region is a prize-winner

Canada's Technology Triangle Inc., the economic development agency for Waterloo Region, has won an award from the Economic Development Association of Canada for one of its publications.

At its annual convention in Saskatoon, the association honoured the local agency Monday for a pocket factbook about the region that was produced for its Ambassador program.

Turbosonic opens office in Milan

Waterloo-based air pollution control company TurboSonic Technologies has opened an office in Milan, Italy.

It's the firm's third foreign office. The others are in Parsippany, N.J., and Raleigh, N.C.

RDM Corp. hires marketing executive

RDM Corp. of Waterloo has hired Mike Murphy to serve as its vice-president of marketing.

Murphy previously held the same post at TNS Inc. of Reston, Va., which, like RDM, sells computer equipment for electronic payment processing.

He has also worked for Proctor & Gamble, RJR Nabisco and Mobil Oil.

Arise Technologies adds vice-president

Arise Technologies has hired a vice-president of business development.

Richard Lu began his duties with the Waterloo-based solar power products firm earlier this month. He most recently served as Toronto Hydro's chief conservation officer and has also worked on several large solar projects in the province.

Lu will oversee Arise's solar cell sales in the Toronto area and lead the company's business interests in Asia.

Impact Expo expected to draw 2,000 students

Major-Gen. Lewis MacKenzie (retired), Tim Jackson of Tech Capital Partners and Gerry Remers of Christie Digital are on the list of keynote speakers for the second Impact Expo on Saturday, Sept. 29 at the University of Waterloo.

Impact Expo lets area secondary and post-secondary students network with business leaders and attend workshops. It is organized by Impact, a national non-profit organization.

More than 2,000 students are expected to attend. The event also features a career exhibition with companies such as IBM, Bell Canada and Deloitte Inc.

The event will be held in the UW Student Life Centre and math and computer building.

The event is free to students in the area, but participants are asked to register in advance for some workshops. To register, go to www.expo.impact.org

MARKETING

Promotional products can send a green message

Today it seems just about everyone has gone green. And it hasn't taken marketers long to notice.

Having introduced environment-friendly products 20 years ago, Loblaw sensed consumers were now ready to do more and recently offered reusable shopping bags made from 85-per-cent recycled material. At 99 cents, they quickly sold out.

Such bags aren't new. They have been available for decades. However, Al Gore's documentary, An Inconvenient Truth, had a tremendous impact on attitudes, creating the perfect marketing environment for introducing a move away from plastic bags.

It was inevitable environmental concerns would change other marketing practices. So I wasn't surprised to receive an e-newsletter from a promotional products company touting its "green" products.

Ron Plasschaert, a promotional marketing consultant with M.P. Russo & Associates in Clinton, Ont., says the firm has embraced eco-friendly products



SHIRLEY LICHTI

as a socially responsible way to support clients' sales initiatives.

Like the reusable Loblaw bags, eco-friendly promotional products have been around for a while. What's new, Plasschaert says, is there is now consumer demand for such products.

In this industry, he notes, it's important "to stay competitive, and adding more green products to our offerings lets us do that."

To qualify as eco-friendly, products must be recycled, sustainable, non-polluting and/or organic. Visit M.P. Russo's website (www.mprusso.com) and you'll find products that satisfy all four categories.

For example, products such as business portfolios, water bottles and key chains, are made of recycled or reclaimed materials. Other products promote reuse, as in the case of cloth shopping bags.

Sustainable products use renewable resources. Unique products range from seeded paper bookmarks to mugs and golf tees made of 100-per-cent corn plastic, which is biodegradable.

The third category includes non-polluting and natural products that contain no harmful chemicals or are battery free. Solar or hand-crank powered devices such as radios and flashlights are innovative examples under this heading.

Lastly, products can be organic, such as tote bags made from 100 per cent organic cotton, bamboo or hemp.

Promotional products — eco-friendly or not — have many strengths for marketing programs. They are targeted, since you have complete control over who receives them. And many offer long-term advertising value, continuing to promote your company for years to come.

There's also a goodwill factor, Plasschaert says, because clients appreciate the products.

Yet critics claim many promotional items end up in the trash and the industry is often

referred to as "trinkets and trash."

Plasschaert cringes when he hears the term. He says this "trash" perception persists because many consumers aren't educated about how to use promotional products.

The most important lesson he communicates to clients is: "Just because you have your name on a product, doesn't mean it's promoting your company."

He defines a promotional product as "any item of usefulness that is given away free and without obligation." And to be useful, he says, there must be a good fit between the company and the promotional item.

A client once asked him for computer mouse pads to use as a volunteer recruitment tool. But after a discussion, it became clear they would not be a good fit in meeting the organization's objectives.

A good acid test is to put yourself in the recipient's shoes. How you would react if you were given the product? If you wouldn't use it, chances are others won't either.

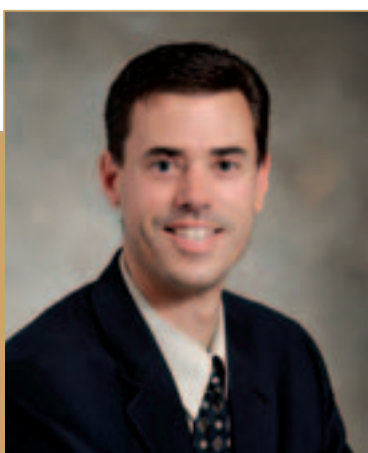
Green promotional items do cost a little more. Still, many companies buy them because they want to be perceived as good corporate citizens.

Given this, are some industries more likely to embrace eco-friendly promotional products than others?

Plasschaert says no, but notes he has seen a great deal of interest from municipal health units and not-for-profit organizations. Environmental organizations also like green products because of the match with the objectives they are trying to promote.

Is there a return on investment for companies that go green? Plasschaert says it's still too early to tell. However, consumers have clearly signalled a desire to change. The response to an M.P. Russo e-mail announcing its eco-friendly products was almost twice the normal response rate.

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