



## Canadian Made?

With the news about domestic markets and suppliers of all things consumable there is a dread in the marketplace about finding anything Canadian made. Well that's a perception and it may be wrong but there are a few people trying to correct it. A few websites, a few marketeers but darn few major retailers visibly pushing Canadian goods.



But locally one man has made it his mission to sell Canadian clothes to a wary public. Allan MacKenzie, a Port Hoper born and bred, was made redundant in the last round of layoffs at the Oshawa car plant. As he is only fifty years old he could not lay around not doing much of anything so when it came around to the time that he was ready to do something else he decided to sell Canadian clothing. "I went to buy back to work clothes and wanted Canadian made and couldn't find any locally. So I decided to sell them!"

The Canadian textile industry has been suffering for the last two decades. First of all the Free Trade Agreement, then the North American Free trade Agreement and then the World Trade

Organizations rounds of negotiations - all have conspired to reduce trade barriers that were advantageous to the Canadian industry. However when Mr MacKenzie did his market research he found to his surprise enough suppliers to satisfy his inventory list. When BusinessTimes asked him how reality overcame perception he answered, "Automation! Most of the industry has gone high-tech to compete." This statement is born out by the evidence. Scanning the internet one can see a plethora of sites that offer multi-headed sewing machines, one even has the capacity to hold fifty-six sewing heads, that's a lot of embroidered dresses to do at once.

But back to Mr MacKenzie and his quest for a "made in Canada clothing store". In the summer of 2009 he started his market research. After twenty-six years on the line at General Motors working for himself was going to be a challenge. After all he had faced challenges before - he trained as a welder at the start of his working life but exchanged the variety of that job for a mind-number on the assembly line. "When you have a family to raise it's a no-brainer to go on the line for twelve dollars an hour when you earn only six for the interesting job." he explained when talking about his life at general Motors. He had two paths of learning: one was the market research that would lead to the inventory in the store and the other was the mechanics of business. How does one become a retailer without experience? He was to find out. Starting at the "Business Advisory Centre of Northumberland", located in Cobourg, he found out all about business plans and budgeting in the months of September and October of 2009. "The folks at the Business Centre couldn't have been more helpful" he gushed in praise as he described the help given to him. Determined to set up shop in Port Hope he located an outlet in the "Granary" on John St. Located off the Main St. Ideally he would have located on the Main St. But the rents were prohibitive. The present location is still inside the Heritage Business Area and as such he eligible for membership and assistance. He says "The HBIA has been helpful and nice!"

Conducting the market research, where he planned to establish the lines of clothing, the Canadian suppliers of the clothing and the quantities needed he checked out labels in other stores and local retailers and a heavy and long internet search. By December he was ready, the store was established, the lines of clothing ready to go in, and he was ready to open and then disaster struck - some of his Canadian suppliers closed their plants in Canada. Moving swiftly he replaced a couple of lines with American made and established new contacts with other suppliers. December 21 he opened "VE-MACKS". Open but missing the Christmas season he entered the doldrums of the late winter and readied for Spring.

When BusinessTimes came to visit he had been in business for eight months and had set a deadline of October 2010 for his first big evaluation. "I evaluate everything: stock, sales rent, every two weeks but a full examination - whether to carry on will be made in October." he says. Asked what will make him go for another year, he replies, "I want to be in the position of having sales support an employee." Asked if he is there yet he smiles and says, "Well things are getting better, people are finding the store and sales are getting better." He made a decision that may have hampered a faster progression to success but he has accepted it. Right at the beginning he decided not to carry the same line of clothing that other businesses that he would compete with carry. "It's not the normal business attitude but I don't want to carry stuff that others have. Perhaps that's why some similar businesses have been so helpful." Asked about the position of a man buying womens' clothing, for the store, he explains, "That it's not that hard - you look at what the other stores have in the store that's not on sale, if it's on sale it's not selling. Also the reps at the shows know what sells." So far he doesn't feel at a disadvantage and his store mix is 50% womens' clothes, 30% mens' and 20% childrens' wear.

Describing his business experiences so far he says he has been surprised by a couple of things. "I never expected to be hit by shoplifters. Once by a professional couple, one distracted me and the other loaded up. And another time I had to send a customer, emerging from the fitting room, back into the fitting room to take off the stolen jeans he was wearing - twice." The other surprise he discovered, before he started, that nobody in Port Hope sells reasonably priced mens' clothing. "Nobody in Port Hope sells them - now I know why" he says with a grin. Talking about his decision to go with "Canadian made" he is still convinced that a market exists but he admits it's good in theory but as yet hasn't caught on well. The one thing he does know is that men do not buy clothes and even though he believes that his stock is well priced he has to do a better job of attracting women into his store.

Traffic is the key and to that end he participated in the Annual Sidewalk Sale even though he had to set up a table at the end of the street it worked and now he notices an increase in traffic at the Granary location after the event. One of his big problems, that he is working on is that his main sidewalk sign is the landlord's responsibility and he is slow in replacing it after it was vandalized. However because he has an entrance to the store from Lent's lane and the Park people do stroll in to visit. Tourists and walkins are common visitors on good sunny days.

So the answer seems to be - get the traffic up because there are Canadian made clothes at a

reasonable price. Canadian suppliers can hold their own against the imports and are proving it. All people have to do is to discover the store. Allen MacKenzie will be in business a while longer and as long as word of mouth advertizing is around traffic will increase. As Allan says "The price point of my stock is good, there is a future in Canadian made and people will buy." Ever the optimist he says he doesn't know what he will be doing next year but he knows that he will want to sell Canadian made and he is ordering his Fall line and preparing for the Christmas rush. Locate at 41 John St in Port Hope. Phone is 905-800-1054, call or visit any day of the week except Mondays.

Ben Burd

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