



THRIVING IN THE ONLINE WORLD

Family-owned business leveraging online capabilities to grow sales and extend the brand.

BY SEAN C. TARRY

NOVA SCOTIA-BASED retailer, Wicker Emporium, is family-run. The company was founded in 1972 by its current president and CEO Madan Kapahi. A lawyer by training, he immigrated to Canada from India planning to practice law in Vancouver. He found out quickly, however, that he would be subject to taking a plethora of equivalency courses and bar examinations to qualify as a professional in this country. He decided to change direction, found himself in Halifax where he entered into educational studies and met his wife. It's when the couple began furnishing their first home that Kapahi realized that there was a potential hole in the home furnishings market. He and his wife were looking for wicker furniture, and there wasn't any.

"He saw the opportunity to bring wicker pieces into the local market here," says his son Raj, the company's COO. "Initially he bought domestically from wholesale importers. He quickly realized that to earn the right margins he needed to buy direct from manufacturers in Asia."

Kapahi opened his first location in Halifax's Scotia Square in 1972. He opened his next store a year later in Micmac Mall. To get the volume of orders up to justify going direct to the manufacturer, he quickly opened additional stores in Fredericton, Moncton and St. John's. The company became a success and a mainstay in the Atlantic market.

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Growing online

Fast-forward more than 40 years later and the company continues to succeed in the competitive home furnishings market with 24 locations. Today, the company has shifted away from selling wicker furniture and is now mostly focused on selling solid hardwood imported furniture and a large variety of home accessories. In addition to the right product assortment and excellent customer service—two elements that helped the company grow on early successes—Wicker Emporium is growing thanks to the potential of online and e-commerce.

"The business is all about trends and the tastes that fit the lifestyle of our consumer," admits Raj. "However, what we and other retailers have seen over recent years is the incredible potential that



(l. r.) Raj Kapaĥi, Priyanka Kapaĥi, Madan Kapaĥi, Alina Kazhatĥala, Christy Mac Donald and Sean MacInnes



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One way Wicker Emporium does this is by combining the potential of online and e-commerce with the power of in-store staff.

“We don’t stock all of our items available at every location,” explains Raj. “Because of this, it’s extremely important for our sales staff to speak to our customers to find out what their needs are and match them with appropriate product. We have such a variety of furniture and collections. And we don’t try to jam every piece into our stores. We’re trying to create a dense but shoppable atmosphere. We’re able to do this by using our website as a tool in store. Our associates are able to show customers what they’re looking for, in addition to other details about the furniture and other things that will complement that piece. The combination of online and in-store service is vital for us to service the customer effectively.”

Online options

In addition to taking the customer online in-store to research product, the company also gives its employees the ability to order off of containers that are en route to Canadian shores. Even if the customer is looking for an item that isn’t in the location they’re visiting, or in another store or the company’s warehouse, staff are

able to see what’s incoming on a boat from Asia, when it’s scheduled to arrive at port and order that piece for the customer.

“There’s a lot of personal service that goes into our store and model,” says Raj. “Online helps us enhance our offering ten-fold.”

In fact, online has come to represent such a boon for the business that its recent foray into Ontario highlights just how powerful the medium is.

“We moved into Ontario in 2011, opening five stores—three in the GTA and two in Ottawa,” he explains. “It’s been a bit of a slow start for us with respect to our brick and mortar locations. But, the province has quickly become our number one market for online sales.”

“Online is awesome because you don’t need to make too many investments with respect to fixed costs, or upfront investment for that matter. Once you have the platform, you can go and market in Alberta or British Columbia and try to create some brand awareness through your online presence.”

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A new way of doing things

The company is concentrating on branding and marketing itself to grow in Ontario. But, as Raj points out, there are some lessons that they can apply to the business down the road.

“Our online performance has been so strong that it really opened my eyes to its full potential,” he says. “The platform offers us the biggest opportunity because there’s very little risk involved. When you enter a new market you can be relative-



The online channel helps sales in store

ly unknown. You invest hundreds of thousands of dollars opening new locations and marketing to a new audience. You end up with all of these fixed costs that you have to somehow manage to pay with your sales. Online is awesome because you don't need to make too many investments with respect to fixed costs, or upfront investment for that matter. Once you have the platform, you can go and market in Alberta or British Columbia and try to create some brand awareness through your online presence."

And, yes—the company does receive orders from those provinces, and others. In fact, as Raj points out, out-of-province orders for the company's products continue to grow exponentially.

To link to its efforts online, the company is also extensively engaged in social media—36,000 Facebook fans—does TV branding, distributes an e-newsletter and has also partnered in some affiliate marketing. But, as Raj rightly says, "Online is where it's at." And to that end, the company is currently focusing resources on search engine optimization of its website, improving its ranking on Google Local Business, working with Google Adwords and Google remarketing, and are also opening an Ebay store and listing its products on Shop.ca. It also has plans to make its products available in other digital marketplaces before the end of this year.

"We're working on continuing to develop our omni-channel model of selling all the time. That means merging the online and brick-and-mortar sales channels. It means refining the in-store shopping experience by allowing customers to access and shop the web site catalogue at all times. It means offering customers the option of in-store pickup or home delivery. It simply means providing for the customer a more convenient, enjoyable and satisfying experience." ☞






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