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HOME IMPROVEMENT QUARTERLY

FEATURE STORY

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*If the pandemic has shown us anything,
it's just how important HR is to a company.*



SECOND QUARTER / 2021

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330 Bay Street, Suite 1400, Toronto, ON M5H 2S8 • 416-489-3396

@Hardlinesnews • www.hardlines.ca

PRESIDENT

Michael McLarney
mike@hardlines.ca

EDITOR

Christina Manocchio
christina@hardlines.ca

ASSISTANT EDITOR

Geoffrey McLarney
geoff@hardlines.ca

CONTRIBUTING WRITERS

Heather Beaumont
John Caulfield
Wanda O'Brien

VICE PRESIDENT & PUBLISHER

David Chestnut
david@hardlines.ca

MARKETING & EVENTS MANAGER

Michelle Porter
michelle@hardlines.ca

ART DIRECTION

Shawn Samson
TwoCreative.ca

ACCOUNTING

accounting@hardlines.ca

COVER PHOTOGRAPHY

Rebekah Littlejohn Photography
littlejohnphotography.com

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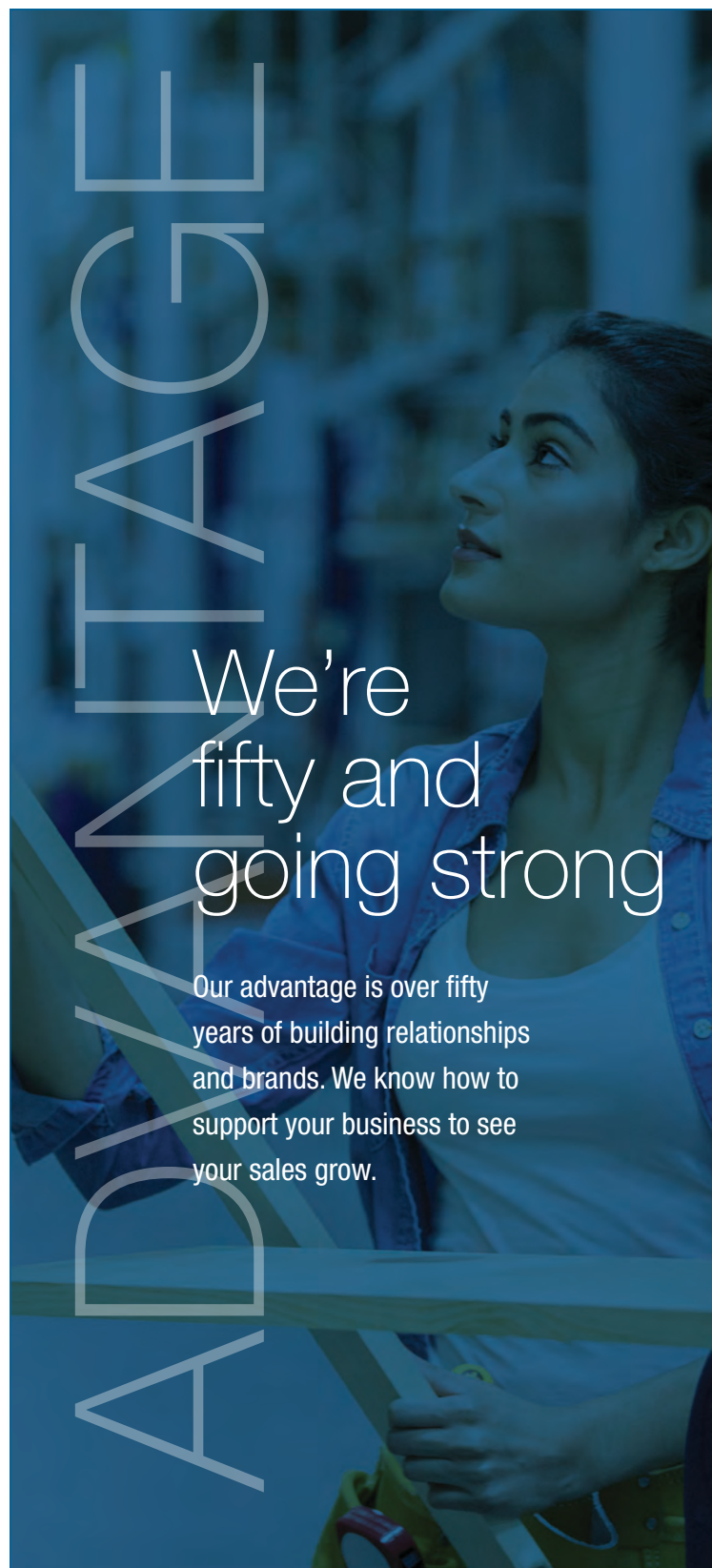
NUMBER ONE

IN THE HOME IMPROVEMENT
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HARDLINES

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COVER STORY

HOW HR CAN ADD TO YOUR COMPANY

28 People management, developing company policies—and managing them—are just some of the tasks HR personnel do.



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Retail leaders will headline Hardlines Conference and awards gala for 2021



Canadian Tire ends year with huge increases in online sales

ORGILL

Orgill sales cap \$3 billion, with fastest growth in Canada, says CEO



Home Depot, Lowe's report record earnings in COVID year



Hardware retailers make lists of top employers



National Hardware Show returns to Las Vegas this fall for live event



GMS expands Canadian presence with another dealer acquisition



NHPA's leadership training will help your team through COVID

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PRO CORNER

SHIPMENT BLUES

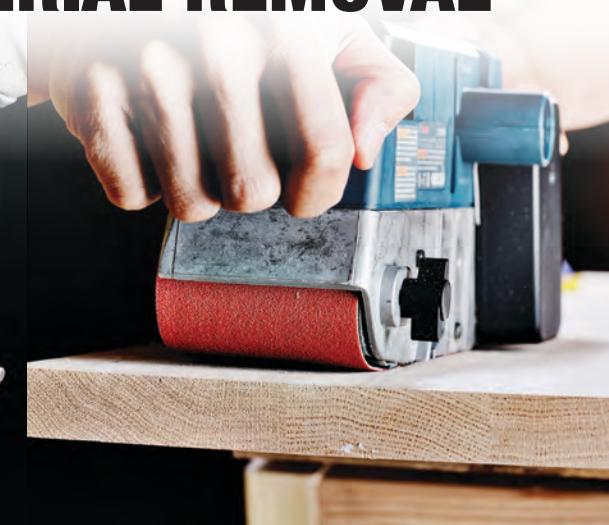
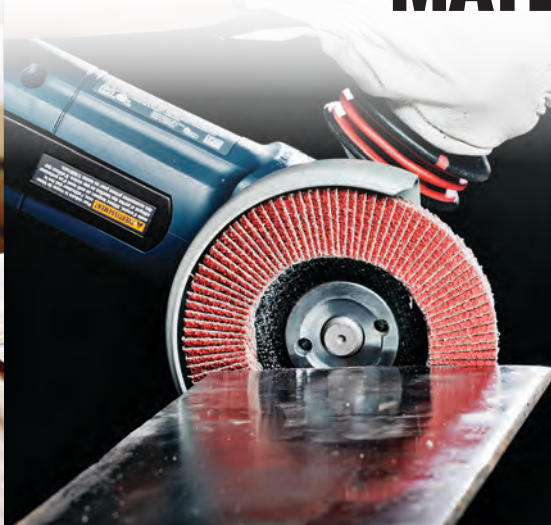
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The pandemic has taught dealers and distributors some valuable lessons about their supply chains.





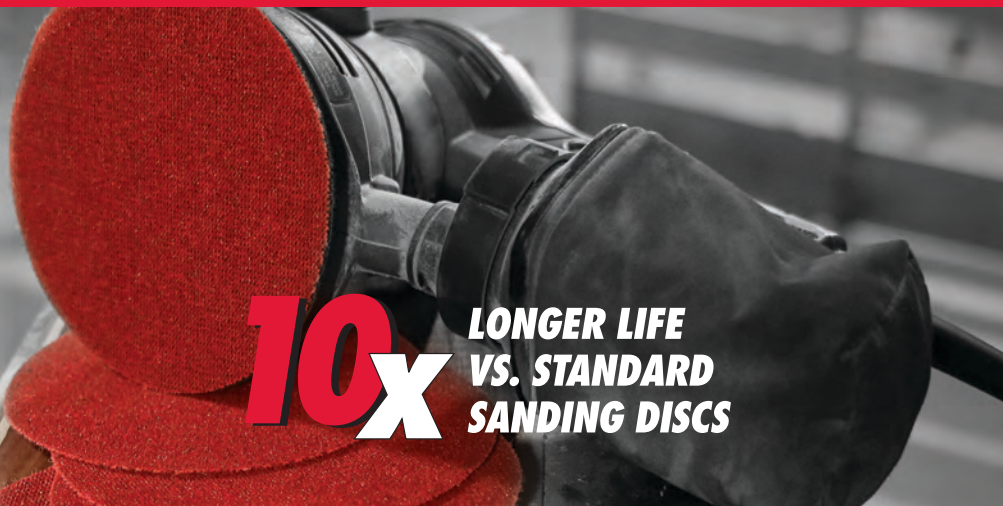
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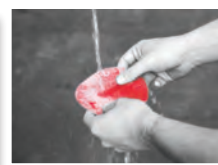
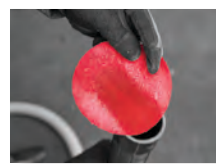
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CHRISTINA MANOCCHIO, EDITOR

THE LIGHT AT THE END OF THE TUNNEL

The last year has been tough on everyone, but the pandemic allowed us to take a step back and reassess business and daily life.



By now you're probably tired of hearing about the pandemic. The year is going by in a bit of a blur, but all things considered, the industry is going strong throughout these strange times.


Although times are unusual, the home improvement industry has adapted well. Regulations keep changing, product can

pandemic pushed companies online." The article covers the success and challenges of e-commerce and online branding.

"Convenience is a leading driver in consumer behaviour, and Amazon is just as much of a competitor. It's so important to be involved digitally," Jenn Dunstan, director, digital marketing, at Central Station, said

restaurants can now exist due to the pandemic. In my opinion, this has been great. I hope many of the business changes (the good ones) remain when some normalcy returns.

A large concern pre- and post-pandemic is the state of the environment. The home improvement industry is a large player when it comes to contributing to greenhouse gas emissions. Dealers and store owners are taking action against climate change by providing environmentally friendly options on their store shelves. Read about how the industry is tackling this problem on page 20.

HHIQ aims to keep you informed during these uncertain times. Considering all of the challenges everyone has faced over the last year, the home improvement industry is still going strong. Keep it up. There's a light at the end of the tunnel. 

“I think some good has come out of the pandemic. Watching many industries innovate has been beneficial for business.”

be difficult to source, online orders can be challenging. These are just some of the issues the industry has faced over the last year.

However, I think some good has come out of the pandemic. Watching many industries innovate has been beneficial for business. Companies have put off things like creating an online store or ramping up social media presence for too long. Once the pandemic hit, many scrambled to improve their online presence.

Heather Beaumont covered the evolution of e-commerce in her article, "How the

in Beaumont's article. "Being a part of the local conversation gives business owners an opportunity to build a personal brand and make those local connections."

The pandemic has made this area so important for a company, especially when competing with online giants like Amazon. It would be interesting to find out how B2C companies survived without an online presence during the pandemic.

Though not directly related to home improvement, some loosening of rules in other industries will benefit ours in the long run. In Ontario, bottle shops inside

christina@hardlines.ca

RETAIL LEADERS WILL HEADLINE HARDLINES CONFERENCE AND AWARDS GALA FOR 2021

After being interrupted by COVID-19 in 2020, the 25th anniversary Hardlines Conference has confirmed dates for this year. The conference will be held on Oct. 19 and 20 at Queen's Landing in Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ont. The event will also host this year's Outstanding Retailer Awards Gala, which will be held at the end of day one.

The speaker lineup confirmed so far features Kevin Macnab, president and CEO, Home Hardware Stores; Doug Anderson, president and CEO, Peavey Industries; and Jamal Hamad, senior director contractor services sales and operations Pro-Rental-Home Services-MRO businesses at Home Depot Canada. This lineup guarantees that attendees will get deep insights firsthand from some of the industry's foremost home improvement retailers. Macnab has

been leading a huge transition at Home Hardware that aims to position the company for growth well into the 21st century. Anderson has made Peavey a household name in this industry, first with the acquisition of TSC Stores and then with the takeover of Ace in Canada.

The addition of Drew Green, CEO of clothing chain Indochino, to this year's lineup ensures that the conference will once again look outward for guidance on best practices and trends in retail. Indochino is a fast-growing retailer of custom, made-to-measure suits.

In this time of supply chain disruption, global supply chain expert Sascha Jamal, director at SAJ Consulting, will outline how overseas supply has been disrupted by rising prices, new markets, and, of course, the pandemic. Rounding out the conference,



Kevin Macnab



Doug Anderson

delegates will hear from Peter Norman, a leading economist and vice president at Altus Group.

The 25th annual Hardlines Conference in Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ont., guarantees a world-class destination to maximize networking among the retail home improvement industry's leading dealers, retail chains, buying groups, and suppliers. (Go to www.hardlinesconference.ca for more information.)

CANADIAN TIRE ENDS YEAR WITH HUGE INCREASES IN ONLINE SALES

Canadian Tire Corp.'s latest results revealed a strong fourth quarter and record sales increases for the year, especially within its Canadian Tire Retail division (CTR).

Reflecting performance across the company's business units, which include Mark's, SportChek, and Helly Hansen, consolidated retail sales increased \$479 million in the fourth quarter, up 9.9 percent over the same period in 2019. Consolidated revenue increased by 12.9 percent in the

fourth quarter; excluding Petroleum, it was up 17.4 percent.

"We achieved outstanding operational and financial results in 2020, driven by sustained strong growth in e-commerce and owned brands, and the addition of 1.8 million new customers to the Triangle Rewards program," said Greg Hicks, president and CEO of Canadian Tire Corp., in a release.

The company says its strong omnichannel performance in the quarter drove comparable

sales growth of 9.5 percent. CTR had growth of 12.8 percent, driven by double-digit growth in almost 70 percent of product categories and 18 percent growth by its private-label, or owned brands. E-commerce sales surged across all retail banners, with CTR up 179 percent in Q4.

For the full year, Canadian Tire's retail sales grew 11 percent, excluding Petroleum, primarily driven by 17.6 percent growth at CTR. The company's ecommerce sales reached \$1.6 billion, up \$1 billion or 183 percent, with CTR delivering over 250 percent growth.

ORGILL SALES CAP \$3 BILLION, WITH FASTEST GROWTH IN CANADA, SAYS CEO

During its virtual spring buying event recently, Orgill president and CEO Boyden Moore went online to share some of the successes and milestones of the company.

In 2020, amidst a challenging business climate, the Memphis-based hardware wholesaler grew by a healthy 21 percent, pushing sales over \$3 billion. And that's just four years after Orgill's sales reached the \$2 billion mark. Moore suggested that the company's growth could have been even stronger if it had not been hampered by supply chain issues that resulted in so many out-of-stocks at the height of the pandemic.

"We've been working most of the year to respond to the supply chain challenges that we faced and improve our performance to you. It has been an incredible challenge," he admitted.

The company serves more than 1,100 stores in Canada and 50 other countries.

Noting that Canada was one of the fastest-growing markets for Orgill last year, Moore explained that dealers everywhere found orders from their existing wholesalers, often tied to a banner, being delayed. As COVID-19 created supply chain challenges, many of those stores turned to Orgill.

Moore shared some industry forecasts for sales growth in the U.S. in 2021. While these outlooks were negative or nearly flat compared with last year's record increases, Orgill plans for seven percent growth this year, a goal that is predicated on the company returning to pre-pandemic levels of service. "We're expecting another strong year of growth, and success, for our customers and the industry generally."

Finally, he shared some aggressive longer-term growth plans. "We are working to ensure we have the capacity in place to support the potential of doubling our business over the next five years."

BRIEFLY

HOME DEPOT CANADA SUPPORTS THE HOMELESS

The Home Depot Canada Foundation completed its latest Holiday Orange Door Project Campaign. Through donations both in-store and online, the campaign raised \$798,195. The foundation committed an additional \$364,000—or \$2,000 per Home Depot Store—to support 125 different charities serving youth across Canada. In total, \$1,161,195 was generated.

SEXTON HOSTS SUCCESSFUL ONLINE AGM

Sexton Group recently held its annual meeting for its members, garnering one of its highest attendances ever. By hosting the meeting and events online, the group made them available to members who can't attend in-person meetings or shows. Encouraged by the success, "we are already talking about what we can do with our vendor partners," said Eric Palmer, VP and GM of the Sexton Group.

LEE VALLEY TOOLS GETS RECOGNIZED

A study has revealed Ontario customers' favourite retailers for an in-person and online experience. Lee Valley Tools ranks at number 12 for in-store shopping, while Reitmans stood at number one and MEC in sixth place. Leger, which has conducted the WOW study for the past 10 years, evaluated a total of 145 retailers for this year's edition.

WEST FRASER ACQUIRES NORBORD

West Fraser Timber Co. has acquired all outstanding common shares of Norbord Inc., reportedly the world's largest OSB producer. The all-stock transaction was valued at about \$4 billion. The combined company will continue to operate as West Fraser.

CEO Boyden Moore expects another year of strong growth for Orgill's customers, and for the industry generally.



HOME DEPOT, LOWE'S REPORT RECORD EARNINGS IN COVID YEAR

The world's number one and number two home improvement retailers both turned in annual sales and profits that confirmed the extraordinary performance of the entire industry during the year of COVID.

The Home Depot saw sales for the fourth quarter climb a whopping 25.1 percent to \$32.3 billion over the same quarter in fiscal 2019. Comparable sales for the period increased 24.5 percent, while comp sales in the U.S. increased 25 percent. In Canada, results were slightly better than that, with posted comps above the company average in local currency.

Profits held as well. Net earnings for the quarter were \$2.9 billion, up from \$2.5 billion in the same period a year earlier. They would have been up even more if not for Home Depot's acquisition of HD Supply at the end of 2020. That deal cost the retailer approximately \$110 million.

At Lowe's Cos., the results were equally dramatic. Fourth-quarter earnings reached \$978 million, up about 92 percent, on revenues of \$20.31 billion, which were up nearly 27 percent year over year. Comp sales in the U.S. rose by 28.1 percent. Restructuring,



related to the closing of some Canadian stores in the fourth quarter of fiscal 2019, ended up costing the company \$45 million, but only resulted in "a very modest impact" on the company's Q4 results.

In Canada, the business performed comparably well, despite tighter restrictions overall in this country under COVID. "We delivered comp growth in the mid-teens despite several COVID-related operating restrictions that went into effect during the quarter," said Lowe's president and CEO, Marvin Ellison, in a call to analysts.

Overall, the Canadian business enjoyed better-than-anticipated performance in the fourth quarter. "The new Canadian

leadership team made tremendous progress in 2020 and remains focused on improving operational efficiency by executing our retail fundamentals playbook to drive greater labour productivity and improve gross margins," Ellison added.

For the year, Home Depot had net earnings of \$12.9 billion on sales of \$132.1 billion, which were up 19.9 percent. The company reported comp sales for the year up 19.7 percent, with comparable sales in the U.S. increasing by 20.6 percent.

At Lowe's, annual sales rose more than 24 percent to \$72 billion, while net earnings climbed 36 percent to \$5.84 billion. Online sales were up 111 percent for the year.

HARDWARE RETAILERS MAKE LISTS OF TOP EMPLOYERS

Home improvement retailers did well in the latest *Forbes* list of Canada's best companies to work for. In collaboration with the market research company Statista, *Forbes* selected Canada's Best Employers for 2021.

The ranking is based on corporate culture and how a company treats its employees. The overall well-being of workers has




Princess Auto, the hardlines chain based in Winnipeg, came in at number 143, while Home Hardware was number 173. Home Depot was

become an even greater issue than in the past thanks to the impact of COVID-19.

Costco Canada landed right near the top, at number 13, IKEA was number 124,

number 201 and Canadian Tire came in at number 268.

Canada's Top 100 Employers project named Lowe's Canada and Sollio Cooperative Group as two of Montreal's Top Employers 2021. The annual competition, held by Mediacorp, recognized the companies for their charitable involvement, along with their retirement savings plans and professional education opportunities for employees.

A man with a beard and short hair, wearing a dark blue RONA zip-up jacket and khaki pants, stands in a hardware store aisle. He is holding a small box of screws in his hands. The background shows tall shelves stocked with various hardware items.

“Ever since we expanded into hardware and retail, without limiting ourselves to contractor business, we have seen our sales and profitability grow.”

Patrick Willis
Multi-store owner
RONA Vermilion, Alberta
RONA Goodsoil, Saskatchewan
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QUEBEC
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MARITIMES
Scott Wilson 519-281-1824

A photograph of the exterior of a RONA store. The building has blue horizontal siding and a large white RONA logo with a stylized 'A' that has three vertical bars. Below the logo are large glass entrance doors.

RONA

NATIONAL HARDWARE SHOW RETURNS TO LAS VEGAS THIS FALL FOR LIVE EVENT

After holding a virtual event in 2020, the National Hardware Show (NHS) will resume its live format this year, and it returns to Las Vegas to do it. The show, which is marking its 75th anniversary, will now take place from Oct. 21 to 23. It will remain in the Las Vegas Convention Center but it will move to the facility's newly opened West Hall.

"After consulting key industry stakeholders and attendees, the decision to postpone to October was made to ensure maximum safety for all involved and to

produce a successful event for all our participants," said event leader Beth Casson in a release. "We know how eager everyone is to come together again, and are excited to unite in a brand new, state-of-the-art space in October."

This year's NHS will showcase relevant, new, and international products and provide insight into industry trends and innovations. "We are committed to serving the industry by providing the education, resources, and networking needed for success in 2021 and beyond," Casson added.



The National Hardware Show, which is marking its 75th anniversary, will resume its live format this year in Las Vegas from Oct. 21 to 23.

BRIEFLY

RONA'S NEWEST STORES IN QUEBEC

Karine Anctil, owner of the RONA store in Rivière-du-Loup, Que., has acquired a building centre in La Pocatière. In Quebec City, a local notary, François Thifault, has acquired the RONA Quincaillerie Crémazie in his neighbourhood. The 1,500 square-foot store has served the community for over 75 years. Philip St-James and Stacy Boulet, the dealer-owners of RONA Quincaillerie des Rivières in Waterville, Que., have acquired a second independent affiliate location in the province's Eastern Townships.

BMR ADDS NEW MARITIME MEMBER

BMR has welcomed the hardware division of Shippagan Enterprises Ltd as an associate member under the BMR Express banner. The fourth-generation family business is a wholesale distributor serving the commercial fishing and aquaculture industries in Shippagan, N.B. The hardware store has 15 employees and a total sales area of 7,000 square feet.

NEW CASTLE MEMBER IN NORTHERN ONTARIO

Castle Building Centres has announced that Mayer Hardware & Building Supplies in Sioux Narrows, Ont. is a new member location. Owners Phil and Lauri Mayer looked to Castle to enhance the store's product assortment and buying power.

TIMBER MART'S LATEST MEMBERS

TIMBER MART has welcomed Silverstar Roofing Supplies in Toronto's east end as a member. Since 2018, Silverstar has offered shingles and roofing accessories to contractors and builders in the Greater Toronto Area. The business is situated on 1.8 acres of land in Scarborough covering two warehouses, a large storage yard, and a shingle recycling depot. In Quebec, Matériaux Direct Inc. in La Pocatière has also joined. This dealer offers a niche selection of building materials to contractors and builders in the Bas-Saint-Laurent region.

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GMS EXPANDS CANADIAN PRESENCE WITH ANOTHER DEALER ACQUISITION

A major U.S. commercial dealer continues to grow its presence in this country with the acquisition of another independent dealer. GMS Inc., through its Canadian subsidiary, WSB Titan, has bought D.L. Building Materials.

Founded in 1988, D.L. supplies wall-board, acoustical ceilings, steel framing, insulation, and related building products to markets in Eastern Ontario and parts of Quebec through two locations: in Gatineau, Que., and Kingston, Ont. Together, those sites represent 80 employees and 30 trucks, supported by 64,000 square feet of warehouse and more than 196,000 square feet of yard space.

The company is an affiliate of Le Groupe Beaudesne, which in turn is part of the buying group within WSB Titan, acquired by GMS in 2018. Headquartered in Vaughan, Ont., WSB Titan represents a network of about 30 locations stretching



D.L. Building Materials has two locations representing 80 employees and 30 trucks.

from Vancouver Island to Quebec. Though Beaudesne was not part of the buyout, it remains tied to WSB Titan for purchasing.

GMS operates a network of more than 260 gypsum supply outlets across the U.S. and Canada. With the addition of D.L., GMS expands its Canadian presence and fills a geographic gap in Eastern Ontario, specifically the Ottawa-Gatineau market. The acquisition also marks GMS's first

location in the Quebec market as it continues to execute strategic expansion goals in Canada.

Travis Hendren, President of WSB Titan, says he's pleased to bring D.L. directly into the GMS fold. He says Canada is a valuable market for GMS. "It's going to continue to be an important part of our growth. We hold the view that Canada has a lot of opportunity."

NHPA'S LEADERSHIP TRAINING WILL HELP YOUR TEAM THROUGH COVID

Managing your team—and your customers' expectations—has become increasingly difficult as the effects of the pandemic continue. That's why the North American Hardware and Paint Association (NHPA) has tweaked its courses and management training programs.

"We've repackaged all the training content so it makes more sense to our members," says Scott Wright, executive director of advanced training programs for the association.

Wright acknowledges that people are getting tired of online learning, after being confined for so many months under COVID.

"But training lets you invest in the people you have and puts importance on your people and your team."

One addition to NHPA's educational series is its Foundations of Leadership program. It offers three different nine-week course options: Intro to Leadership, Leading Your Team, and Financial Management. The next Intro to Leadership course will kick off in August. The deadline to enroll is July 30.

The course is designed for staff who are on their way up, perhaps leading to an assistant manager or manager role within the business. Students can choose between



a scheduled course plan or use self-paced options. Graduates of the Intro to Leadership course will walk away with insights into their personal leadership styles and strengths. They will be able to develop a framework for their ongoing leadership growth and career development.

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—*Albert Pike, Pike's Building Centre*



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ProductSPOTLIGHT

BY GEOFF McLARNEY



◀ Shur-Line extension poles

From Shur-Line's Lumi-Tech line, the LED Pro Painter's 4-7.5 foot Extension Pole provides increased visibility and better results. By getting into hard-to-reach areas without a ladder, users never have to miss a spot. The pole features five LED lights surrounded by impact-resistant bumpers. Universal threads attach to most extension poles and frames as well as other threaded applicators, making it a convenient multi-purpose tool.

www.shurline.com

Celestia soaker tub by Bain Ultra ▶

Bain Ultra's Celestia 6233 soaker tub features a simple silhouette. It's the first tub to be offered in FineStone, the brand's new high-quality solid surface material made of refined minerals and pure liquid acrylic. The material is durable, light- and colour-resistant, and has a nonporous surface that is naturally hygienic and easy to clean. The Celestia is available in the 62 inches by 33 inches by 24-inch size.

www.bainultra.com



◀ Delta-FL subfloor system

Delta-FL is a subfloor system for concrete and slab-on-grade floors. Its unique air-gap technology provides a thermal break that separates a finished floor from the cold concrete floor. Laminate floors can be installed directly on Delta-FL, protecting the laminate from moisture. It is easy to install and creates a sealed vapour barrier subfloor that prevents moisture rise and makes basements feel warm and dry.

www.delta-fl.com





▲ Diablo Steel Demon saw blades

Diablo's new range of Steel Demon AMPED reciprocating saw blades introduces an industrial-grade coating, Black Industrial Cooling Element (I.C.E.), for up to 100 times longer cutting life compared to standard metal cutting bi-metal blades. Carbide teeth deliver longevity while the one-inch oversized blade body provides stability and rigidity for straighter cuts with less vibration. An enhanced tip-to-blade connection provides extreme impact resistance.

www.diablotools.com



▲ SmartSide ExpertFinish Trim & Siding by LP

LP's SmartSide ExpertFinish Trim & Siding is a prefinished siding option available in an array of tailored colours. The inclusion of the new ExpertFinish Lap eliminates the need for seam caulking, joint moulds, or pan flashing at butt joints. With a choice of 16 colours, the siding is designed to look great and remain durable for years to come, thanks to a factory finish with acrylic latex paint.

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GIVING GREEN OPTIONS

BY WANDA O'BRIEN

Going green. Eco-friendly. Commitment to sustainability. These common catchphrases have caught on across industries with the rise of global environmental consciousness, and widespread talk of climate change. But what is happening in the home improvement retail space?



Retailers are incorporating reduce, reuse, and recycle into their daily business practices and providing environmentally friendly options on their shelves. While the perils of greenwashing—a marketing tactic where products appear eco-conscious when they are not—are prevalent, there are accessible entrance points for those looking to capitalize on this slice of the market and do good by the planet and their books.

Besides the environmental impact, there is a strong business case for the three Rs. “It’s just a good business move, regardless of whether it’s backed up by your company’s ethics or values,” said Chis Galer, president of POCO Building Supplies, a TIMBER MART dealer in Port Coquitlam, B.C. The family-owned and operated company is celebrating 100 years in business in 2021 and has had a robust recycling program for more than 30 of those years.

“The forklift drivers kind of got an earful from my grandfather and my uncle years ago if they were discarding metal bands that could be reused,” Galer shared, referencing the steel bands commonly used to wrap and prepare lumber loads. If the band was damaged, it was chopped up and sold in bulk to a steel refinery close by. The more modern synthetic bands are recycled. Used cardboard is sold to a paper company. Wherever



Cousins Chris and Jeff Galer, current stewards and fourth generation owners of POCO Building Supplies.

possible, the company tries to ensure materials are recycled or repurposed.

Environmentalism might not have been top of mind for POCO’s forefathers, but it is for Galer. He’s exploring an opportunity with Unbuilders, a deconstructing and salvage company in Vancouver that dismantles buildings piece by piece so the materials can be reused. “There are so many materials around us that have already been harvested. How can we give those materials a second, third, maybe a fourth life?”

Galer, like many other dealers, optimizes transport routes to reduce delivery times and emissions. Efficient deliveries mean more can be completed in a day while easing the burden on the company’s purse and the earth. Galer is keeping an eye out for when electric trucks or forklifts become a feasible alternative.

CREATING CUSTOMER OPTIONS

In 2018, Zak Thorup, manager of two Home Hardware stores in Newfoundland and Labrador, found an alternative for old pickle jars otherwise headed for the garbage dump. There’s no curbside glass recycling program in the province.

“Obviously that weighs on a ton of people’s consciousnesses. Everyone accumulates glass jars in their day-to-day,” he said. Used jars were dropped at the hardware store and customers could choose to use them instead of opting for a plastic bag to hold their purchases of nuts, bolts, and nails. While Newfoundland formally banned plastic bags in 2020, Thorup plans to continue the used jar initiative as soon as it’s safe to do so taking into account COVID-19 precautions.

Zak Thorup, manager of two Home Hardware stores in Newfoundland and Labrador, found an alternative for old pickle jars.





Len McAuley, owner of Pollocks Home Hardware in Toronto, says customers love the BYOC program.

Len McAuley, owner of Pollocks Home Hardware in Toronto, Ont., started a bring-your-own-container (BYOC) program in June 2019, selling biodegradable soap from a local company called Eco + Amour. McAuley was introduced to the company at a Green Living Show he attended when he was scouting for environmental products to add to his store. The bring-your-own-container refilling station took off with his local customer base.

"Customers loved it. They were thanking me. I live in the neighbourhood and they would see me on the street and thank me," he said. Popular products included shampoo, dish soap, laundry soap, and dishwasher tablets. Pet wash came in just before COVID-19 started and had a positive response. Although the refilling station is on hold until post-pandemic, he's still selling the related products.

Thorup was close to setting up refilling stations at both his stores, using refill stations offered by Home Hardware under its own Natura brand. The stations started as a pilot project with one store in June 2019 but were paused in 2020 when the industry had to adjust to curbside pick-up. That's going to be Thorup's next project, and he's waiting until it's restarted.

McAuley's refilling station turned into a green section. What started as a four-foot space has since enlarged to 10 feet by ten feet as he added more products, like bamboo toothbrushes, to his offerings. "It's almost like a little store within a store," he said.

Thorup's Home's stores also offer smaller products, like loofah scrubbers made from natural fibres and DSolve laundry strips. The latter is more cost-efficient to ship to the island as well as being hypoallergenic and biodegradable.



"By giving options, then you can encourage good choices," said Thorup. "You need to start a conversation around it. You're raising awareness."

SHORT-TERM PAIN FOR LONG-TERM GAIN

Audrey Archambault co-owns the RONA Iberville store in Quebec with her dad. She's making store-wide changes to try and reduce waste. The pair updated the lighting for the store in 2019 to integrate LED lights and made it more energy efficient.



In efforts to become more energy-efficient, RONA Iberville upgraded its lights to LEDs.

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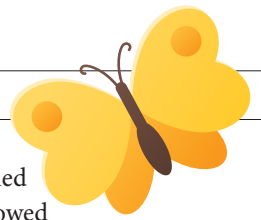


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"The consumer base has definitely demonstrated they're willing to pay a bit more for a product they believe is less impactful on the environment," says Chris Magwood, of The Endeavour Centre in Peterborough, Ont.



"I was impressed to see the conservation that we saved. The investment is made by what we saved," said Archambault. They are also exploring moving all their price tags and banners to digital displays to lower paper consumption.

Archambault said it's up to retailers to encourage customers to explore green alternatives and push those products so more people know about them. "The eco-friendly products should be at the front because sometimes the customer just doesn't know about it and would be proud to use the product."

Some products on Archambault's shelves include RONA's own recycled paint and cleaning products from Attitude, a Montreal-based company that creates household products from natural, plant and mineral-based ingredients.

In addition to what's on the shelves, Archambault stopped giving out plastic bags at the store before it was formally banned in her town in 2020. Lowe's Canada started charging for plastic bags in 2018. The corporate initiative cut store use of plastic bags by half, and profits from the sales, some \$160,000, were donated to the Nature Conservancy of Canada between June 2018 and December 2020.

The investment in product knowledge and start-up costs can pay off for retailers.

"You can cultivate that market," said Chris Magwood, director at the Endeavour Centre in Peterborough, Ont. The centre is a not-for-profit sustainable building school as well as a design/build firm. "If you're the one building store here in Peterborough that has a really good green building section, all the people who are into green building are going to come to your store." He also stressed that retailers won't lose existing clientele by providing a green section in store, but they definitely stand to gain.

Galer said his same customers who care about the sustainable sourcing of their wood products are also willing to pay a little more for stains from natural oils. "It can be more expensive, but the consumer base has definitely demonstrated they're willing to pay a bit more for a product they believe is less impactful on the environment."

OPPORTUNITY AWAITS

Magwood gave a presentation on sustainable building materials at the Western Lumber Retail Association (WRLA) trade show in January 2021.

"I was really thrilled to be asked to speak there because that's the first time any trade

or retail association has reached out," he said. Two dealers followed up with him after the presentation, which he said was a great outcome. But in general, he feels retailers could be doing more.


"There are a lot of people starting to realize that business as usual is changing. There's all the climate pressures, the health pressures," Magwood said. "All of that is going to start to change the industry and I feel like retailers could be playing a huge role in that by highlighting it instead of waiting until people are knocking the door down to get the stuff."

With 25 years in home improvement, he said the options for customers on shelves are still minimal and staff behind the counter often lack the knowledge to explain a product's differentiator.

"I think you need to look at the demand out there from the consumer base for legitimate, sustainable products. There is truly a market for it," said Galer from POCO Building Supplies. He encourages any retailers new to exploring sustainable options not to get caught up on cost. "Don't fall into the trap that just because something is going to cost more, it's not going to sell."

Galer said store owners should look at the life cycle of a product to avoid the pitfalls of greenwashing. For example, a product may be marketed as green, but the manufacturing process tells another story. "You really have to dig deep and not take everything at face value. Greenwashing is, unfortunately, a little too prevalent in our industry. Ask, what is this claim based on?"

Magwood echoed that research is critical, but retailers don't need to reinvent the wheel. He cited certifications such as Cradle to Cradle, Declare Label, Health Product Declaration (HPC), and Environmental Product Declaration (EPD) as tools for dealers to reference.

"If you start to explore any category of building products, somebody is making the clean, healthy, non-toxic version of it." 

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BY MICHAEL McLARNEY

PATRICK MORIN ACQUISITION SOLIDIFIES HOME HARDWARE'S PRESENCE IN QUEBEC

The takeover of one of Canada's largest independent home improvement retailers caught the industry by surprise.

Home Hardware has brought the independent chain, Patrick Morin, into its fold, greatly increasing the company's presence in the Quebec market. The acquisition was made in partnership with Groupe Turcotte, a network of seven Home Hardware stores led by Louis Turcotte, with partners Daniel Gervais and Pierre Beauchamp.

Groupe Turcotte is the principal owner in the takeover, with Home Hardware Stores holding a minority share.

The deal will add plenty of sales power in Quebec for Home Hardware. Patrick Morin's estimated sales are over \$350 million and it's one of the largest independent chains left in the country. It ranks among Hardlines' top 20 home improvement retailers. It has been on an aggressive expansion track itself in recent years with the addition of new stores. It added its 21st store in March 2017, an 80,000-square-foot outlet in Saint-Eustache in the Laurentides region.

Patrick Morin was formerly a member of the Independent Lumber Dealers Co-operative, a buying group that counts some of the country's largest independent home improvement retailers in its ranks.

The deal involves all 21 Patrick Morin stores and a distribution centre. Established in 1960, the family-owned business employs more than 1,700 and operates throughout the province. Currently run by the third generation of the Morin family, the company will now be led by Louis Turcotte. The stores will continue to operate under the existing Patrick Morin banner and branding.

Groupe Turcotte has Home Hardware stores in Marieville, Blainville, Pointe-aux-Trembles, Montreal, Laval, Saint-Lin-Lau-



rentides, Que.; and Stittsville, Ont. An experienced dealer, Louis Turcotte has been part of the Quebec home improvement industry for over 30 years.

With the new ownership still largely in the hands of Quebecers, the takeover is expected to be regarded favourably, something Louis Turcotte expressed himself. "As we carry on the legacy of a truly Québécois company, Patrick Morin will continue to operate with a head office in the province and in partnership with Home Hardware," he said in a release.

"We recognize that Quebec is a unique market, and we believe that partnering with such a strong, made-in-Quebec brand will continue to give us a competitive edge as we work with Groupe Turcotte and the Patrick Morin team to strengthen our merchandise programs," added Kevin Macnab, president and CEO of Home Hardware.

Seven members of the Morin family were involved in the management of the business at the time of the takeover. However, the timing of the move was favourable, as some members of the family were eyeing retirement by the end of this year.



Reflecting on the family culture of the retailer, the management at Patrick Morin took the opportunity to thank its staff and vendors when the deal was announced.

"For the members of the Morin family, it is an adventure that is coming to an end; an adventure written by three generations. The Morin family would like to thank each and every employee individually for their work, commitment, and loyalty throughout the years. We would also like to thank all our suppliers and business partners with whom we have built solid relationships over the years."



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Kingdon TIMBER MART HR from left to right, David Breukelaar, VP of purchasing; Steffanee Douglas, human resources generalist; Don Dyck, president and CEO; and Kevin Dyck, VP of operations.

HOW HR CAN ADD TO YOUR COMPANY

If the pandemic has shown us anything, it's just how important HR is to a company. People management, developing company policies—and managing them—are just some of the tasks HR personnel do.

BY CHRISTINA MANOCCHIO

Kingdon TIMBER MART photos: Rebekah Littlejohn Photography





Target Building Materials president, Greg Drouillard, finds comfort with an external company managing his company's human resource needs.



Love it or hate it, every workplace requires some form of oversight of human resources. HR represents a range of tasks, including hiring and firing, payroll, updating company policies, and much more.

People management has evolved over the years. Changing labour laws, finding quality staff, and staff management can be challenging for a small, or even large, business. Without an expert, navigating this field can be difficult.

HR, OR NOT TO HR, THAT IS THE QUESTION

Human resources can be a tricky area. That's why many companies hire a professional. Human resource professionals help with a variety of business tasks, including hiring, benefits, and general administration work that may have been completed by office personnel, like an office manager or accountant. If your company's HR demands aren't enough to warrant a full position, this can be a cost-saving measure for smaller companies.



Sometimes companies are stuck in the middle. They may not have the resources to hire an HR professional, but their current staff may not have the time or knowledge to deal with HR tasks. This is the problem Windsor, Ont.-based Target Building Supplies ran into.

Target's buying group, TORBSA, held a meeting where Toronto-based company Peninsula HR gave a presentation regarding their services. After hearing the presentation, Target jumped on the opportunity to join the service.

"From an employer's perspective, I have to tell you, it gives me comfort to know that they know one heck of a lot more about a subject relating to HR than I'll ever know," said Greg Drouillard, president of Target Building Materials.

Peninsula provides 24/7 service for their users, which is a key feature Target liked in comparison to their old HR company. Peninsula works together with Target to navigate any HR-related issues that come up. Although having an HR team available around the clock is very convenient, not

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having a dedicated HR person nearby is a bit of a challenge. “When we call it’s whoever answers the phone, so there’s no consistency that way,” said Claire Tyrrell, office administrator at Target Building Supplies.

Although there are some challenges with using an external company, it gives Drouillard peace of mind to know that any HR-related issues are taken care of.

“I can go about my business and representing lines in the construction market. [Peninsula] allows me to do my job.”

For Kingdon Lumber Limited, a TIMBER MART dealer in Peterborough, Ont., their HR requirements grew with the company. Within the last five years, Kingdon Lumber’s workforce almost doubled.

In the past, any HR-related tasks were completed by administration personnel. Fortunately, they hired an HR expert in 2016 before the company really took off.

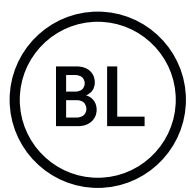
“We needed to sort of separate and divide some roles,” said Kevin Dyck, operations

manager at Kingdon TIMBER MART. “In that regard, it allowed us to tackle some of these problems more efficiently and more effectively.”

Don Dyck, president at Kingdon, explained that their HR personnel provided direction and communications between the three different locations, two stores and a manufacturing facility.



Kingdon TIMBER MART's HR department grew right before the business took off.



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“We would have been absolutely dead within the process of doing all of this stuff,” said Don Dyck.

HOW HR BECAME IMPORTANT DURING A PANDEMIC

The pandemic caused many companies to go into HR mode. Managing staff schedules and workplace safety are just some of the pressing items to come up during COVID-19.

While other industries have struggled throughout COVID, the home improvement industry has been excelling. Lowe’s Canada’s hiring spree is proof of this. Starting this spring, it is hiring 7,000 new staff across Canada.

Staff motivation can be tough during a pandemic. Like many businesses, Lowe’s Canada had to figure out a way to keep staff motivated during tough times.

“We kind of had to adapt overnight to a brand-new reality and, you know, adjust the way that we’re doing things on different levels,” said Nadine Chiasson, director of talent acquisition for Lowe’s Canada.

Lowe’s introduced a temporary \$2 wage premium for eligible associates due to the pandemic. They also introduced emergency paid leave and invested nearly \$1 million in pandemic support. One initiative included \$1,000 for each of Lowe’s Canada’s corporate stores to construct a food pantry for staff.

For Don Dyck at Kingdon, HR has been necessary to navigate COVID regulations. Keeping communications open and timely between his stores has been crucial for ensuring that employees at the facilities stay informed about COVID regulation requirements.

“Now we are often hearing them after an employee does,” said Dyck. “Then we’re trying to sift through what we really have to do.”

Having someone dedicated in HR made it easier to navigate the policies that came out during the pandemic.



Nadine Chiasson, director of talent acquisition for Lowe’s Canada, says it’s all about creating this culture where everyone can thrive.



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Andrew Godin, owner and operator of
Yvon Godin TIMBER MART in Neguac, N.B.



FINDING THE RIGHT TALENT

One of human resources' primary roles is to manage and conduct hiring for a company. Finding the right talent can be an expensive process. According to BambooHR, an HR software and resource company, it costs companies on average \$4,125 to onboard a new employee. This includes managers' time, office supplies, and time spent training. HR can provide insight for finding quality talent that can meet the company's needs.

Since the home improvement industry is doing well throughout the pandemic, many companies are still hiring to keep up with demand.

"We're not just surviving in terms of business, we're thriving. It's booming along and has been for the last year," said Don Dyck. "The struggle then is to find the right people. In the midst of all of this, how do you go about doing that?"

The pandemic has changed the way companies have to conduct hiring. Most face-to-face interactions have either been reduced or eliminated.

"A few years ago, we had a quick little survey and we asked folks, 'would you hire someone without face to face?' And people would say there's no way," said Ben Lamarche, general manager at recruitment and consultant agency Locke Search Group.

Now, companies are forced to get creative with phone and video interviews. Lowe's Canada is being innovative with its hiring process. They call it the "flexible formula" where candidates get to determine the nature of their interview with three choices. Candidates can go to in-person interviews, a virtual live interview, or a pre-recorded interview where candidates record their interviews when it's convenient for them.

Some small companies, like Yvon Godin TIMBER MART in Neguac, N.B., don't have a large staff and hire less frequently in comparison to larger companies like Lowe's. The Neguac TIMBER MART seeks longevity in an employee and they find that most employees leave due to retirement. According to Andrew Godin, owner and operator, his company looks for someone who is well-rounded and enjoys doing

physical work. Since they are a small team, there are no defined roles for day-to-day tasks on the floor.

THE EVOLUTION OF TALENT

Keeping up with the times is also an important aspect for HR. When Kevin Dyck joined Kingdon TIMBER MART, the company wasn't up to date.

"When I first started, we were still putting ads in the paper for people to apply, which is kind of an archaic thing to be doing," he said.

The hiring and application process became a bit easier after going online, but the company still faces a few more challenges. Due to the nature of the industry, the manufacturing side sees a lot of seasonal staff.

According to Kevin Dyck, the company used to hire students from high school and the nearby university. It would work out perfectly due to their schedules lining up with the manufacturing needs and many of the students would return the next season. But he has seen a decrease in students applying for work.



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“I’m not sure whether it’s the population that is going to those types of schools now or if they’re able to find better work elsewhere,” he said. “I’m not sure what it is.”

Now the company hires seasonal workers who are later in their careers and are interested in only working for a part of the year.

Another problem Kingdon TIMBER MART’s HR department faces is being in a rural location. The area has no public transit and is hard to get to. Although their two locations are only 20 minutes apart, one sees fewer applicants than the other.

“We’ve played around with ideas about rideshare and trying to stimulate interest in making the extra trip out there,” said Kevin.

Although there are some challenges with the location, Kingdon has other perks to attract talent, like a benefits package and RRSPs.



When learning about HR, he has found it helpful to attend courses and to gain knowledge about the area of people management. When his local chamber of commerce held workshops for business owners, he attended anything HR-related.

“Take advantage of any of your associations where you can sit in on industry knowledge.”

Finding good talent is important, but making sure your talent can excel within the company is also important. For Chiasson at Lowe’s, HR is more than just hiring and benefits.

“It’s all about creating this culture where everyone can thrive and we really believe that our people are our biggest asset.”



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BY HEATHER BEAUMONT

HOW THE PANDEMIC PUSHED COMPANIES ONLINE

Since face-to-face interactions have been limited or wiped out entirely within the last year, companies had to get innovative to serve their customers and to keep business going.



The pandemic has limited in-person interactions, leading to an emphasis on online shopping. Many businesses continue to scramble for ways to support and connect with customers during the pandemic.

Wolseley Canada Inc., a national wholesale distribution company with 225 locations, encourages contractors to text their orders to counter staff for a personalized shopping experience.

“It’s been a fantastic success,” says Paula Grond, senior manager, eBusiness, of the company’s Text-to-Branch business. “The service improves communication between staff and customers and provides a seamless and contactless experience.”

She adds, “It’s been good for social distancing because it limits the number of people in the store. Contractors text from outside to let staff know they’ve arrived to pick up their curbside order.”

The Burlington, Ont.-based supplier of plumbing, HVAC/R, fire protection, and waterworks launched its Text-to-Branch

service last fall with 50 locations and expanded with an additional 75 branches in early December.

Contractors text questions to staff or send images of a part, a product serial number, or a video of an installation in progress and request assistance.

The texts reach multiple branch associates simultaneously during regular business hours from 7 a.m. to 5 p.m. Staff response time averages five minutes and customers who text after regular hours receive a response the next morning.

“With a pandemic, digital is often the only way to reach and connect with people right now,” explains Jenn Dunstan, director, digital marketing, at Central Station.

Dunstan’s position involves developing digital strategies to increase lead generation, brand loyalty, and brand reputation for clients. Her Toronto-based marketing and communications agency stresses branding, innovation, and technology in telling its B2B and B2C clients’ stories.

“The challenge with digital and technology

is that there are so many options and tactics out there but most people aren’t doing the fundamental things,” says Dunstan.

She says every business needs to “invest the time to get a website with an e-commerce component.” Then that website needs to be leveraged. Business owners need to anticipate the questions both potential and regular customers will ask and be aware of the different virtual platforms where their customers hang out to communicate with them.

Community management is another service offered by the Central Station team. Businesses should expect questions and comments to be addressed to active social media channels, including Facebook, Instagram, Messenger, and live chat.

Dunstan recommends smaller businesses check out affordable chat options.

“There are many cost-effective options available. Adding a live chat widget to your website allows you to support site visitors as they’re considering your inventory,” she says. “Diligently handling your community engagement in the form of comments,

direct messages, and emails also ensures that you retain and capture all prospective business revenue.”

In addition, Google My Business and Facebook enable businesses to connect their product catalogue or manually upload products and services lists to a business page.

“A verified Google My Business page is critical for attracting business,” says Dunstan. The company name, address, phone number, and website URL must then be mirrored on other channels, web mentions, and directory lists to increase SEO (search engine optimization) and customer searches. Businesses with a Google My Business page can then claim their free business listing and engage with public reviews.

When online engagement is monitored, these days, customers expect prompt responses to both positive and negative reviews. Dunstan recommends that B2C customers receive a response within 15 minutes.

Wolseley Canada’s management responded promptly to the changes that social distancing brought to the company’s showroom bookings.

Grond describes the pre-pandemic appointments in the 26 showrooms that



display kitchen and bathroom fixtures as a tactile experience.

“We quickly pivoted to get the technology in place to book virtual appointments,” Dunstan says. Now, showroom consultants offer virtual consultations and walk-throughs. And the company will likely continue to offer virtual showroom appointments when physical distancing requirements are no longer in place.

Businesses can reach customers in so many different ways. Uploading a full line of product images; engaging customers with news and updates; posting blogs, customer and staff stories; broadcasting instructional videos; webcasts and podcasts all create a company’s personal brand story and serve to enhance consumer engagement with that brand.

At Wolseley, contractors with a company credit account can log into Wolseley Express to view products and product lines and add items to their shopping carts.

During the early months of the pandemic, user registration on the e-business platform increased significantly. Established almost 20 years earlier, owing to the increasing popularity, prevalence, and convenience of e-commerce, the transactional platform promotes its products to the wholesale trade.

Customers also connect with the company by responding to What’s Up? Pipe Up! website surveys that measure customer satisfaction. Survey participants are eligible to win a \$150 VISA gift card.

IKO Industries, a Central Station client, enables customers to view its shingles, both up close and at a distance, by using artificial intelligence with its “ROOFViewer” tool.

The global roofing material manufacturer features a variety of shingle products and colours for website visitors to see, with an overview of a home’s exterior, complete with new roofing.

Customers can either upload an image of a home or choose from different styles of available homes. They can then customize their photo or the style of home they selected by choosing shingle colours to match the home’s siding and trim.

As part of its branding, IKO Industries has leveraged 70 years of experience to build trust through its history as a family-owned business, along with its IKO RoofPro loyalty program for contractors across North America.

“IKO offers its customers more in terms of options and ways for their customers to communicate with the brand,” explains Dunstan. To make the shingle colour selection process a little easier, IKO delivers the same information in several formats to align with the different ways that customers absorb information. The shingle selection process is made easier with long-form, text-based articles, infographics, and an array of informational video content.

Wajax, another Central Station client, has customers who connect both digitally and at over 110 locations across Canada.



Jenn Dunstan, director, digital marketing, at Central Station says adding a live chat widget to your website allows you to support site visitors as they’re considering your inventory.

Customers of the company, which provides industrial and service products to mining, forestry, oil and gas, and other industries, can connect with the company through website, Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube.

The Wajax home page customer communication tools are clearly posted on their website, which includes email, phone, address, promotional offers and deals, and a map that identifies the different branch locations. A message to website visitors reassuringly characterizes the company with these words: “We’re here to help you find the best solution.”

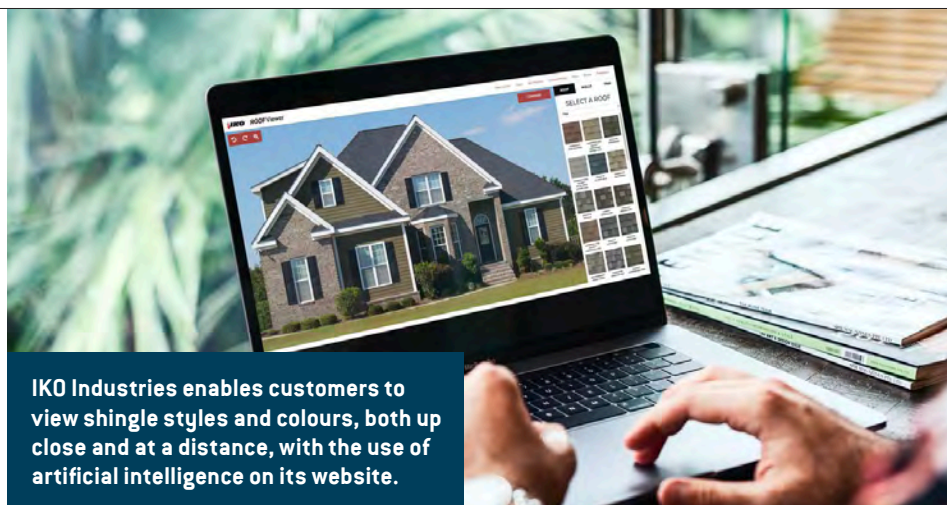
While physical distancing regulations have siloed individuals from their local retailers, services, and communities, retail strategy consultant Jim Davidson of Competitactics may just have an innovative solution.

“It’s analogous to a shopping mall,” Davidson says as he explains his concept for a virtual downtown. “The difference is, it’s online and with a broader range of services and retail stores than the average shopping mall.”

Davidson and his partner, Steven Mulhall, have expanded the online marketplace model with an “aggregation of local retail and service providers, available to shoppers, around the clock.”



Jim Davidson of Competitactics is launching a virtual downtown where consumers access virtual storefronts for local stores, services, and restaurants.



IKO Industries enables customers to view shingle styles and colours, both up close and at a distance, with the use of artificial intelligence on its website.

At a virtual downtown, there’s no need for masks or physical distancing and parking hassles are no longer an issue. Consumers access virtual storefronts from their phones or computers to shop local, branded retailers and services in their communities.

With plans to launch this spring, the virtual downtown will extend its reach across North America and later into global markets.

Each virtual storefront will link to the retailer’s existing e-commerce site. Fees start at \$9.95 a month and an optional package provided by the ShopSite e-commerce platform includes cross-selling and inventory monitoring capabilities, priced at \$60 a month.

“The value offering is that many local retailers are struggling with getting online,” writes Davidson in an email. “This is the avenue to provide that turn-key retail platform in an environment where the consumer can shop for items and services all through one checkout.”

Products and services include lawn maintenance and plumbers. In a B2B wing, suppliers will showcase new and featured products and services to include DeckStars, deck builders and specialty associations that provide local, qualified services. Educational resources, health providers and other services and retailers will also be featured.

Unlike Amazon and other e-commerce websites that post products and prices, visitors to the virtual downtown will log into an interactive website. There they’ll

visit branded virtual storefronts or use keywords to conduct online searches.

Shoppers will view retailer brochures and learn from instructional videos. The virtual downtown will also link to retailers’ Zoom or Webex accounts for live chats.

“The key to the virtual downtown is that it promotes local stores, services, and restaurants. It’s more than a marketplace. It’s a community,” Davidson said.

A town square, as envisioned by Davidson, who is also a college business instructor, will showcase live events including fashion shows, concerts, and product demonstrations.

Central Station’s Dunstan agrees that communities are an important focus when it comes to digital branding, particularly for smaller retailers associated with national brands who may be struggling for individual recognition.

“The goal is to be known by name, both as a member of the community and a representative of that national brand,” she explains.

Small businesses often compare themselves to the retailer down the street. But with online shopping now a major player to influence shopping habits, “convenience is a leading driver in consumer behaviour, and Amazon is just as much of a competitor. It’s so important to be involved digitally,” says Dunstan.

“Being a part of the local conversation gives business owners an opportunity to build a personal brand and make those local connections.”

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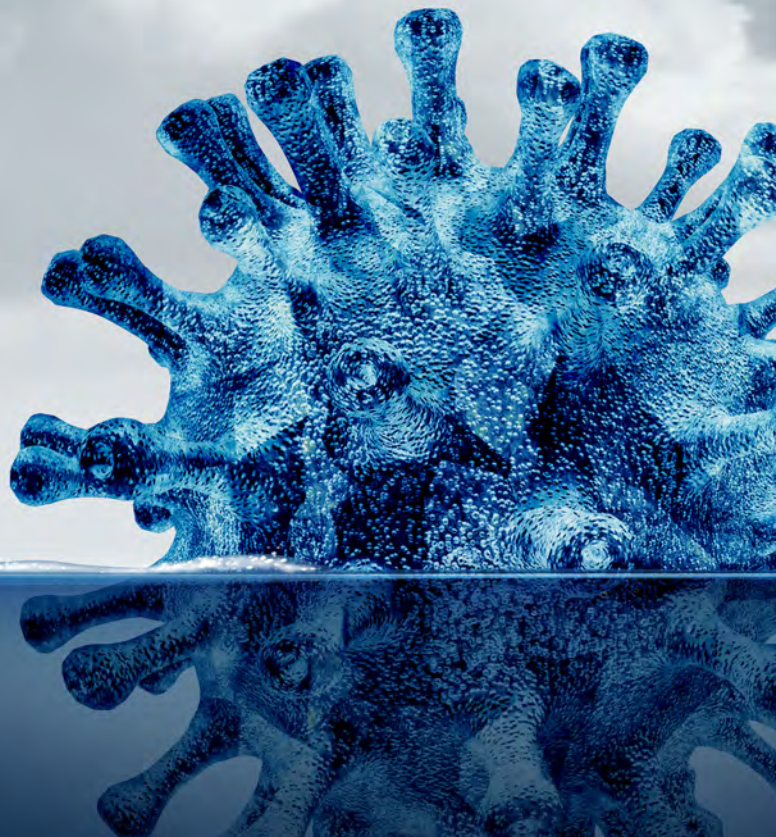
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BY JOHN CAULFIELD

SHIPMENT BLUES

The pandemic has taught dealers and distributors some valuable lessons about their supply chains.



The coronavirus pandemic has been a double-edged sword for Eddie Calderon, who owns two RONA-affiliated stores in the Montreal suburbs of Terrebonne and Laval.

On the positive side, his company's sales went through the roof in 2020, expanding by one-third over the previous year. But demand sometimes overwhelmed supply and his stores' capacity to deliver.

Between last April and July, "it was insane," Calderon recalls. "We went from getting 10 web orders a day to over 100, and

not just small items, either." The stores also encountered shortages in several categories. "I was scouring the Internet at four in the morning trying to find inventory, especially seasonal goods." As a result of these factors, same-day delivery became five-day delivery in some cases.

Since last summer, web orders and delivery patterns have settled back to normal levels as shopping restrictions eased. But Calderon's experience is one that dealers and distributors across Canada can relate to. The pandemic exposed weak links in

the supply chain that, for some products, remains fragile.

"There was no contingency for this kind of thing," Curt Crego, operations manager for the 60-location Windsor Plywood, says of the pandemic, during which his company experienced shortages across a range of products.

"Allocation has been replaced by managed supply," quips Dave McNeil, VP and national accounts manager for Taiga Building Products, with 15 distribution centres serving nine provinces. He singles



out the “unbelievable” demand for treated lumber as one example of a hard-to-get product. Other dealers pointed to paint, moulding, and hardware.

Just-in-time delivery, which has been most retailers’ stocking strategy for decades, lulled them into a false sense of security that the pandemic rudely disrupted.

“No one had extra inventory,” laments Brad Swanson, who owns a Home Hardware Building Centre in Kitchener, Ont.

Finding products became a treasure hunt. Case in point: last summer, Paul Williams,

general manager of the 25-member buying group TORBSA, purchased a portable air conditioner from a retailer in Barrie, Ont. Between his placing the order and driving 45 minutes to pick it up, the number of air conditioning units that the store had in stock had dwindled from nine to three.

TORBSA’s dealers also struggled to meet demand during the early months of the pandemic. “Everyone was learning on the fly,” Williams admits. Even now, dealers across the country continue to rethink how they buy product, and from which suppliers. The

lessons they’ve learned over the past year could influence their purchasing decisions after the virus subsides.

ONLINE ONSLAUGHT

The virus’s spread exacerbated shortages in some categories that existed before the health crisis. Homeowners cooped up in their houses took on renovation projects with greater avidity. Manufacturers were forced to slow or halt production when employees tested positive for COVID-19. And the global supply chain “was thrown off rhythm,” says Taiga’s O’Neil, with unpredictable delays in shipments and transport becoming common.

What also caught Canada’s dealers and suppliers off guard was the spike in online sales, which put unexpected pressure on their companies’ delivery programs.

Home Hardware Building Centre in Fort St. John, B.C., saw its online transactions increase tenfold last year, says its GM Doug Gallinger.

“If it weren’t for online, I don’t know what we would have done,” adds Paul Sharpe, GM for RONA Guelph in Ontario, where online transactions rose from two percent of total sales in 2018 to 20 percent last year.

Canadian Tire Retail saw its e-commerce sales rise by 250 percent in 2020. Correspondingly, the retailer’s Ship-to-Home program jumped by 556 percent for parcel shipments in the second quarter, and by 166 percent for bulk shipments, according to Shawn Farmer, Canadian Tire’s vice president, digital ecomm experience.

The retailer stabilized its Ship-to-Home program by setting up Canada Post and Canada Cartage Systems at more of its stores in order to expand its courier and bulk carrier networks.

During the fourth quarter, Canadian Tire started allowing its stores to dynamically change the estimated times of arrival for order fulfillment displayed on their websites. The aim was to set more realistic expectations for its customers. As most online shoppers prefer to pick up purchases at the

nearest Canadian Tire store, the retailer continued to roll out Self-Serve Pickup Lockers to more than 150 stores across the country, “enabling a truly touchless pickup experience,” says Farmer.

AGGRESSIVE PURCHASING

During the pandemic, Canadian Tire added about 4,000 products to its Ship-To-Home service, including items like bagged soil and auto batteries that previously had been available for in-store purchase only.

To accommodate the rising demand for products in general, other home improvement retailers expanded their delivery capacities and stock on hand. In Saskatchewan, the pro dealer Econo Lumber, a TIMBER MART member, delivers between 70 and 80 percent of what it sells to job sites. “We do a lot of business with First Nations, and all that stuff is delivered,” explains owner Curtis Lemieux. As Econo’s business increased during the pandemic, he added “a few pieces” to his fleet and two more delivery employees.

“I’m carrying more inventory now in my store and warehouse than I have for the past 10 years.”

Groupe Materiaux Godin saw sales from its four locations in Quebec and Ontario rise by 58 percent last year, which prompted its owner and president, Joel Godin, to add two Moffett trucks. Godin says his stores also warehouse more products: his winter bookings, which used to be for three-to-six months out, are now for six-to-12 months, which for treated lumber equals \$1.5 million.

And he’s not alone. “I’m carrying more inventory now in my store and warehouse than I have for the past 10 years,” says Swanson, the Kitchener retailer.

Econo Lumber’s inventory is up 15 percent, says Lemieux. Windsor Plywood is warehousing more product in its distribution and its salespeople “have a good

knowledge” of alternatives in the event a customer’s first choice isn’t available, says Crego. Sharpe of RONA Guelph encourages his staff to be proactive in forecasting. He’s been allowing department managers to add “safety stock” and to establish relationships with secondary suppliers.

WILL CURBSIDE PICKUP SURVIVE?

TORBSA’s Williams wonders if product shortages and delivery delays will lead dealers and distributors to rely less on foreign suppliers in the U.S. and Asia and to buy more from Canada-based sources. At the very least, he thinks what’s happened in the past year should give retailers pause to “re-evaluate how you’re operating. There is a new appreciation for the planning side of the business.”

“Planning is worthwhile, and it pays off in spades,” says Taiga’s O’Neil. About a year ago, Taiga initiated its Business Continuity Plan, which included the use of mobile procurement devices that allow Taiga to run

Lemieux and Godin say the Plexiglas partitions at their stores’ checkouts will stay up for the foreseeable future. And Sharpe now has a dedicated team for online sales. “It’s a segment of our business that requires a leader.”

RONA Guelph had offered curbside pickup since 2018 and has a dedicated crew that includes two “captains,” four “personal shoppers” who pick the products for customers, and two front-door employees who bring products to customers’ vehicles.

Groupe Materiaux Godin’s two stores in Ontario offer curbside pickup and delivery, with a twist: a window where customers can either walk up or drive up, order merchandise, and pay for it. “It’s like a Tim Hortons drive-thru,” says Godin, adding that curbside pickup is used by between 30 and 40 customers per day at these stores.

Since launching its national Curbside Pickup program in April 2020, Canadian Tire has added a text option for customers to let the store know they’ve arrived. That option was enhanced last October with a Self Check-in button in emails that Canadian Tire sends to alert customers their orders are ready for pickup. In the fourth quarter of 2020, Canadian Tire improved the directional and instructional signage in its parking lots.

But will curbside pickup live on after a COVID-19 vaccine is widely available? Possibly not. In Saskatchewan, where retail stores have been open during the pandemic, fewer than one percent of Econo Lumber’s customers use curbside pickup, estimates Lemieux. The same is true at the Home Hardware in Fort St. John, B.C., says Gallinger.

“Customers are resilient and can adapt to a lot of things, but curbside service is labour-intensive and it’s not an adequate substitute” for in-store selling, says Swanson. He, like other dealers interviewed, believe that customers still crave the in-store shopping experience, and will return in droves once the virus is under control.



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BY GEOFF McLARNEY

THE POWER OF YES

Staff at the Ace Hardware store in Watson, Sask., are empowered to do what it takes to keep their customers happy, a goal the business extends to the community beyond its own walls. It's all of a piece for a store that's involved in every aspect of the community's life.

"Never say no." That's how Cindy Herriges describes the motto of Ace Hardware in Watson, Sask. She and her husband, co-owner Kelly Herriges, ensure that their staff are empowered to do whatever it takes to keep customers happy.

That attitude has powered the store over the years through transitions from corporate changes to the current pandemic.

The dealers got their start under the TruServ banner, which RONA converted to Ace Canada in 2016. Now that the Ace licence has been acquired by Peavey Mart, the Herriges see a continuity in the banner's mission.

"TruServ was one of the few groups working with retailers on the smaller level," says Kelly. "Ace is the same, focusing on individual needs, where larger big boxes have large minimums."

Cindy adds that Peavey has worked hard to optimize the transition, even amid the challenges that the pandemic has posed to supply chains. In addition, she points to Ace Canada's "great" territory managers as a much-appreciated source of support.

"We're just a really good team. We complement each other in different areas of the business."

Watson is a small town, but its strategic location in the province allows the store to draw its clientele from a wide radius. "We're on the corner of two major highways," Cindy notes. "They call it the manufacturing hub of Saskatchewan."

As a result, she explains, "we service a lot of industries other than straight retail," including the manufacturing and agricultural



Cindy and Kelly Herriges own the only hardware store in Watson, Sask.

sectors. "Quite often we have the ability to source items most stores don't, and that is through our partnership with our vendors."

While Cindy and Kelly are the only hardware dealers in Watson itself, the surrounding communities are home to other retailers, including a Co-op in Humboldt.

As is key for any small-town retailer, the local connection goes beyond product selection and great customer service. "Because we're in a small community, we're

professional relationships that become entwined in such settings. "But it actually is a benefit for us because we have the ability to manage in a multitude of ways," Cindy says about working with Kelly.

"We're just a really good team. We complement each other in different areas of the business. We share the same goal. Our goal is to provide a service to the community and surrounding areas at affordable prices."

That's where the "never say no" policy comes in: if staff aren't sure how to handle a customer request on their own, they're encouraged to check with management. They also have, through Ace Canada, access to "a really great in-house training program that allows our staff to take courses and gain knowledge to use with customers."

The fruits of that service approach are shown not only in Ace Watson's sales but in the loyalty of its customers. As Cindy sums it up, "That's the big thing: we want to make sure we meet their needs."



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