

NO BLIND SPOTS

AT NATIONAL BLIND SUPPLIERS



MERMET



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NATIONAL BLIND SUPPLIERS SERVICED JUST THREE STATES WHEN IT WAS PURCHASED BY THE HABIB FAMILY FOUR YEARS AGO. TODAY, THE COMPANY IS A NATIONAL FORCE IN THE WINDOW FURNISHINGS SECTOR. DAWN ADAMS REPORTS.

THE NEW YEAR will see significant changes at National Blind Suppliers as it continues to gain market share across the country. Among the latest initiatives will be the release of the company's preferred range of fabrics and components, additional product training sessions and a continued research and development focus on manufacturing window furnishings with the least amount of cord possible. It's also planned to expand its market across the country and into New Zealand.

A lot has happened at this business since it was purchased by the Habib family four years ago after it had been placed in voluntary administration under its previous ownership. It's a remarkable turnaround story that is attracting interest from within the industry. While the initial focus was to rebuild confidence in the company among suppliers and customers, today's experience is vastly different. "We're being contacted by retailers who want to sell our products and do business with us," says Bruce Habib who operates the business with brother Francois. He suggests that retailers are seeking out the company because they know it doesn't walk away from a problem. "In manufacturing, you do come upon problems and we don't walk away," he says. "We service and rectify any problems and we can always be contacted. This is a family-owned operation that is still hands-on."

RESEARCH GOAL

With a determined focus on Australian-made product, Habib points to a key goal at the firm to develop window furnishings with the least amount of cord possible. Already, the company has released a cordless pleated venetian that is operated with a built-in spring. "The next product we'll go for is a cordless roman," he says. Habib admits that the firm has set itself a significant challenge, but he also stresses the importance of this venture as people become more aware of the safety issues around cords and governments legislate in this area. "We want to produce as many blinds as we can in designs that are cordless; it's a key objective over the next few years," he says.

And he observes that the current trend for consumers to select motorised options is a step in the right direction as it eliminates the need for cords. The company first began offering motorised options in 2007, and Habib says this segment is becoming more popular in a middle market where people might choose to use motorisation for window dressings in one or two rooms. "More people are buying motorisation as more competition enters the market," he says. "The average person wants this option as it becomes affordable."

A PREFERRED RANGE

In another new development for 2011, five books will be released that display the National Blind Suppliers' preferred range of fabrics and components. The books will be divided along product categories with one focused on roman, roller and panel blinds and another on verticals. Mesh rollers or sunscreen rollers will be covered in a third book, while two more will feature fabrics and components for exterior products including solid and mesh outdoor options. "We're seeing people wanting more patterns rather than plain textures," he says. Habib notes substantial early interest expressed in two new



fabrics, Ventura and Retro Circles, which he suggests reflects a growing trend in the marketplace towards patterns and designs for a stronger statement.

"For the exterior category, a lot of mesh fabrics are growing rapidly in popularity rather than the solid canvas," Habib notes. For example, proving to be in demand is the use of the Channel Chameleon fabric to transform an al fresco dining area into an outdoor room.

Habib also notes how significantly the firm has grown in recent years. The business employed just one sales representative four years ago. Today, it employs four sales representatives, has a full-time agent in South Australia and enjoys a reach that has spread considerably.

"When we took over the business, it serviced Melbourne, South Australia and Tasmania," he says. "In four years, we now also service Perth and have moved further into New South Wales. In 2011, we will begin to sell into Queensland and New Zealand."

Strong investment in machinery has aided its growth as well as expansion in product areas like soft furnishings. "We've not increased staff, but their productivity has grown because we've invested in machinery," he says. And he notes the benefits of producing an Australian made and designed product, including keen quality control and ease of manufacturing and re-ordering.

Bruce and François believe that it is imperative to continuously maintain the highest level of excellence in all aspects of the business. Through implementation of compulsory staff development processes that include nationally recognized certifications and in house development strategies for all employees, every individual within the company is provided with the highest standard of educational resources that are available.

"This ensures the ongoing success of the National Blind Suppliers and sets us apart from their competitors," says Habib.

Each operational section employs a broad variety of quality and durability processes that monitor and encourage a more affluent environment thus producing a more superior outcome.

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The Habib brothers say they are dedicated to the ever evolving market of window furnishings, having spent most of their childhood being involved with their Mother's curtain and blind business from a young age. They pride themselves in regards to the growth of the company in only four short years, and look forward to what will be next for the years that follow.

"Our background was in soft furnishings and that area is growing at a steady rate." The family's history in soft furnishings stretches back 26 years ensuring it is well equipped to offer its selection of curtains, padded pelmets, swags and tails and custom-made romans. "On top of that, we have the full range of blinds," he says.

With great attention to detail, in a fast paced consumer market, it is important to the Habib family that they look after their staff and provide their clients with that old fashioned family feel, which establishes trust and satisfaction.

"The difference that you will experience with the Habib family, will enable you to see how important it is to invest in such a unique Australian owned and made product."



PRODUCT TRAINING PRIORITY

PRODUCT TRAINING is a key priority at National Blind Suppliers, while retailers are being urged to better inform end consumers about the benefits of energy-efficient window coverings. Bruce Habib, who operates the business with his brother Francois, notes a reluctance by some retailers to sell shutters. He is convinced that this hesitancy is because they fear they might not take the correct measurements that are required. "That's a justified fear because a shutter is a hard blind," he says. "Once it's made, it can't be chopped down or changed."

Habib suggests that the only way to rectify this barrier to increasing sales is to invest in sharing product knowledge, which the firm will do on a grander scale in 2011. It has already held product training sessions in Melbourne, which also cover other window dressings, but will take those courses interstate to New South Wales, South Australia, Tasmania and Western Australia.

However, he perceives a strength in the shutter market particularly in Melbourne where the firm offers a measure-and-fit service.

Habib says there is a return to pleated blinds due to their insulating properties, but he also urges retailers to be more proactive about informing consumers about the benefits of energy-efficient window coverings. "Pleated blinds allow people to use less heating and cooling, so they can cut their energy use," he says. "And the middle market will spend the extra money for a good insulated blind or insulated drape as long as that benefit is explained by the retailer."

But roller blinds still make up the majority of sales at National Blind Suppliers, while the firm continues to develop into a one-stop shop for internal and external window coverings. "People go for a textured fabric in rollers," Habib says. "They've moved from plain roller blinds into textures and patterns in colours like mocca, coffees and lattes that are richer than a traditional neutral."

WHEN WE TOOK OVER THE BUSINESS, IT SERVICED MELBOURNE, SOUTH AUSTRALIA AND TASMANIA," HE SAYS. "IN FOUR YEARS, WE NOW ALSO SERVICE PERTH AND HAVE MOVED FURTHER INTO NEW SOUTH WALES. IN 2011, WE WILL BEGIN TO SELL INTO QUEENSLAND AND NEW ZEALAND. BRUCE HABIB - NBS

