



R I S I N G T O T H E C H A L L E N G E

Located in Melbourne's home furnishings Mecca, In Vogue Blinds has carved a niche all its own, writes Belinda Smart.



NESTLED IN THE CLASSY DECOR ENCLAVE THAT IS the easternmost end of Swan Street Richmond, In Vogue Blinds' elegant exterior bespeaks a sense of unfussy professionalism that seamlessly continues on entry.

Eye-catching swathes of richly embroidered curtain fabric and luxuriant sample books adorn the showroom's interior, while an array of harder edged products indicates the company's familiarity with technology. This ability to span the finer points of decoration as well as technical nitty gritty is one of In Vogue Blind's key points of difference, says co-director Lelia Ward, daughter of the company's founder Thomas Ward.

"They're equally important to the business and it's fairly unusual to mix them together. For us it makes a lot of sense however. Our aim is to act as a 'one stop shop' targeting the mid to high end of the market."

In Vogue Blinds also spans the commercial and retail sectors. When Thomas Ward founded it in 1982 from premises in Camberwell, the company focused on commercial projects. The early 90s saw its first move to Richmond, with a small showroom there. Lelia Ward joined

Thomas in 1996, while her brother Justin Ward joined two or three years later. While the commercial projects continued to roll out, In Vogue Blinds' retail arm grew steadily during the 90s and the company gradually found itself expanding its focus.

"It wasn't really intentional, but we found more and more people were coming into the showroom to make enquiries, so that's how the retail side of the business began."

These days, In Vogue Blinds' business is evenly split between retail and commercial clients, the latter mainly small to medium architecture and interior designers, as well as select commercial projects.

With co-director Justin Ward working largely on business development and commercial projects (Thomas Ward also retains a strong presence at the company), Lelia focuses on working with clients and suppliers to optimise outcomes, a skill she describes as "akin to that of a translator and diplomat."

"Often what I'm doing is liaising between different parties, translating



what the designer or architect wants into what would work for the client. [For example the designer might want to use linen curtains but the client might want privacy.]”

“With bigger commercial jobs and new builds, there’s an element of project management, in terms of ensuring products are delivered at the right time, or solving riddles like whether the size of a door handle is going to affect the drop of a roller blind. With a new build, ensuring a ceiling construction can accommodate a pelmet or hidden curtain rail might be required. Getting all that right is deceptively challenging. It’s not rocket science but it feels like it sometimes.”

In Vogue Blinds’ level of service requires in depth product knowledge, particularly given the increasingly sophisticated nature of those products.

“For example, motorisation is much more common now; in the last three years it’s gone through the roof, especially thanks to remote control technology, which makes it much more simplified, with less wiring needed.”

“There’s now also such a proliferation of products that understanding their different applications requires knowledge and experience.”

Responding to market trends is also key. Along with motorisation,

demand for external shading systems has grown in line with environmental consciousness, she says.

“External shading is larger part of business than it used to be. It used to be much more seasonal but now it’s all year round. We used to get one enquiry every two months; now we get several a week.”

People still want that personalised service. Our goal is to have the client come back again and again and send their family members to us. Around 50 per cent of our business is from repeat clients.

The current trend for fabric opulence has also brought texture and colour to the business.

“We’re doing twice as many curtain sales as this time last year, particularly in our retail business. Soft, patterned curtains tend to soften those hard edges, particularly in modern houses and apartments.”



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Another quality that we're known for is that we don't walk away from challenges and we work hard to ensure we meet our after sales commitments.
LELIA WARD



"At one point we sold nothing but linen, linen, linen but we're now selling a lot more colour, texture and pattern, which is really lovely. There's still demand for those minimalist, natural textiles but it's great to also see this new movement towards the decorative."

With a loyal customer base and a value-added offer, In Vogue Blinds has successfully ridden out the worst of recent economic jitters. However, current trading conditions remain hard to call.

"It's been a funny old year. Come last Christmas everyone was breathing a sigh of relief that the GFC was over. However the first six months of 2011 have been pretty erratic. The upside is that we had time to look at the business."

One result of this will be a revamped website, in the final stages of construction at the time of writing, as well as a suite of other tools such as CDs for key clients explaining the finer points of the In Vogue Blinds range.

A devotee of technology, Lelia points out that since last year, all staff work with iPads that allow them to access product images and technical information on the road.

"About 12 months ago we also started using the web for our scheduling through Google Calendar. Some of the staff were nervous about changing over, so we hid the diary for a week. We haven't looked back. It's really revolutionised the business, especially when you have numerous projects on the go and need to co-ordinate with other staff or installers. It's been fantastic."

Ongoing challenges include the spread of imported and readymade product as well as an average client who is more educated about product and pricing than ever before; but after almost 30 years in business and a decade in its current location, In Vogue Blinds is poised for a strong future.

"We are not locked into to one supply chain, so we can offer choice and can easily customise systems to suit most applications. Another quality that we're known for is that we don't walk away from challenges and we work hard to ensure we meet our after sales commitments."

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