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TONY CASSAR + RON GOTTLIEB

The July 2018 edition of WFA began a new tradition in which Victory Blinds Managing Director Tony Cassar acts as guest interviewer for our long-running 'Ask the Expert' series. This issue, the tradition continues, with Ron Gottlieb, Ricky Richards' owner and self-described 'crazy ideas man' and 'Chief Distraction Officer', as interviewee. Here, Tony quizzes Ron on over three decades in the industry and his other passions, from family to the Sydney Roosters.

TONY: Ron, welcome, and thank you for your time today and your involvement in the Window Furnishings Australia Magazine Ask the Expert Series.

RON: Thanks for having me Tony.

TONY: So, Ron, tell us where it all began.

RON: My brother had a business he started in 1983 selling mainly industrial textiles; insect screening, shade cloth, polyethylene fabric. I was off still doing my own thing. God knows what that was. He came to me and said "Come and join me. I think you'd be good in sales." It started from there.

I joined him. I didn't know anything about textiles, really, but we started selling over the telephone. It was almost like being an internet or mail

order business before it was really popular, before it was even invented, I guess.

We'd ring customers. We had a list that we'd garnered from things that we called telephone books in those days. We'd created a list of people, and for one reason or another, I guess some people took pity on us or felt for a couple of young blokes having a crack, and we were grateful to have some customers who gave us an opportunity bit by bit.

In those days, I think it was about three or four staff. Our warehouse was separate to our office. It was before faxes. We used to telephone order to the warehouse or we'd hand deliver them. It was about a 10-minute drive. We had a warehouse guy who was in a smaller warehouse that we rented. He would process the orders. It was entirely a manual business, and it grew from there.

TONY: We all need to start from somewhere and your beginnings are an inspirational one. What was your professional background prior to commencing this venture?

RON: I left school and didn't really apply myself probably as I should have at school and just wanted to go out into the workforce.

I was a computer programmer for a year after school, and then I left that

and started a small business with my best mate and we were house painters with very minimal experience, I have to say. But we learned quickly on the job painting for real estate agents. We had some contacts with some friends. We had a little business for about two and a half years which we built up and we became painters and decorators. It was a nice business, but in the end, we were just working very long hours and I think we both had enough of it. He went into his family's business and I had the opportunity of going with Norman.

TONY: Computer programming to house painting? That's an interesting change. What's a typical week in the life of Ron Gottlieb, look like?

RON: If you're asking me, I work really hard. If you ask the people that I work with, they might say something different.

It's moved on from the early days. These days, I'm certainly removed a little bit from the day to day operations of the business. We have a General Manager, Kathryn Polgar, who's running the business. With her team, she's doing a great job.

So I guess these days, I'm doing a lot of studying of markets, reading a lot of industry magazines from around the world, read a lot of local magazines, as

well trying to find ways to improve our service levels, our marketing, and still trying to source high quality products, which is something that we did even from the very earliest days. Even when we were selling very small amount of products, we were always sourcing high quality products and that hasn't changed.

I have a fairly open-door policy where anybody in the office is welcome to come in and chat at any time. I think sometimes they don't want to disturb the boss but, here's the thing, I'm not the boss anymore. But really, it's to hopefully help be a guiding light. I hope that doesn't sound big headed.

TONY: No, not at all. That leads me into the next question. Your team seem very motivated. How do you engage and motivate your team? What's your process?

RON: It's certainly not structured. Anybody who knows me at all knows that it's not structured.

I guess, ultimately, I want people to enjoy themselves at work. That's always been a very strong principle even from the early days. We all spend a lot of time going to and from the office and being at the office. It's always been a philosophy for me and my family that you should at least enjoy your time at work. I think that is a guiding principle. You should have fun at work. To some people,

I think that's possibly a contradiction in terms, but I think it's something that we should certainly strive for. I'm not saying it's for everybody, but that's really a key for me is that people enjoy their work; also that they should have the freedom to come up with ideas.

We have a policy that no idea is a bad idea. It's more that some ideas fly, and some ideas may not fly immediately, and some ideas may not be the right thing at the time, but they can often be the catalyst for the right idea. I think those things need to be worked on all the time.

Also, we like to make sure that staff are learning all the time. These days, we do spend a fair bit of money and time on development; courses or things that will help expand people's horizons beyond what they may have grown with in their own personal lives or even in their previous work careers elsewhere.

TONY: So, you give them an opportunity to grow?

RON: We do, and we do like to promote from within whenever possible.

Even the young people when they come on board at the very beginning, they're told, you can even come to the owners and say, "I don't agree with your idea." We would always welcome that as long as they have a good argument to back up their own idea. That usually leads to a useful discussion.

TONY: What would be one of your greatest achievements, Ron?



Tony Cassar and Ron Gottlieb

RON: I have to be careful what I say. I guess you'd have to say from a professional point of view, still having a viable business 35 years down the track, I think, is an achievement. I think allowing people to grow in their roles, people to move into areas that maybe they didn't think of or they weren't sure they could do and nurturing that, I think that's been a good achievement.

I guess there have been some things along the way that while we're not necessarily ground breakers, I think there are certain things that we've done over the years that would have helped the industries that we service along the way. You look back on that with some sort of pride, I'd have to say.

TONY: Can you give me a specific example?

RON: Well one of the things we did many, many years ago certainly in the industrial textile area is we cut roll sizes down. Many, many years ago, the fairly standard roll size was 50 metres and we cut a lot of those back to 30 metres. That was for two reasons: one was there were lots of customers out there who couldn't necessarily afford to buy bigger rolls, so we decided that why not

give them the opportunity to buy smaller rolls; and also before workplace health and safety was a popular buzz term, it's hard work and not everybody had the mechanics that they have today. We thought it helped customers, particularly smaller customers.

I'd say another achievement for us, certainly in some of the industries that we service, is we always had a high percentage of female employees.

We didn't need any guidelines or rules or quotas to tell us if that was the right thing to do. For us, it was always about having the right person for a particular role. To this day, we have quite a number of women who are in senior management positions in our company and we're proud of that.

I guess another thing also is we've never been 'ageist', if that's a term. We'll employ someone who's 20. We'll employ someone who's in their 60s. If someone wants to work and have a crack, that's good for Ricky.

TONY: Great philosophy. What can you share with us about some of your most difficult challenges?

RON: Certainly in the early days of business, one of the biggest challenges was not having any money and having the bank manager that would haul you over the coals.

It's a far cry perhaps from today, but there were times when we used to have to wait for the next cheque to come in before we could send our next advertising campaign.

Let me tell you, when you don't have money and you're waiting to get money in so that you can go out and try and sell your wares again, that's a mighty challenge.

I think that's worth noting for lots of small businesses who all face this sort of problem at one stage or another. I'd always say don't despair. Just keep on track. And if you've got the bank manager from hell, it'll hurt at the time, but it'll probably serve you well later on. I've got to say that we learned a lot of really good lessons as a young company when we weren't allowed to do some of the things we wanted to do, and we just had to wait and bide our time.

TONY: With the lack of funds in promotion, you can only self-promote. How did you Accomplish this?

RON: We kept calling people all the time. We didn't go away. We were around. Then when we had money, we would advertise again, and we'd follow up, and we just keep on doing the simple stuff.

We even did that with suppliers when we started travelling to trade shows. When you've been to trade shows for five and 10 years down the track, even those guys overseas would say "Here are those two brothers from Australia again. Maybe they've got something."

So, keep yourself in the game. That's a pretty strong message. That is part of the challenge, and then hopefully that's also part of the solution.

TONY: Well that's a great outlook.

RON: I'd add that more recently, from a business point of view, certainly one of the difficult challenges we found is the rise of what we would consider less than acceptable quality in some of the industries we face. I know this is a very touchy area, but I think that in this country, we've always had a very high standard of living. I think just over a century ago at the time of Federation, we had one of the highest, if not the highest standard of living in the world. We don't quite have that these days.

I think something that is a challenge leading into the future is keeping that quality level that Australian manufacturing can bring to the table. We have some companies in this country doing fantastic work as good, if not better than anything else around the world. We cut across quite a number of industries and we're proud to be associated with those industries. From our point of view, we're a part of that process, so we believe that we certainly should be addressing that in the appropriate way and bringing high quality product that's fit for purpose. You can have different levels of quality, but they should still be of a quality.

From a personal point of view, losing my partner three years ago was, obviously, a big blow. We've had to ride through that. It's been a transition period for a few years now, but we're getting on top of it.

TONY: Good on you. Well done. What changes have you seen over the last five years or so in our industry, Ron?

RON: Well, that is a good question.

I think you'd have to say certainly the rise in strength in some of the wholesale manufacturers. I think that quite a number of them are very good at what they do, and they provide good quality service to the industry. I think, obviously online, online sales have certainly changed things but that's just not only our industry, that's really the world, and we all have to adapt to that. I'd say they'd be the big ones at the moment.

If you want to tie in that quality aspect to it, I think there had been times where probably some products are coming in that are being bought to a certain price level. I think that brings its own challenges to the industry. I think that has the potential to create a gateway for cheaper finished products to come in from overseas. Rather than companies here being able to manufacture those products, they could be slightly pushed out by cheaper quality products coming in based purely on price.

TONY: In your view what does that say about the state our industry is in and where it's heading?

RON: Well, carrying on with that theme from the previous question, I do have some concerns.

I think a stronger economy would help us. I think when the economy's a bit down, people are wary to spend. If the economy is pumping along, people generally put quality in place.

I think as an industry, we have the ability to sell that quality if we want to do so, but it is up to the players in the market across the board, starting with very raw materials; not just textiles where I'm involved in but components, motorisation, the quality of the steel and aluminium we use all the way through to finished product and being able to sell the quality to the consumer, because I do believe that most consumers want a high-quality product. We all want a good deal. We don't necessarily have to have the cheapest, but we just want to have a good deal.

TONY: You're obviously committed to some critical causes in the work sphere, but what are your passions outside of work, Ron?

RON: Well, I do like to play golf, but I don't play enough of it. And seeing as we're the day after Grand Final day, I love my beloved chooks, the Roosters in Sydney. We played against the Storm yesterday, so I'm pretty passionate about that.

TONY: They call that a thrashing, don't they?

RON: It was a very solid performance.

I guess being a good father and husband would have to be up there. Don't know if I'm either of those, but I am passionate about my family.

TONY: Tell me about your family.

RON: Well, I'm very fortunate I have a lovely wife, Deborah, who would obviously have to have a fair sense of humour to be settled with me for the best part of 30

years married and 40 years together. I've three great daughters, Madeleine, Brigitte, and Lilia who are all finished school and working their way through life. My eldest daughter, Madeleine, is a filmmaker. My middle daughter, Brigitte, is working in an interior design firm. My youngest daughter, Lilia, is taking history and film. I live in a house full of creative, strong women, and that's why I look like the way I do. But I must enjoy it because I keep going back every night.

TONY: Other than your family, who else have been some of your great influences in life?

RON: Well, I'd have to say my late older brother, Norman. He pulled me into the business. Even though we were different personalities, we managed to work together really well. Like most little brothers, you look up to your big brother, he was my hero. We influenced each other, I'd like to think. Along the way, our father came into the business and joined us which we really enjoyed. He still comes in once a week at 87. He still gets the figures every day. If he sees something wrong, he'll get on the phone to either myself or the financial controller to see what's going on. I'd have to say my father, along with my mum, were obviously great influences, as well as my wife.

TONY: Beautiful. Thanks for sharing that with us. It's a beautiful story.

Your support of the Melanoma Institute of Australia has been terrific. Can you tell us a little bit more about that; how it started and why it started?

RON: For the last 20 years or so, we've always done some philanthropic work, particularly, the Sydney Children's Hospital. We'd have a sale day once a year in December. A percentage of sales will go to the kids' hospital.

I'd been travelling in America and noticed how well they do philanthropy. We, Aussies, are fantastic in a crisis but I do have to take my hat off to people from the US. They don't always wait for the crisis. They are very proactive in their philanthropic work.

I came back from a trip to America, and I spoke with my brother and my father, and I said "I think we should do some more work because we've been fortunate. Our business is reasonably solid." We decided to give more back to the community. We decided to look for something that made some sense to us in terms of what we do, and we were doing a lot of business in sun control through the window furnishing industry and also through our shade cloth sales on structures for the kids' playgrounds. We made some enquiries and we found the Melanoma Institute of Australia, which is the leading research organisation in melanoma research, probably in the world. We struck up a friendship with them and basically decided to give a percentage of sales from all our sun control products to them.

Now, that's been rewarding for us. We're still trying to work out how to really get more people engaged, but it's an ongoing call for us to do. I guess that's basically it.

TONY: I know you're a modest man. How much money do you think you've raised for the Melanoma Institute of Australia?

RON: Well, our initial commitment was we'd give a percentage of sales or a minimum of \$100,000 per year. I challenged my sales people to make sure that the percentage of sales was greater than \$100,000. We've managed to do that for two years that we've been together. We're in our third year now, and I dare say we'll be on track to do that again. Likewise, we are raising increasing amounts for the children's hospital as well.

On top of that, we do some one-off events sometimes when something comes up. I guess the nicest thing that happened fairly recently, is around the big drought issues in New South Wales. I think a bit of that has stretched into Victoria and Queensland. One of the people who works at Ricky Richards came to us and said they thought that we should do something for the farmers. That filled me full of pride because that was not us as management or the owners of the company suggesting, but it was one of the employees who came and said, "Why don't we do something?"

So, we did that and just recently we raised just over \$10,000 to send a semitrailer of hay to drought-affected areas. We had some customers who just decided to donate money as well to the cause which was really wonderful.

TONY: Must be something you're very proud of.

RON: I've got to say I was very proud of that. I was very proud of the fact that it wasn't our idea. It was one of the staff members.

TONY: What does the future look like for Ron Gottlieb and Ricky Richards?

RON: Well, Ron doesn't see work as work. Ron sees work as fun. Ron wants to keep going to Ricky Richards because Ron really likes—I shouldn't talk about myself in the third person. I sound like a footballer. Strike that!

I want to keep working with Ricky Richards and being a part of the scene there.

As you get older, you realise you're getting older as the age of the people around you keeps getting younger and younger, but I get energised from that. I think it's great to listen to different points of view of things, different ideas, and as long as I can still be useful and not giving away too much, I want to stay at Ricky for a while longer. I also think that my wife would kill me if I wanted to retire. I don't think either of us are ready for that yet. That's what I'd like to do.

I'd like to see the people across the whole company being able to own the success of the company. It's all been very well for us as the owners of the business, or my family as the owners of the business, to have some success along the way, but now, any successes should be that of the management team and the people who work with them. That's something that's pretty important to me.

TONY: Well, if I can speak from a personal point of

view, you're one of the most positive people in the industry that I know, Ron.

RON: That's very kind.

TONY: Where did the name Ricky Richards come from?

RON: Ricky Richards was actually a dress manufacturer in the '60s who started...I can't tell you the exact year. It was probably around the time I was born. It was in the early 60s. My father who had come to Australia with nothing and didn't know anything about the textile industry got into it because he was told it was a good industry to be in. He had a manufacturing facility in Surrey Hills in Sydney which was the textile hub at the time. I think at the highest point, he had somewhere between 80 to 100 staff manufacturing ladies' wear, bridal dresses, and he was a big supplier to some of the big bridal companies as well as Katies. It was a big retail chain in the '60s and '70s. He got out of that in the '70s.

When Norman started his business, he didn't have any money. My dad had the shelf company. So, when you don't have money, you don't even spend 50 bucks on things that you can't afford to. He used the name Ricky Richards, and over the years, people at various times had told us "What does that have to do with textiles?" We said "Who cares? It's our brand. It's our name. There's a family history there." and Ricky Richards started. I guess now a lot of people just call us 'Ricky' and we've adopted that on our cards

too because a lot of people just were going to Ricky.

"Let's go to Ricky's." They even call me Ricky.

TONY: There you go.

RON: Yes, that's where it started.

TONY: Ricky Richards is an advertiser and an advocate of Window Furnishings Australia Magazine. Can you share with us why?

RON: Yes, that's pretty easy. We make our living out of the various industries that we're involved with. And if you're making a living out of something, we've always thought you should be involved, and so we've been involved with the BMAA for many, many years. We've been involved with STA as well, and the two groups get together once every three years for the Super Expo. We believe that we should be active members. We should support as much as we can because if the industry is strong, then we'd like to think our business is strong. If our business is strong then perhaps we can help other businesses be strong. We're an advocate of membership of the organisations that we're involved with. We believe it's always better to be inside rather than outside. You hope that along the way, sometimes you can make a bit of a difference to help people.

From our point of view, that then extends through to advertising, being involved, helping out using our company resources. If it's of benefit to the organisation we're involved with, we're happy to assist where we

can if we're asked to. Yes, it's very important to us.

TONY: Very good. Well, Ron, that's all I've got. I'd just like to thank you for your time and it's been a pleasure speaking with you today.

RON: It's been a pleasure, Tony. It's always a pleasure to have a chat with you. I'm humbled and honoured that you thought to ask me to be a part of this. I feel privileged. Thank you.

TONY: Likewise Ron and thanks to James Boston and his team.

RON: Yes, absolutely, many thanks to James and the team.