

SPORTING Life

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EXCLUSIVE!

251

SUMMER STYLES

Allure
of Sports
Fashion

PLUS

RUN FOR KIDS
10K RUN
CHANGING
CHILDREN'S
LIVES FOR
THE BETTER

**FINDING
BALANCE IN
BEIJING**
CYCLING
WITH INNER
PEACE
IN CHINA

**NEW
BRANDS
REFRESH
YOUR
WARDROBE**

The Right Stuff

Sporting Life
Delivers Quality
Experience



HOT TRENDS

Coloured Pants
Lightweight Jackets
Flashy Footwear

PRODUCT SELECTION, pricing and customer service are keys to success in the retail world. Many retailers offer affordable, quality merchandise, but customer service is a tough one to deliver every day.

This is where Canadian retail icon Sporting Life shines. Combining top brands in fashion, equipment and footwear with knowledgeable, well-trained, customer-focused staff is its recipe for success.

Sporting Life thrives thanks to passion, knowledge and integrity, plus a relentless desire to create the highest-quality experience for all customers and staff.

"Relentless" is an important part of the Sporting Life mission statement, which hasn't changed since Ontario entrepreneurs Brian McGrath, Patti Russell and her husband, David Russell, opened their original ski shop 33 years ago. From the onset, they established their "house philosophy" to treat every customer as a guest, whether that means tying shoelaces for a customer, keeping the parking lot free for shoppers, or calling patrons by name.

General Manager Jerry Rynda has been with the store since day one. He started out part time on the floor while studying business at the University of Toronto and freestyle skiing. He's developed an astute understanding of what it takes to thrive. "The only way to really succeed at customer service is by doing it every single day, and every single person has to be on the same page," Jerry says. "By no means do I say we're perfect at it, but we are relentless at it."

According to Jerry, it's critical that everyone is persistent when it comes to customer service. You can bet that all 600 employees from the floor to management and across

all four stores in Ontario understand how important that first impression is. Even the warehouse staff have a saying: "If you're not serving a customer, serve somebody who is." If there is a complaint, it goes directly to Jerry or David to address immediately. They will then incorporate the lesson learned into their training so everyone can benefit.

The same goes for compliments, of which there are many. Rob Sinclair, for example, is a phenomenal front line manager at the Toronto flagship store. Day in and day out, he offers consistent, no-pressure sales to anyone who walks in the store. Last Christmas morning, on his own volition, he went to a customer's home to install a Thule roof rack on their car because they were leaving on vacation.

Hank Shannon was Sporting Life's top salesman at the same Toronto store. Management schools caution trying to turn top sales staff into managers, but Sporting Life promoted Hank to store manager in Collingwood for two reasons — his enthusiasm for customer service and skiing was over the top, and it was a perfect fit.

Hank is a Level 4 ski instructor. In Collingwood with his family, skiing any day he wants and working at one of Canada's best ski shops, Hank's in his element. Unhappy with your gear for any reason and he'll offer to go skiing with you. "You don't like your skis," he asks? "No, they're terrible," you say. "Wanna go skiing?" And he's serious. He has taken clients skiing several times. Customers end up with skis they love and walk away smiling because they just had a lesson from a top-level coach.

The owners of this "fashletic" empire, an exclusive fusion of fashion and athletic



MOTHERSHIP — The December 2011 expansion of the flagship store on Yonge Street in Toronto gives visitors an experience that connects closer with the store's mantra of living healthy, active and enthusiastically.



The Right Stuff

High-end merchandise and high-quality experience:

A winning combination By Sheila Reesor Photographs by Naomi Finlay



wear, would be the first to say it's the combined efforts of everyone who works for Sporting Life that make the company successful. It's the faces behind the brand that define it. Everyone from parking lot attendant to cashier understands that if they can't make a connection with you each step of the way, they're sunk. Fairness, empathy and respect are more than just buzzwords, they're what all Sporting Life staff practice daily. At the Yonge Street store, Sporting Life has one of Canada's top-ranked boot fitters, Cameron Powell. He knows feet. He knows boots. His passion for his job takes boot fitting to a new level. Beyond his legendary work with the Canadian Paralympic Alpine Ski Team, Cam is renowned for taking whatever time it takes with customers — hours if necessary — to ensure their ski boots fit correctly.

The staff at Sporting Life will go to these lengths. To say they care is an understatement. Staffers even use CARE as an acronym in training: "Customers Are Really Everything." The C is also for customer service, which of course comes first. A is for having the right attitude. R stands for retail and all the policies, procedures and great product, pricing and branding that go along with that. E represents the staff education, which is extensive. Each employee receives 18 hours of basic product and sales training. On the floor, they get 45 minutes, twice daily, from brand relevance and consistency trainers in every store. Twice a year, senior staff will "share the vision" with employees, informing them of what's to come six months down the line.

To management, having happy, engaging, knowledgeable employees supersedes all the usual key performance indicators. They're dialed in to any sales figures they need, but also well aware that numbers mean nothing if a grumpy sales associate doesn't know how to make a customer

happy. A retailer can buy the right product and have the best selection and pricing, yet just one disconnected, unhappy employee can ruin that. Time and experience have taught these savvy merchants that if they've got enough staff on the floor, all happily serving satisfied customers, the numbers naturally go up.

Even return policies are secondary to this retail operation. Sporting Life prefers to handle each case individually. Take the day one woman wanted to return a toaster. The store doesn't sell toasters, but she maintained that it was \$19.95 and even showed the manager where she had found it in the store. He ended up giving her a store credit, with which she then bought some clothes and left happy. This is not to say the store will take any return. That would be taking the store's slogan "If it's in you it's in here" a bit too literally. In this particular case it was the right thing to do. To Sporting Life, customer service is all about understanding, being empathetic and finding a happy solution for the customer.

Of course, to keep customers happy, the staff must be content, and Sporting Life does that in a number of creative ways. In summer, managers organize ever-popular mountain bike rides Wednesday evenings in the Don Valley. In winter, they host demo days and staff snowsport days, taking employees to Georgian Peaks for slope fun. Some go snowshoeing but many take a free ski lesson for the first time. With the store's vendors there too, avid skiers on staff offer valued feedback on next year's products.'

Introducing some employees to the sport while exposing key sales people to the latest and greatest equipment on the market enhances staff knowledge when they speak to customers. True to their words "We sell what we live," you can be sure they know what they're talking about, because



GET FASTER, LOOK BETTER — With a full fleet of bikes and cycling gear, such as the latest offerings from the Specialized family (left and above), and swimwear (top), Sporting Life is the largest retailer to carry many of the top lines and brands for all sporting interests.

they've actually tested that Vökl ski or that Burton board you're thinking of buying.

Getting out on the ski hill together also takes everyone straight to the white, fluffy source of this retail giant's raison d'être — winter. Year after year, riding chairlifts together and moaning about sore quads for days after goes a long way toward building a synergy among staff of all ages, from different stores, from part-time cashiers to senior management. Friendships grow and spill into the workplace, resulting in a great community of fun-loving, like-minded people.

This could be why so many staffers stay forever, like Jerry Rynda, Senior Buyer Ross Hagans and Associate Buyer Sandy Forbes, who all started decades ago on the floor. Many who worked in the store part time during high school will return through university. Then there are those who went on to be successful elsewhere, using Sporting Life as their customer service training ground and gaining knowledge that serves them well no matter where they go.

Supporting growth, sport and community, Sporting Life is the official retailer

The private shopping room adds another layer to a relaxed shopping environment.



for Chico Racing and remains involved with Ontario ski racing, specifically the National Ski Academy in Collingwood. Runners in Toronto might also know the Sporting Life 10K. Established 14 years ago, this annual Toronto run has grown exponentially to 20,000 runners. Proceeds support Camp Oochigeas, where kids with cancer soak up the joys of summer camp.

Interconnected with its favourite sports, staff, customers and community, Sporting Life sells more than just sporting merchandise. It sells a healthy, active lifestyle for outdoor enthusiasts and fashionistas alike. The expansion of the newly renovated flagship store in Toronto last December was in line with that, and you can be sure that the new website, slated to launch in September 2012, will be too. This new website will give anyone outside of Toronto the opportunity to access the same high-end merchandise and legendary customer service online — the same experience and bestselling product, without the brick and mortar.

Sporting Life proudly stands head and shoulders above the competition because of tireless daily efforts to provide great customer service. Sporting Life's focus as it contemplates expanding outside of Ontario will be to consistently translate the same quintessential customer and employee experiences everywhere.

BUILDING A WINNING TEAM

Sporting Life started off as a ski shop in 1979 that wasn't going to open in summer. The owners were never planning to sell footwear or fashion. But as baby boomers progressed, demand changed. So the brand evolved with them. "We developed that into our lifestyles store because that's what our customer demanded," says General Manager Jerry Rynda.

In 1993, the owners' first expansion beyond their original store on Yonge Street was Sporting Life's Bikes and Boards, also on Yonge Street. In 1995, they opened another store at Toronto's esteemed Sherway Gardens mall. In 2000, they opened their popular ski shop in the escarpment town of Collingwood north of Toronto, next to Blue Mountain and other private ski resorts in the area.

"You can't just say it. You can't just hope it happens. You've got to be focused on making that person happy," Jerry says. "We strive to do it well every single day, every time we open the store. We always try to make it perfect."

As Vince Lombardi, legendary coach of the Green Bay Packers, said, "Perfection is not attainable. But if we chase perfection, we can catch excellence."

"We're kind of like the New York Yankees of baseball or the L.A. Lakers," Jerry adds. "We're a very successful retail organization and have been for 33 years. Employees like to work with a team that wins." — S. Reesor



Over 25 years, we have evolved our viewpoint about design to create extraordinary moments and opportunities for people to have experiences that change their understanding and perspective of the world they live in.

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