

Burlington Post

King of alterations realizing his vision one stitch at a time

Melanie Cummings, Special to the Post
02/23/07

Alain Baird is a rare man. He knows how to sew a button, hem and even create a cuff.

He learned from a pro -- one of the women on his staff.

Baird is an alterations magnate. With 600 staff across the nation he and they are the nerve centre of Stitch It, Canada's Tailor.

The Burlington-based company's founder and president admits that when he coined that slogan back in 1989, it was a bit of a stretch.

At the time, in 1989, there was only one Stitch It store -- in Mississauga. That location has now become the flagship of his alterations empire. In 1999 a Stitch It store was opened in St. John's, Nfld. and then in 2000 Baird's coast-to-coast vision was realized when a shop opened in Victoria, B.C.

Baird is now aiming to make Stitch It North America's tailor. In 2001, four more locations were opened in Minneapolis-St. Paul and last year another three joined the family.

Another two -- soon to be three -- shops are up and running in greater Chicago, Ill. Six more are planned for its metropolitan area of more than 9.4 million people -- the third most populated city in the U.S.

The next goal is to open 15 stores per year over the next eight years, which is when Baird, 58, may retire. That would make 250 Stitch It locations in Canada and the U.S., a legacy that will likely be handed over to Baird's daughter, Jennifer.

It's the little local company that is a quiet success story.

"No one has any idea that this is a national company, meanwhile we're the only national alterations company and now we're international," said Baird.

He credits a talented staff that is put at the front and centre of the business for its success. The days of the tailor tucked away in dimly-lit, cramped quarters behind-the-scenes have been erased in the Stitch It culture.

"We make sure it's about our people. This is a dying trade so when we do find them, we want to keep them," said Baird. Better than industry average pay, combined with profit sharing, benefits, educational subsidies and mutual respect are paying off.



Employee turnover is merely two per cent among full-time staff and eight per cent among the part-time crew, Baird said.

Last year on \$25 million in sales, \$1 million was handed back to employees, community causes and international charities.

Two per cent of pretax profits are held in a separate bank account for this purpose. Sixty per cent goes to associates for special causes such as illness or personal strife, 30 per cent is given to community events and the remaining 10 per cent to worldwide causes.

Baird is hoping to crack a top 50 employer list compiled by the Hewitt Association, the human resources consulting firm that uses survey responses from employees for its annual ranking. The closest Stitch It has reached so far is No. 52 and No. 56.

Status and attention aren't the only motivators for this goal. "The feedback we get is helpful," said Baird.

He said it's imperative to treat employees well, considering that replenishing existing skilled sewers is becoming ever more difficult as fewer young people take up the trade.

Baird relies on unconventional recruitment through word of mouth, ads in ethnic newspapers, church bulletins and Internet listings. "It's still a struggle to find qualified staff. It's our Achilles heel."

In fact, to ensure those sewing lessons learned during those early days are not lost, Baird and his chief operating officer roll up their sleeves and head to one of the company locations to assist staff during the busiest time of the year -- the week between Christmas and New Year's Day.

The company's guiding philosophy is that to grow the business, it needs to help its employees grow and if they grow, Stitch It grows. "What goes around comes around," said Baird.