

Success is all sewn up

But alteration chain's owner and founder wants 250 stores before he retires

By Meredith Macleod
The Hamilton Spectator (Feb 12, 2007)

At a Glance

Who: Stitch It, owned by Alain Baird

Where: 85 locations in Canada, 16 in United States (by end of 2007), headquarters is in Burlington

Since: 1989

What: Canada's largest alteration chain, 600-plus employees

Even while closing in on breaking the 100-plus store mark this year and sewing up \$25 million in sales last year, Stitch It owner and founder Alain Baird considers himself the little guy in the midst of giants.

He points to a mobile phone ad showing an ant carrying a giant spool of thread on its back. "That's what I feel like. That's where we are," he says, although his alteration chain with headquarters in Burlington is easily the biggest player in the game in Canada.

Store locations stretch across the country from St. John's to Victoria, with more in the United States. His goal before retiring is 250 stores and he figures he has about eight years to get there. His daughter is learning the business with an eye to becoming a successor.

Baird, 58, who lives in Ancaster, prides himself on customer service and bringing seamstresses and tailors out of "back rooms, dark corners and basements" to the front of bright, glass-fronted stores where customers can see them work. Prices are laid out and wait times are guaranteed.

That might not seem revolutionary in our fast-food culture, but it is in the alterations business.

"You used to walk into an alteration shop and they would size you up for how much they would charge you," says Baird. "Then they would tell you it would take a week, 10 days or two weeks. That's not customer service."

A New Brunswick native who moved to Hamilton at 13, he offers competitive wages, benefits, a bonus plan and profit-sharing to employees.

The company gave back \$1 million in bonuses, profit-sharing and corporate responsibility initiatives last year.

"We believe in our people. We can't do it without them. They have a skilled trade that is a dying art these days."

That poses both an opportunity and a challenge. As families become increasingly time starved, there is a



Cathie Coward, the Hamilton Spectator

Alain Baird, owner of Burlington-based Stitch It, says he never envisioned the growth that his company has achieved.

need for someone to do alterations that at one time were done at home. At the same time, there are fewer people with those skills available for hiring.

Stitch It began Dec. 9, 1989 in Mississauga. Baird had spent his career in retail, first at the downtown Hamilton G.W. Robinsons department store and then as the owner of clothing stores in Oakville, Hamilton and Grimsby.

But the early 1980s recession hit and people stopped buying clothes. Instead, they streamed in with requests for alterations so they could continue wearing what they already owned.

Baird saw an opportunity. He developed a business plan in 1982 that featured consistent pricing and quick turnarounds. He saw big malls as the best opportunity for convenience and proximity to the retailers selling the clothes he wanted to alter. He kept after uninterested mall developers for seven years until, finally, his first store opened in Square One.

"People lined up outside the door and we've never looked back."

Now, Stitch It is focused on its brand image. Baird even has a former marketing executive from a rather well known Canadian chain, Tim Hortons, heading up his marketing department.

BIGGEST CHALLENGE: "Finding qualified seamstresses and tailors. The service we provide, clothing alterations, is quickly becoming a lost art because most young people don't consider this type of work for a career."

BIGGEST SURPRISE: "The need for our service. Never in my wildest dreams did I ever imagine that we would have 100 stores and generate \$25 million in business. And guess what? We have just started."

BEST DECISION: "I didn't think so at the time, but in retrospect it was aligning ourselves with a holding company that owned several branded retail stores (Cleo, Ricki's, Bootlegger, etc.) which allowed us to use their clout, money and management experience to grow Stitch It coast to coast." (Baird bought out the holding company's interest three years ago.)

WORST DECISION: "I have been so blessed, I honestly cannot think of one."

LEARN THE MOST: "First, you learn the tactical aspect of the job from the people who actually do the work. (I learned how to sew). Second, you learn the management and strategy aspect of the job from experienced, successful businesses (I learned how to lead) and third, through continuous learning, business courses and a lot of reading (I learned how little I know)."

BEST ADVICE GIVEN: "You only have one chance at becoming No. 1, so if you ever find a void in the marketplace, commit yourself 100 per cent, work hard, work smart, be the best, become the biggest. We did and we are."

BEST ADVICE TO GIVE: "No man is an island. You cannot do it all by yourself. So listen to the people, your staff, your customers. If our staff is happy, our customers are happy. People will support what they help create."

SECRET TO SUCCESS: "Fortunately, there is no single secret. If there was only one, we would likely become complacent. Success is complex because you have to properly manage all the elements: people, location, operations, marketing and staying focused."