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Celebrating 50 Years of Retail Inspiration, Innovation and Growth



COVER STORY: GROOMED FOR SUCCESS

STITCH IT PRESIDENT JENNIFER BAIRD IS NOW READY TO LEAD HER FAMILY'S NATIONAL ALTERATIONS COMPANY, BUT, ONLY AFTER EXECUTING A PLAN THAT SHE AND HER FATHER BUILT...*STITCH BY STITCH*. [PAGE 12](#)

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PREPARING FOR SUCCESSION, STITCH BY STITCH

Whether you're running one of the largest retail businesses in the country, or a single store location, developing a succession plan to ensure future growth is becoming increasingly critical. The way Canada's largest alterations retailer and family-run business did it was by developing a ten-year plan that started from the bottom up.

BY SEAN C. TARRY



BEFORE Jennifer Baird had even completed her studies at university she had already started on the journey towards realizing her dream of becoming president of her family's business. Just eight years and a lot of hard work later that dream has become a reality.

At the ripe age of 30, Jennifer is now the president of Stitch It Clothing Alterations—the only national alterations company in North America with stores from coast-to-coast in Canada as well as a finger in the U.S. market. However, despite her youth, she explains that getting to this point is the result of a well thought out ten-year plan that her father Alain built. She also admits that if it had been up to her, the path to succession may have looked a little different.

When Jennifer eventually graduated from the halls of academia, she felt as though she was ready to take on the world. She had gained valuable experience working two different part-time retail jobs throughout her post-secondary years. She also believed that she already possessed an intimate knowledge of the industry and the business she was to one day run. With a business degree under her belt, to boot, she felt well and truly prepared to step into an office role at the company.

"Because I had already worked quite a bit in Stitch It stores during university, I thought that I had earned my stripes. I thought I could move right into head office," she explains. "Thank goodness my dad knew better. As soon as I graduated he put me right back into the stores. He knew that I needed a deeper understanding of the basics of the business."

The first stitch

Jennifer vividly remembers the beginning of her journey, "like it was yesterday," she quips, when she sat down with her father to create the ten-year succession plan that would result in an opportunity for her to run the family's national company. It was a plan that she recognized immediately as one that would clearly involve a lot of hard work focused on gaining the respect of Stitch It's 650 associates.

The plan started while Jennifer was in her second year of university at a time when the Baird family was given the opportunity to buy Stitch It back from the retail powerhouse that helped Alain grow the business



in its early years. Alain, however, had no interest in buying the company back for himself. He was only interested in doing so if there were some succession planning involved. He asked Jennifer if it was something that she would consider.

"It was a big decision for me to make at the age of 21," she explains. "But I already possessed a passion for retail. And I already loved this company—I loved what it was about and how it was started. I didn't have to think about it too long. My immediate reaction was a resounding 'yes!'"

Hard work and understanding

Though her reaction may have been immediate, however, she was well aware that her rise to ascendancy within the company would not be. It was going to require a lot of hard work; hard work, at the insistence of her father, which involved working in every role and covering every aspect of the company, from office administrator to area supervisor. She even moved to Chicago where she was responsible for overseeing the opening of the company's six stores there.

"I've learned so much during this experience about production, training, hiring and building a region. I've worked within an HR function,

have worked customer service in our stores, managed stores, and have led operations. I've pretty much worked within all of the facets of the business leading up to where I am today. Doing things this way has afforded me fantastic learning opportunities and

prepared me for my role as president."

It's the skills that Baird has picked up while working in all of these capacities that she credits for her early successes. She also explains that the intimate knowledge of the company and all of its facets that she now pos-



JENNIFER BAIRD ON RETAIL LEADERSHIP, THE CUSTOMER, AND ASSOCIATE TRAINING

How important is skills development and training at Stitch It?

The Clothing Alterations profession is a lost skill in North America, so finding ways to preserve this skill is of the utmost importance. At Stitch It we also rely on our Seamstresses, Tailors & Fit Experts to give the highest level of customer service. It's the Perfect Storm. We embrace this by finding the right person, giving them a reason to care through recognition, and the potential to increase their earnings at the company. Through our extensive training we also provide encouragement for growth which can lead to internal promotions. Our philosophy at Stitch It is that if our associates grow, the company grows. And, if the company grows, then our associates are presented with even more opportunities. Our last AGM focused on providing the "Why" for our associates. And, we feel strongly that the extensive training programs that we offer provides our associates with a reason and incentive to want to learn and grow. Our philosophy

also provides great growth opportunities for many new Canadians. Stitch It has become a great opportunity for our many first-time Canadian associates.

How do you listen to your customer?

We are on all available media channels—social media, surveys, emails—but I think the biggest advantage we have is our 650 associates who are on the front lines every day. They know what our customers want and, in many cases, because our stores are small and usually only have 6-7 associates they are able to react immediately right at store level. They are then able to gather the feedback and relay the information back to head office so that we can share experiences across the other 86 stores. This allows us to understand our customers preferences and desires and then act on the information to service them better in-store.

One of the new concepts we are launching this year has proven very successful for some of our fellow retailers. We will be creating an online focus group comprised of willing customers from our NeedlePOINTS loyalty program. We are really looking forward to talking directly with our customer base and getting direct feedback.



esses could never be learned in school or anywhere else.

"There is no substitute for learning your business from the ground up," she says. "The in-store experiences taught me so much about our business, including the fact that running a successful service business is not just about serving your external customer. It's about serving your internal customers as well. Our associates are the face of Stitch It, by working the front lines I feel connected to both sets of our customers."

Baird goes on to explain her deep appreciation for her earlier experiences gained in the stores—experiences that help her today in her role as president.

"When I visit stores today, I know enough about the processes to test out new concepts and programs," she explains. "There have been many times when we come up with a great idea at head office but it just doesn't work when I get into a store. Unfortunately, this lesson is something that can go stale if you do not stay connected. I try to get into the stores as much as possible and hope to do even more of it as I get settled into my new role."

Openness and communication

Beyond taking this step by step, or stitch by stitch tactical approach to succession, which has given Baird the opportunity to learn all of the ins and outs of her family's business, she stresses open and honest communication as the other critical element to an effective succession plan.

"Communication is critical," she asserts. "I knew right away that it was going to be important for my father and I both to commit to keeping open and honest communication between us. That was the only way this was going to work. In family businesses, we often take communication for granted. It's easy to assume that family members will be on the same page, but that isn't always the case. Having

How exactly do you manage to meet the customer's needs?

Customers today are busy and often focused on ways to look and feel better, evidenced by the millions we spend on health and wellness. Stitch It's job is to make them look and feel great in their clothes.

We look for ways to go beyond what they may have originally come to see us for. We take the next step and ensure that we educate them on how to make their clothes fit their individual body, and we do it fast. 50% of our alterations are ready for pick up within 24 hours.

What's your definition of a satisfied customer?

A satisfied customer is a repeat customer. If we do our job well the customer will come back. People do not want to search out new companies, especially in the alterations industry there is a lot of trust involved in what we do, it's very personal. Because of this we are in a very fortunate position. If we do a good job then we have the opportunity for a lifelong customer! We are continually putting focus and training around the importance of creating a fantastic experience for the customer.

What's your definition of a leader?

The leader is the inspiration for a company. You need to have a strong vision and be able to communicate that every day. I think leaders need to be passionate about what they do, to continue pushing forward.

Taking a look at 2013 where do you think the challenges and opportunities are for Stitch It?

One of the biggest opportunities for us is to educate people on how to look and feel great in their clothes. Alterations are more than just pant hems—alterations can give "off the rack" clothing that "customized" look and feel. We strive to make every one of your garments really fit. Think of how good you feel in your favourite outfit—the one that makes you stand up that little bit taller. We can make that happen more often.

One of our new business strategies is focused on sharing that secret with more people. We are testing a 'Fitting Service' within the dressing rooms of two major department store chains and through event support with several national retailers. We have received fantastic feedback from both the retailers and their customers. Customers love it because it is a huge convenience—one-stop shop for their perfect outfit. The Retailers love it because it allows them to fully service their change-rooms and use their staff to focus on the sales. We are excited to see where the Fitting Services will take us, but one thing is for sure—if I have my way you are going to be seeing a lot more of Stitch It!



Alain Baird admits to finding it difficult to relinquish control of the business that he founded more than two decades ago. He also, however, stresses the benefits of a well thought-out succession plan, the need to develop much needed leadership skills along the way, and the importance of never forgetting the "why" of business.

What are some of the challenges involved in planning for succession?

There are many challenges, but the two most important for me were the need for patience and passion. Impatience is a human condition. Society wants everything yesterday, and Jennifer was no exception to this mindset as evident by her expectations coming out of university. Passion was also a concern of mine, as it's something that cannot be taught. Passion has to evolve inside of you, and if you are not passionate about the business, it just won't work.

When did you realize that Jennifer could one day assume leadership of the company?

Jennifer displayed leadership qualities from a very early age. She has always been at her best when she's showing you how to do something. I realized that she could assume leadership of the company when I saw the passion she was developing for the business and its associates, while developing her skills during the various positions she took on.

In your estimation, how does Jennifer suit the position of President and CEO of Stitch It?

As the business continues to evolve—it's had to make quite a few changes over the last four years to stay competitive—Jennifer's youth better suits her for adapting to change. She's not afraid to challenge the status quo and she has a good understanding of the issues, challenges and opportunities that come along with running a service business. Jennifer's people skills are a huge asset to the business, our associates and the customers that we serve.

Has it ever been difficult for you to relinquish control of the company?

Absolutely! For the last 23 years, Stitch It has been part of every waking moment for me...not to mention my nightmares and dreams, too. We have 650 associates whose families depend on Stitch It being successful. I would rather die than let them down. I appreciate that Jennifer has to take control, but I intend on staying in the background to whisper in her ear, hopefully at the right time for the right reasons.

How important is it for a company to develop a solid succession plan for growth and continued success?

Business has to grow to be successful because the cost of doing business is always growing. Therefore, if you don't grow you cannot be successful. Likewise, leaders need to grow if they are to be relevant. However, a leader's growth must never be at the expense of 'why' they are in business or 'why' their associates want to work for the business. When a leader's personal growth becomes more important than the 'why', then the company is doomed to failure.

What's the most valuable piece of advice that you have given Jennifer? And why?

There have been many pieces of advice that I've offered Jennifer over the years. Here are a few bits that stick with me:
 If you think you can, then you can. Positive reinforcement can never be underestimated.
 There is nothing wrong with Stitch It that cannot be cured by what is right with Stitch It. Focusing on the positives will almost always allow you to work through the challenges.
 And...never lose sight of the reasons you're in business and the reasons your associates want to work for you. Retail is a people business—it's about the customers and the associates.



structured conversations around the succession plan and how well it is going is crucial. We may be family, but we are not mind-readers."

The communication between Baird and her father continues to this day, allowing her to at all times be within reach of advice from the man who started the company and the benefits of this advice are not lost on Baird.

"My father and I have a meeting every single week where we talk about what's happening. We're in a transition period right now. I have taken over the president's role, but Alain is staying on full time for two years to continue to mentor me. He makes sure that things are going well and allows me to make some mistakes while ensuring that 'both of his babies' are staying on the right course." ☞

Do you want to learn more about the Stitch It's succession plan, and all of the challenges and opportunities that the Bairds encountered along the way? Jennifer and her father Alain will be sharing their story and further insights about succession planning at Retail Council of Canada's 2013 Human Resources Conference on April 8-9, 2013. To register, visit the association's website at www.retailcouncil.org, or call the RCC membership team at 1-888-373-8245.