

Canadian Jeweller Magazine

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When opportunity speaks

Staying true to the core message of love has allowed Michael Hill to take the Canadian retail industry by storm

*by Irina Lytchak
photography by Mike Ford*

WHEN BRETT HALLIDAY LEFT HIS LIFE IN AUSTRALIA BEHIND to help bring the success of jewellery giant Michael Hill to Canada, failing was out of the question for him.

“We wanted to avoid spreading the company too thin and expanding on too many horizons at once,” explains Halliday, president for the Canadian division of Michael Hill. “That’s why we decided to make sure that Canada is a priority.”

Michael Hill, an Australian jewellery and watch retailer that was first established in New Zealand, entered the Canadian market back in 2002 when the owner’s daughter, Emma Hill, opened the first locations in Vancouver, British Columbia. By 2007, Halliday made the move to Toronto with his family and immediately took over the reigns for the Canadian market as the top choice for the job after working with the company for over two decades.

FROM HUMBLE BEGINNINGS

Michael Hill opened his first location in New Zealand and after experiencing a significant amount of growth, he expanded what was becoming a retail chain of jewellery stores into Australia. By that time, Halliday joined the company as a manager in training but having never worked in retail before or the lack of jewellery expertise didn’t stop him from pursuing a management career within the company. After managing stores in the eastern region of Australia for about seven years, Halliday made the move to bring the Michael

Hill name to the western region of the country.

“When I first met Michael, he spoke about growth and the future,” recalls Halliday. “Who would have thought that 22 years after meeting him in Canberra, I would be sitting in Toronto with a multimillion-dollar business? It’s a shock, and it happened so fast.”

In a span of just four years, Halliday managed to open 14 new stores in the western region of Australia. This was the experience and preparation that he would eventually need in order to do the same in Canada.

The company opened its 12th store in Canada by Halliday’s arrival and since then, the store count has gone up to 60 with plans to reach 65 by October 2015.

TAKING A CHANCE ON CANADA

At the moment, Halliday is focusing all of his efforts on 21 locations that are in full swing, including a major store opening set for this summer in one of Canada’s most up-and-coming retail centres, Yorkdale Shopping Mall in Toronto.

Since its arrival into Canada, Michael Hill has already conquered the central region of the country, with stores operating all across Alberta, Manitoba and Saskatchewan. British Columbia is well on its way to reaching its targeted number of stores and the east coast is Halliday’s next stop.

“With 60 stores, we have a successful business, and we’re making a



profit that goes back to the organization,” he says. “We are the only jewellery retailer that’s expanding as quickly as we are.”

The company set out a goal of opening 1,000 stores by 2022 and it’s well on its way to reaching that number considering Michael Hill already boasts 290 locations around the world, with 52 in New Zealand, 180 in Australia, and 60 in Canada.

IT’S ALL IN THE FAMILY

Today, although Michael Hill is an international corporation, it’s still considered to be a family-run business. Not only is the owner’s daughter on the board of directors in New Zealand, but Halliday and the other regional presidents all came from the same beginning.

“Myself and the gentlemen that run the U.S. and Australian markets have been mates for 20 years,” he explains. “We all started on the sales floor together; we sold jewellery together and we’ve all grown as we expanded. We talk every day and we challenge each other.”

While his role within the company is much different today than it was 20 years ago, Halliday makes it a priority to visit all of the locations across the country and maintain a strong relationship with all of the management and

sales staff, many of whom have been with the company for more than one decade.

“Salespeople like to work for the organization because they’re still working for Michael, who is still with us,” he explains. “My wife and I travel the country and I spend most of my time in the stores on a regular basis. I still keep as much in contact with the salespeople and the store managers as I can, because that’s how I grew up. And I try to pass on everything that I’ve learned to the younger generation.”

“At Michael Hill, there’s a career path from the starting point to the CEO because we’ve all done it. I don’t have any formal education but I have the life skills, the knowledge that I learned from this business, and a vision of what I want to achieve. Now, it’s about putting all of this into action and assembling the best team that I can.”

THE SECRET LIES IN THE PRODUCT

One unique aspect of Michael Hill that keeps this retailer competitive on a global scale is that it manufactures and retails its own in-house brand.

Offering almost everything under the stars when it comes to jewellery, Michael Hill also began manufacturing its own watches about ten years ago.

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“The main thing about having the Michael Hill brand is that consumers are buying a piece of jewellery that they are going to have for the rest of their lives. And to know that it was designed, sourced, and manufactured in-house – that’s how we develop that trust.”

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Today, the retailer offers a wide range of collections that have been specially designed and branded for customers' various and precise needs. The company's most profitable line includes the diamond and engagement pieces, which are all designed and manufactured by a master craftsman in Brisbane, Australia.

"At the end of the day, we want to offer the best product at the best value to our consumers," says Halliday. "The main thing about having the Michael Hill brand is that consumers are buying a piece of jewellery that they are going to have for the rest of their lives. And to know that it was designed, sourced, and manufactured in-house – that's how we develop that trust."

To stay competitive in the charm game, the retailer has also recently introduced a branded line of charms and beads called Emma & Roe. As an addition to the already existing collection of Michael Hill charms, the Emma & Roe line, inspired by Michael's daughter's name and his wife's maiden name, has already gained momentum in the Canadian market after being introduced into a number of Michael Hill Jeweller locations across the country.

CAMPAGNING FOR LOVE

Recently, the retailer released a new advertising campaign that centres on the idea of love. And although love is the go-to topic for most retailers when it comes to marketing jewellery, Michael Hill has added its own spin to create a

series of very moving promotional videos and images.

"It's about real, everyday people with stories to tell and we've actually weaved that into our advertising," says Halliday. He explains how the Michael Hill advertising team spent a few days in New York City talking to hundreds of people randomly selected on the streets about their idea of love. The final product involved choosing about 20 people that served as the inspiration for the current "We're for Love" Michael Hill campaign.

"The ring that you buy – it's not just a piece of metal with a diamond in it – it's actually something that's personal," says Halliday. "It's love and everyone deserves to find love in all sorts of ways. Hopefully, the Michael Hill story will intertwine and become part of the story of the couple, or the mother and daughter, or the brother and sister."

Since its inception, "We're for Love" has helped the retail chain form the basis of its communication style with consumers. When the campaign first rolled out, Michael Hill employees were given the chance to preview the video before the public at an exclusive cinema screening and Halliday recalls that at the end, there wasn't a dry eye left in the building.

"Even when selling in store, we always train our staff to be able to find the customer's story," he says. "For every person that buys a piece of jewellery, there's a story behind it. It's an anniversary; it's a wedding gift; it's an engagement ring. It's about finding their story, telling them our story and then



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weaving them together to find the customer that perfect piece.”

All of the couples that were interviewed for the campaign as well as their videos can be found on the Michael Hill website. Michael himself can be seen in the campaign alongside his wife, being a true testament to the power of love after so many years of being together.

“This is probably the most powerful campaign that we’ve put together, and we only launched it late last year, so it’s still in its infancy,” says Halliday. “We don’t care what love you’re into, we just want you to get your fair share.”

A LOOK AHEAD

Today, Halliday prides Michael Hill’s longevity and credits a large part of it to customer loyalty.

“In Canada, we now have employees that have been here six, seven, and even eight years and I think from a consumer point of view, that’s trust,” he says. “When you walk into a store, you want to see familiar faces, and our customers stay and buy through us because of a trust in a Michael Hill product. They’re buying our name and they know that we’ll look after it for the rest of their lives.”

Michael Hill continues to grow in the global market by staying true to the one thing that inspired its inception – love. CJ

AT A GLANCE

Name: Michael Hill

Owner: Public company

Locations: 290

Staff: over 1,000

Known for: diamond engagement and bridal jewellery, watches, Emma & Roe

Cool factor: Established in New Zealand, Michael Hill is still operated by its original founder and his family



we're
for
love™

