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Loyal following at Fletcher Jones

Fletcher Jones has built a longstanding retail business around the key components of quality, service and value, reports **Caroline Ford**.

Few retail operations around today can trace their origins back to 1918, but the Fletcher Jones Group – which now numbers 48 stores and employs around 450 people across retail, head office and manufacturing – has stood the test of time since then. From its humble inception as a drapery store and transformation into Fletcher Jones in 1925, the business has experienced many adjustments, its most recent change occurring in 1995 when it was bought and restructured by its current owner, Ted Dimmick, and his then business partner. A large part of its endurance appears to be attributed to its strong business philosophy based around the principles of quality, value and service.

Today, the Fletcher Jones business is made up of several facets, including wholesale (bowlsweat and some fashion product), corporate and schoolwear, and manufacturing. The company runs two clothing factories in Warnambool and Mount Gambier, which employ 125 people and provide about 80 per cent of the

retail chain's product. The majority of the fabric for its garments is also produced in its Geelong fabric mill, making Fletcher Jones a completely vertical operation – a unique proposition in today's apparel industry.

Also part of the group is the Jane Lamerton business, which was acquired at the end of last year. Designer Jane Lamerton now designs the diffusion label Signature, which sits in the womenswear area of Fletcher Jones retail business.

According to Fletcher Jones retail director, Rowan Gow, the company's retail business has experienced significant growth of around 44 per cent over the last five years. Its retail operation now consists of around 48 stores in a variety of shopping centre and strip shopping locations, with two new sites recently opening in Tuggerah and Werribee. Gow said this growth has been a result of a move back into regional centres and major shopping centres.

"To help with our volumes of stock and our brand, we need to be in the major

centres so we've made a big push to get into them in the last five years," he said. "At the same time we have got into regional areas that haven't been serviced much by retailers and that's been very good for us."

Fletcher Jones' overall product mix in its retail stores consists of 70 per cent menswear and 30 per cent womenswear. While it has been offering womenswear since 1956, a relaunch in 1997 with its own logo has sparked growth in the area of around 5 to 10 per cent per year. In menswear, around 40 per cent of the product sold is trousers, due to its extensive range and fractional sizes.

Suiting is also a huge area for Fletcher Jones, ranging from entry point suits at \$350 to made to order suits up to \$2,500. The company employs professional fitters in their stores and is also well known for its alteration service – it has several of its own workrooms dedicated to this service. "It's an extension of our customer service which in turn makes people become loyal to our brand," Gow said.

Despite the popularity of its suiting, Fletcher Jones has also noticed significant growth in its casual wear area. "We've had up to 50 per cent growth each year over the last two years in men's casual wear," Gow said. "That is the area that we are going forward in."

While the Fletcher Jones target market has traditionally been the 40-plus customer, Gow said the company is trying to lower that slightly to appeal to the 35-plus market, introducing more fashionable colours and designs. However, it will not go any lower with its target market, due to fierce competition in the youth area as well as the tradition of the Fletcher Jones brand. "We have a very definite brand, a really good niche and a loyal customer, and we don't want to give that customer up," Gow said. "But, we've got the brand now, the quality and the stores that we can keep our current customer and also try to get a newer customer as well."

Gow said that despite this push towards a slightly younger customer, the product will remain essentially the same, especially its high Australian made content. He believes that the fact that 80 per cent of its product made in Australia is a big selling point for the retailer. "A lot of our customers love not only the loyalty and tradition of Fletcher Jones but also the fact that we are Australian made – that is definitely a selling feature," he said.

Customer service is also a huge focus for Fletcher Jones, as part of a way of differentiating itself from other retailers. According to Gow, the company's culture is one in which the customer is the utmost importance. "We've got a lot of loyal customers and they come back for the service. Our whole product and our stores are geared towards the customer. It's always been that way – people love to be served. I think people are also coming back to that more than ever now."

True to this ethos, major stores such as Queen Street in Melbourne, which is around 800 square metres over two floors, employ around 10 to 13 staff during weekdays. New staff are given detailed training



Queen Street city store, Melbourne.

both through specific sessions and in-store on requirements such as how to fit a suit and alterations. Staff are also encouraged to undertake the Certificate II, III and IV retail traineeships and to pursue a career path in retail. "With the amount of stores we have we are able to offer them opportunities – we can always move people through and promote people so that reinforces it," Gow said.

Complementing this training and customer service focus are Fletcher Jones' retail systems. It has just rolled out a new point of sale system from Retail Directions across its stores over the last 12 to 18 months, which links the retail operation back to its buying office and warehouse and provides real time data. "It's really helped our business because we can see where the stock is, move the stock around, and be more reactive," Gow said. The system also allows the company to respond quickly to the market by linking into its production schedule and enables it to always be topping up key core lines.

While greater control over stock levels and continued increased sales will assist in reducing the need for discounting, it will not have a huge effect on Fletcher Jones' existing marketing and promotions calendar. According to Gow, the retailer has two quality sales a year during the traditional periods of June/July and December/January, teaming this with a number of specials and value add sales throughout the year. "We don't want to cheapen the brand by having a lot of special buys – we try to make the sales a genuine sale," he said.

This desire to protect its brand has no doubt contributed to Fletcher Jones' longstanding presence in Australian retail, along with other key factors. "I think the reason that we've lasted so long is because we are Australian owned and made, have superior service, good quality product, and offer value for money at a price point," Gow said. "I think that's really helped consolidate the brand to what it is today."