

Trappers celebrates 40 years of successful retailing

The outdoor gear retailer, Trappers, is celebrating its 40-year history of shifting from a 'mom and pop' wholesaler to a national retail enterprise, outperforming the retail index. It also has a growth strategy to increase its chain exponentially within the next three years.



Grant Ponting and John Black, executive directors of Trappers.

As one of the longest standing market players, the company is well recognised amongst customers, having built capability and scale across the entire supply chain to improve its footprint and points of difference. The Johannesburg-based executive directors, Grant Ponting and John Black believe that they have never forgotten the brand's heritage and continue to focus on their 'core' customers, whilst still managing trends in a rapidly changing retail environment and this approach, combined with strong operating values, is paying off.

While there has been a notable decline in national consumer confidence over recent years, resulting in a slowdown in retail sales volume growth, Trappers is still growing, with a 17% increase in group sales for the financial year ending February 2017. Its ambition is to grow revenue from R274 million to R320 million by 2018.

In 2004, Ponting and his family acquired the struggling group, which comprised 14 franchised stores, after initially providing a management consulting service to the owners of the company. Black joined Trappers in 2011, and was appointed director soon after.

Today, the group comprises three entities Trappers Franchising, Trappers Retail and Outland Distributors, with 34 stores across eight South African provinces, selling a wide range of outdoor equipment and clothing.

Successful franchising

There are currently eight corporate-owned stores, while the rest are franchised. Ponting says, "Much of our success can be attributed to strong franchisees. We are particular about whom we work with and as a result, have built up a loyal and stable franchisee base that mirrors our values and vision; we pride ourselves in having an almost nil franchisee turnover.

"The group operates in a highly competitive market and so customer interaction, local market relevance and a wide range assortment remain the key focus. The franchised stores are community focused, owner-run stores, which are often key differentiators in the outlying urban areas they trade in. Being owner-run ensures a vested interest approach to get to know

and understand customers personally. 85% of the store products are core to the group and we allow for 15% flexibility in order to ensure our franchise stores are relevant to local markets.”

Expansion into Africa

Expansion is a strategic priority for the company and the directors have negotiated a significant private equity investment that will serve as capital to increase the store base within the next three years. Ponting adds, “We have grown through a mix of corporate-owned and franchise owned stores. Ultimately, we are building a 45-50 store chain across all provinces with room to grow in both existing and untapped locations across South Africa.”

The company has registered trademarks in South Africa and Southern Africa and there is potential to expand into neighbouring Botswana and Namibia.

Increasing private labels

Given the increased size and scale of the business, the company is now able to drive private label ranges across apparel, footwear and accessories. As part of the business’ short-term growth strategy, these exclusive ranges will gradually become more available in-store and expand to meet customers’ diverse needs/choices. Black adds, “We have always had a large contingent of male customers, but this is rapidly shifting to include more women, so we are evolving our ladies offering. We also recognise the value of the younger customer and aim to appeal more generally across the sector.”

Conservation is another issue that is aligned with the corporate value system. It established a partnership with the Endangered Wildlife Trust (EWT) based on core synergies and continually supports its initiatives. More recently, the company helped contribute and raise almost half a million rand for EWT’s anti-rhino poaching initiative.

“In four decades, much has changed in our business and market. As a company, we have grown significantly, yet, we face challenges almost daily, many of which are unique to the South African business climate. As long as we remain true to the company’s and our core values, whilst continuing to improve operational efficiencies across owned and franchise stores, I believe we have an opportunity to make further in-roads in our market segment,” concludes Ponting.

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