

## A father's legacy

Back in 1969, a man set out to start his own business in the hardware industry. Nothing special in that you might say except that he was 51 years old and his name was Ron Disney.

The world was a different place when Ron Disney was a young man. It was the Menzies era (1949-66) in Australia and it was the first time it was called "the Lucky Country". Wealth from the land and the mines paid for new factories, providing plenty of jobs. New suburbs sprang up around the cities and a new, suburban way of life developed. New appliances steadily accumulated and most people could afford a new car every two or three years. This was also a time when the first wave of immigrants arrived en masse from war-ravaged Europe and bringing with them a more diverse and exciting culture.

The hardware industry was part of this period of optimism and growth. In fact the following quote appeared in the *Hardware Journal* in its seventieth anniversary issue in 1956:

*"...the remarkable expansion of the hardware industry has followed the same pattern throughout the years. As settlers moved into more distant areas some enterprising soul among them would open a small store to serve his (sic) neighbours, usually stocking a wide variety of goods, and when the town grew larger, a more specialised form of trading appeared."*

After the Second World War ended, Ron initially worked in wholesale grocery before becoming sales manager for Henderson Springs during the fifties. Soon after he was the Victorian sales manager for Glenn Carr & Partners where he helped to introduce Henry Lane locks and Plasti-Bond into the Australian market. Ron left Carr's to create the Ron Disney Sales Company.

Barry Perry who is currently an agent for Wild Country Leisure but worked for Hawkes Brothers for 26 years and was general manager for Southern Wholesale, has only fond memories of Ron. He says: "I first met Ron as a boy sweeping the floors at Hawkes Brothers in the 1950s. Then I watched him grow in various buying and management roles through the 60s, 70s and early '80s. I saw him socially in the '90s. Both personally and professionally, he was the most consistently

happy and personable man I ever dealt with. He always treated people in this manner, regardless of their 'status' in an organisation."



Ron Disney

### Disney's 30th anniversary

Ron created the family business as a sales agent, buying and reselling products at 51 years of age. His only financial backing was taking out a second mortgage but he was still able to look after his family and provide his children with a good education. The 30th anniversary of the company means that it is a long serving member of the hardware industry.

His son Andrew (and current managing director) started in '75, straight after finishing school. It would be fair to describe the younger Disney as a self-taught professional who operates well on gut instinct and is a "salt-of-the-earth" character. He is also a mad keen golfer, as many in the industry could attest.

Ron Disney Sales is a specialty wholesaler and its main motto is: "You make it, I'll sell it!" The company prides itself on its ownership of products that have been made to ensure successful product sales. It has experienced the benefits of niche marketing in the business. "I niche everything," explains Andrew.

In the past, the company has been a manufacturer's agent and Velcro is the only generic brand name within the Disney range. The company sells to all the major hardware retailers such as Danks, Mitre 10, and Bunnings. In addition, it sells product into leading department stores including DJs, Myer and specialty kitchenware retailers. But at the end of the day, the focus is on hardware, not supermarkets.

Andrew took over the day-to-day managing of the business in the early eighties and admits one of the main challenges was how to cope with such a big responsibility at a young age. He worked hard to gain the respect of his "elders" in the hardware industry, and continues to do so today.

Ron embraced semi-retirement in 1982, partly because the "golf course was looking really good" at the time. He maintained his managing director title (with its associated perks) and was the senior partner of the business throughout the rest of his life.

The Disney Company has an extensive range of products — almost 500 different lines. It concentrates its efforts on having the right product, with excellent follow-up service, ensuring the product is available when you need it. "I believe that there is far too much emphasis placed purely on pricing ahead of knowledge and support of product to the consumer. We try to ensure a point of difference to give protection against the 'discounters' to the hardware industry," says Andrew. This attitude has enabled Disney's to strengthen their position in the industry and survive against the corporate market.



Andrew Disney

Andrew believes the biggest change in the business since his father left him in charge has been the impact of computerisation and technology since the early '80s. "Also, I think the number of wholesalers and retailers (corporate, discounter etc.) importing has created an excess of supply against the demand for product and made all industries overly competitive, focusing purely on price in an attempt to beat the next bloke," he adds.

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