

empire

STRIKES back!



FROM LONE SOLDIER, TO RESPECTED LEADER OF 30 EMPLOYEES, DON HAILES HAS CONVERTED A TINY CURTAIN-TRACK BUSINESS INTO THE MODERN-DAY WINDOW FURNISHINGS GOLIATH, THE ROMAN EMPIRE.

Susan Cowen reports.

HAILES, WHO BEGAN his furnishings career working for a Melbourne-based pelmets, tracks and bed-heads manufacturer, says the Roman Empire enterprise started with a single idea ... and a little bit of ignorance.

"In the beginning, when the business was called Total Track Services, it was just me," Hailes says.

"After the name change to The Roman Empire, the company grew and we now have a staff of 30.

"It all started when I left my job manufacturing pelmets, tracks and bed-heads and went to work for my dad in retail.

"While working for Dad, I decided to make, sell and fit curtain tracks, and that is how Total Track Services came about."

Working with his meticulous father taught Hailes that there was a right way and a wrong way of doing business.

"Through my father's patience, I was taught the right way the first time and so I loved working with him and the challenges the job presented.

"Then in 1989 things started to go very quiet in the industry and my father and I came to an arrangement whereby I would work for him on call and at the same time source my own contract installation work."

At the time, Hailes was under pressure financially, with his new house and mortgage set against the looming recession.

"So what did I decide to do?" he says.

"Start my own business – ignorance really can be bliss."

Total Track Services, which changed names to The Roman Empire several years later, came into being in May 1989, primarily as a contract installation service and with nothing more than a \$5 bank deposit.

"During my various roles within the industry, I had come to know many retailers," Hailes says.

"This gave me insight as to who to offer installation work and before long I had a list of regular clients.

"Really, it began with five main clients and that's grown to a client base in excess of 500."

With the client base steadily building via word of mouth, Hailes was becoming impossibly busy.

"Someone once said to me, 'I think you've bitten off more than you can chew', no matter, I thought, and continued chewing like a madman.

"I was working around the clock, seven days a week; manufacturing at night and installing during the day.

"My wife Susi would help me and we worked like that for six years."

The business's growth was extremely quick. No longer able to split his time between manufacturing and installing, Hailes had some decisions to make.

"It was time to relinquish the installation work and concentrate solely on manufacturing and implementing systems to ensure quality and reasonable lead times."

Then, in 1993, there was a major turning point when Susi decided to leave her fulltime position with a well respected furniture manufacturer and commit to her role manufacturing alongside her husband.

"Susi has German blood pumping through her veins; she's a perfectionist to the point of obsessive compulsive and has no concept of the terms 'she'll be right' and 'that'll do'.

"To Susi, things are either right or wrong and there is no in between."

By then, Wayne Rabot was with the company and the trio were still required to work late nights and weekends.

"We got fed up with the long hours and decided it was nuts.

"We had to either move out of the small factory we were in, or restructure the business to fit the premises.

"Roman blinds were doing well at the time, so we stopped everything else and focussed on romans.

"Romans were taking over the window furnishing industry, so eventually we still had to move to a bigger factory, but that's how we got the Roman Empire name, which we adopted in May 1997."

The popularity of romans during the late 1990s opened the door to national and international distribution. Also, packaging of the product was favourable to transport, in contrast with other products Hailes had previously manufactured.

"With the appointment of sales representatives and agents interstate, the 'invasion' was starting to take shape.





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Don Hailes - The Roman Empire

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“We now have an agent in WA and two girls on the road fulltime, covering all the other states.

“The rest is done through marketing; the clients come to us and then everything is shipped out of our factory.

“There’s no retail involved.”

Along with local and international expansion, growth within the company was stepping up and in September 1999 The Roman Empire relocated to a larger factory in Melbourne’s southeast.

The introduction of automation to The Roman Empire – via the purchase of a romans plotting machine, ultrasonic cutter and pressure cutter – led to yet another move. “By the end of 2004, staff levels had peaked.

“Even with an additional mezzanine floor, we were full; so full we found productivity starting to dwindle due to the lack of space.

“What happened next?

“You guessed it ... we were on the move again.”

In April 2006, work on The Roman Empire’s purpose built Seaford facility was completed and Hailes’ charges set about moving into the new premises.

“It is some 40 times bigger than our first premises and everything here is spotless.

“So, here we are, having grown from the back of a panel van, to a business exporting products to countries including Holland, France, Japan, Ireland, Vanuatu, South Africa and New Zealand.

“We continue to rise, yet we’ve never changed our commitment to service and quality, which is as strong now as it was way back in 1989.”

One aspect that has changed over the years is the product offering.

What began as a pelmets, bed-heads and tracking business became a romans-only specialist, but as market demands change, so too does The Roman Empire’s offering.

“Roman blinds are still one of our best sellers but our (relatively new) roller blinds and sunscreens are what we’re now known for.

“Supply and demand is what dictates our product range, so if people are screaming out for a certain type of window furnishing, long enough and loud enough, we’ll do it for them.”

Originally, custom romans were a big hit in the marketplace, but Hailes’ generic romans have positioned themselves equally since then.

“Custom romans are where the fabric is supplied and we add the lining, but they lost favour because they took a long time to make and were therefore quite expensive.

“Their popularity slowed around the time the minimalist look was coming in, so we ceased production and added roller blinds.

“Now we find it’s come full circle and custom romans are making a big comeback, which is good for us because we have experience making them and have a faster turn-around than most.”

The current trend towards soft furnishings has meant padded pelmets and bed-heads are back on the menu.

“We’re creating different varieties of bed-heads and pelmets and are now manufacturing bed surrounds, which look great and really complete the picture.

“It’s about reinventing the old.

“Customers are going back to the softer look but are more experimental with colour.

“Purple, black, silver and grey are going to be huge and people should not be afraid to use colour.”

Irrespective of colour and type, customers of The Roman Empire can rest assured that their purchase lives up to the highest quality standards.

“Every item is checked according to a 20-point checklist.

“Also, we’re often asked to test and provide opinions on our suppliers’ latest fabrics, which I think is a bit of a feather in our cap.

“We make blinds using their fabrics and provide honest opinions and the great thing is that we get the heads up on future trends, sometimes three years in advance.”

Respect from The Roman Empire’s peers has been hard won but Hailes believes you get out what you put in.

“We’ve been surprised by our success but everyone’s worked really hard for it.

“It is just nice for everyone to be rewarded.” WFA