



## Creating a buzz

JEAN LOUISE INTERIORS

# Shades of Australia

A GROWING DEMAND FOR WINDOW FURNISHINGS THAT CATER FOR LARGER WINDOWS HAS COMBINED WITH A RESURGENCE IN DEMAND FOR CURTAIN FABRIC. NEIL PAPARELLA, WHO OPERATES VICTORIA-BASED JEAN LOUISE INTERIORS AND SHADES OF AUSTRALIA WITH WIFE ANN-MARIE, NOTES THE KEY INDUSTRY TRENDS. DAWN ADAMS REPORTS.

When Neil Paparella speaks about fitting out entire homes with window furnishings, his voice resonates with a particular 'buzz' he gets from guiding clients from concept to completion. His enthusiasm, still healthy eight years after purchasing Shades of Australia, helps him effectively transform a new set of window furnishings into a potential artform.

"When we make blinds or curtains, they really light up a home. It's such a buzz," he says.

"You're creating something. It would be a hard industry if you didn't do it for that buzz because there's no room for error if you don't put the right number of drops or take the measurements accurately. It's not like picking something off-the-shelf, it all has to work and you become quite skillful."

### Distance no barrier

With head office based in Mornington, Shades of Australia services clients across Victoria, determined that distance will provide no barrier to catering for city, suburban or country customers. Just two years ago, Neil and Ann-Marie purchased yet another firm, Jean Louise Interiors in Moorabbin, determined to brand the stores in a way that better suggested window furnishings. With a laugh, Neil explains that he's convinced Shades of Australia helped to create opportunities for a local shade sail business. Over the years he has often referred customers elsewhere if they turn up convinced that the business produces shade sails rather than window furnishings.

Shades of Australia has built its reputation producing indoor and outdoor blinds, such as awnings, as well as curtains, which Paparella is convinced are enjoying a resurgence. He describes Jean Louise as stocking



"When we make blinds or curtains, they really light up a home."

- Neil Paparella, Shades of Australia.

"lovely fabrics" that might find homes in areas like Toorak or St Kilda.

"Curtains are definitely coming back and roman blinds are not so popular now," he says.

"We're also doing more screen rollers with customers seeking UV treatments on windows to protect furniture. There's a lot more organza and sheer with a blackout behind it for a softer look."

He points to anodised decorator rods and chrome fittings as gaining popularity.

### Complete solution

As he describes countless possibilities, it's easy to imagine Neil and his team, including interior designer, Carly Lane, planning entire houses.

"Today's modern house with large windows might have decorator rods with a nice earthy colour scheme with a backing lining in the formal areas," he says.

"Through the living area might be screen fabric on roller blinds, while shutters are used in wet areas like kitchens, bathrooms, wall cavities or near the front door. There might be a pelmet with curtains in a home theatre, or shutters in a walkway, the 'wow' areas. Shutters are used to be noticed, such as either side of a dining room table."

He stresses that there's always a place for roller blinds, with opportunities to use them to complement curtains, such as a screen roller blind inside a window

and the drape on the face, or a sheer blind for daytime privacy in a bedroom with a drape over the top to sleep.

"Today, you can't sell a houseful of curtains or a houseful of blinds. You might instead have a cross-section of your whole business in a home," he says.

This trend is most evident in new houses where clients may only have in their possession a carpet and paint sample on which to base their decorating decisions.

"A lot of people can't visualise, which is why it's great to have Carly on board," he says.

"She can explain the possibilities so they can visualise it and ensure that, if we go ahead, there will be no surprises. You don't want to surprise but you do want to delight them."

### Importance of expertise

He stresses the importance of expert assistance, especially highlighting the challenges of larger windows, and ensuring these window furnishings are easy to operate and safely installed.

"If you haven't adjusted the tube, the fabric can crease or it doesn't hold properly and dips in the middle," he says.

"A three-metre window is not a problem, but you need to use the right fabric, the right tube and the right mechanism. And you could put a helper spring inside the chain mechanism to make it easier for the customer to operate."

With much of the business

obtained through referrals, Paparella cites customer service as a high priority, and he is willing to assist customers who call for assistance years after installation.

"If they ring three or four years later, we will still service their needs, such as a chain that needs fixing," he says.

### Relationship marketing

He also notes that the success rate for securing a job or forging a relationship is far greater when a potential customer comes into a store. Paparella suggests that the hours allocated to getting that job right might take place over a friendly cup of coffee or, if it's after hours, a glass of wine.

"At a person's home, you could be the number three quote," he says.

"By the end of the day, there could have been three visitations from three different people and the client gets confused."

The customer is most likely faced with making a decision based on different fabric options and they might not understand the benefits of one over another. While quoting for jobs is regarded as essential to building the business, Paparella still dreams of an ideal world where potential customers would pay a \$200 deposit for a quote, which would be refunded when they confirmed an order. But he's not expecting that to happen anytime soon.

Meanwhile, Paparella credits his main installer, Bruce Paterson, as possessing the ability to finish off a job perfectly.



**Neil Paparella is convinced curtains are making a comeback.**

“Bruce has been with us the whole eight years and he has the knack,” he says.

“He has that ability to finish things off perfectly. You have to look at window furnishings like art. When you walk into a finished home, you want it to flow and you don’t want something that might distract you from what is wanted.”

His aim for perfection sometimes even over-rides customer satisfaction. When a client was recently happy with a job, Paparella still insisted a company representative return to solve a problem he had noticed with a dip in a six-metre-long rod.

“When I measure something, I do it three or four times, never once,” he says. “They call me ‘Little Hitler’ in here because I make sure things are right. I saw the dip in the track and I couldn’t accept it.”



## Never mind, these things happen

Some eight years of operating a window furnishings business are bound to lead to a few legendary tales. Shades of Australia’s Neil Paparella found out the hard way that townhouses often look alike.

“We put awnings on the wrong townhouse once,” he says.

“It was a problem but a lot of these places look the same.”

Paparella was pleasantly surprised when the person who had accidentally received the awnings wanted to keep them. He gave them the awnings for a discounted price.

Unfortunately, the person who had missed out on their promised awnings now had two things to consider, an unexpected waiting time for the new awnings to be ready and the fact that his neighbour had just received the awnings he’d been promised at a discounted rate. Paparella came up with a solution, to also offer him the awnings at a discount.

“It worked out well – these things happen,” Paparella laughs.

On yet another occasion, Paparella’s son Neil, who is a painter/decorator by trade, was able to offer a solution when a client found that her curtains didn’t go with the walls in her house. He simply repainted the walls.