



GOING *the* Distance

IT'S almost a century since Arthur G Wilson founded Wilson Fabrics in 1926 and a sense of heritage remains a strong guiding principle for the business, which is still entirely Australian owned and has built its reputation on the back of a primarily Australian made product range. That said, the company clearly understands that longevity is not about looking back.

Specialising in supplying drapery and blind fabrics to custom made curtain and blind retailers, design led, directional fabrics are the heart and soul of the business, general manager Chris Sencek confirms.

"Wilson Fabrics' specialism lies in designing and developing an exciting range of innovative, decorative and functional quality fabrics, suitable for all types of window treatments, inspired and sourced locally in Australia and from all around the world."

"Our product range consists of an extensive collection of drapery, flame retardant fabrics, linings, sheers, blind fabrics, readymade curtains and blinds that range from classic designs, textures and stripes to plain and textured block out coated drapery and blind fabrics. These are ranged in approximately 2000 businesses across Australia, including curtain retailers, blind manufacturers, decorators and designers."

"All of the blind fabrics we offer for the custom made market are proudly made in Australia and our coated drapery fabrics are also made here. We also now have a range of Australian Made linings," Sencek confirms. It's perhaps not surprising that he cites Wilson Fabrics' securing of the licence to use the Australian Made Logo for its blind fabrics in 2010 as a significant moment. "Everything this logo stands for; trusted quality, reliability and supporting local jobs, complements Wilson Fabrics, making this a perfect fit. We are very proud to be able to use this logo and find it is a great way to differentiate our products and highlight the value of being Australian Made."

The company does supplement its Australian made drapery ranges with internationally sourced uncoated fabrics to ensure it can offer a complete range to its customers, but Sencek is clear that the superior quality of product offered by manufacturing in Australia is the real driving force behind the business. By manufacturing locally the company offers the added benefit of short lead times and a substantially smaller carbon footprint when servicing the Australian market. "Having quality local manufacturing ensures we can do quite technical weaves and designs that cannot be easily duplicated by cheaper overseas mills."

WILSON FABRICS MAY BE ONE OF AUSTRALIA'S LARGEST AND OLDEST SOFT FURNISHING WHOLESALERS, BUT HAVING INVESTED IN A HOST OF INITIATIVES INCLUDING A SUCCESSFUL RANGE EXPANSION, UPDATED IT SYSTEMS AND A NEW WEBSITE, THE COMPANY IS WELL POSITIONED TO TAKE ON THE FUTURE, WRITES BELINDA SMART.

Wilson Fabrics' ability to respond quickly to market demand is also key to its ability to innovate. The development and release in mid-2012 of a new, fashion-forward range is a case in point; positioned at the high end of the market, the Studio blind range caters to colour and design enthusiasts and comprises five lines: Arizona, Lava, Spencer, Blizzard and Moma.

Sencek says he expected the Studio range to perform well, but was surprised by how well. "It really did hit the ground running and we're expecting more growth in that market going forward; we had five lines at launch but will certainly be expanding on that. The range has also been selling well overseas, into China, Hong Kong, Singapore, India, Thailand, Canada, the US and Europe - it was a very strong drawcard on the stand at R+T Stuttgart 2012."

Meanwhile Wilson Fabrics continues to experience strong uptake of its core fabric ranges, including the Jacquards for which it is renowned.

“Our Jacquard blind ranges all offer a number of key benefits: Australian Made; Fade Resistant; Stain Resistant (protected with Teflon Fabric Protector); Oeko-tex Certified; manufacture using superior Pitch Black Blockout Coating; 280cm wide widths.”

The Oeko-tex Certification is a particular point of difference. “With the increasing awareness of social well-being and our desire to ensure we are not being subjected to harmful substances, Wilson has taken the proactive approach to obtaining certification form Oeko-Tex, the internationally recognised label that signifies that the product has passed rigorous testing implemented by independent testing institutes. This confirms that no harmful substances are present and that the fabric poses no risk whatsoever to your health.”

“One of the distinct advantages of being local and Australian Made is that we have tight controls over the quality of the coating and the ingredients used to ensure a high quality and consistent finished product. In addition, the internal textile-testing laboratory is independently accredited by the National Association Testing Authority (NATA) and internal Quality Assurance systems comply with AS/NZS ISO 9001:2000.”

The blind ranges are also available in two options: translucent; which is light filtering, allowing light to enter the room while still providing privacy, and the trademarked Pitch Black blackout.

“We are renowned for quality blackout coating and our Pitch Black blackout coating is full blackout that surpasses the standards for this category. The superior blackout properties eliminate heat in summer and retain it during winter, saving on heating and cooling bills. Windows are critical to the overall energy efficiency of a home; as much as 40 per cent of the heat lost from a home is lost from windows and up to 50 per cent of unwanted heat gain is through the windows.”

In terms of the company’s drapery offering, Wilson Fabrics Australian Made coated drapery offers a distinct point of difference in the market.

“We pride ourselves on the quality of the coating of our products and within the 30 blackout ranges on offer we have several ranges that are available in both Australian Made drapery and blind fabrics. They have been designed as direct coordinates, which provides consumers with a more comprehensive offering for coordinated window coverings within the home. For example, consumers can have the same texture / design and colour throughout the home in a mixture of drapery and blinds, creating a fully coordinated look.”

“Our coordinating ranges such as Broome Drapery and Blinds, Boston Blind and Avalon Drapery and the recent addition of Santiago Drapery and Austin Blind provide a comprehensive mix of styles, designs and colours available in both blackout blinds and drapery. All these ranges are available in blackout drapery, blackout blind fabric and translucent blind fabric, allowing for flexibility in window covering designs and styles. Consumers can have the light filtering translucent blind coupled with the matching blackout drapery on the window, or opt for dual rollers and have both translucent and blackout blinds all in matching colours and design. This allows customers to mix these window dressing styles throughout the house using the same fabric.”

Wilson recently re-released these ranges with blinds and drapery featured on one sample hanger. “This has been a great success for us; it allows our Australian Made story to be easily communicated to the end consumer as all the samples are together. We’ve had a few customers come to us stating that they didn’t realise we had a matching drapery range for the Austin blind and vice versa. It’s been an invaluable exercise for us and we plan to release a few more coordinating ranges this year.”

Wilson Fabrics is certainly a company on the move, spurred, as Sencek confirms, by pervasive challenges most local manufacturers know only too well.

“We are constantly under threat of overseas suppliers and products trying to compete with our locally made products, in particular our blind ranges, so we have to stay at the forefront of design and ensure that we utilise our local manufacturing as much as possible to reduce the threat of direct competition,” says Sencek.

“Having said that, local manufacturing as a whole is under threat itself; as the Australian dollar retains its strength, cost does have an impact on price sensitive products. We know that we cannot compete on price when it comes to our core Australian Made products but we offer a distinct difference; design, quality and reliability. When it comes to an investment in window furnishings for a consumer, this is critical as you really do get what you pay for. As local manufacturing is such a core part of our business we are passionate about communicating the benefits of locally made products supporting jobs in Australia.”

Wilson Fabrics is also far from complacent about strategising for the future. Last year saw the company invest in a new customer relationship management system from Sales Force, which has exponentially improved intra company communication while also bringing other benefits such as the ability to track sales trends over time. Meanwhile the DC and warehousing facility in Wangaratta has been undergoing lean systems training over the last 12 months, bringing with it new efficiencies and better outcomes for the company’s customer base.

Looking ahead, the company is preparing for the widely predicted m-commerce boom with the launch of a smart phone friendly website set to go live in April, while a Platinum rewards program for Wilson Fabrics’ retailers is set to launch by the new financial year.

“Beyond that our key objectives over the next few years are to further develop our product offering, in particular our blind fabrics, with a focus on technological advances and environmental benefits of these fabrics which leverages off our local manufacturing,” says Sencek. “We have some very exciting developments and ranges planned for release this year that we can’t wait to release to the market.”

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