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ALL WINDOW SOLUTIONS STARTED OPERATING THREE YEARS AGO DESPITE ITS OWNER IAN MESSER BEING TOLD HE WAS 'SILLY' TO BEGIN A NEW VENTURE IN SUCH A DIFFICULT MARKET. DAWN ADAMS REPORTS.

**FACED WITH TOUGH** economic conditions, Ian Messer set about building a new wholesale business with a novel idea. He focused on the important aspects of winning over customers, such as offering the best possible service and quality. But when pressed for a reason why his business has grown during challenging times, he points to something entirely different.

"Obviously, they do enjoy the lollies," he says. Delivered with each order fulfilled are five or six

lollies attached to the invoice, a practice the firm started from its first day in business. "It's a talking point," he says. "We wanted to do something different so we got in contact with a lolly company," he says. Messer laughs when he recounts how customers let him know if the lollies have been forgotten on the invoice. "They ring and ask 'where's our lollies' so we give them extra on the next order," he says. "And we still do Christmas gifts for everyone."

## *Starting* **STARTING FROM SCRATCH**

When Messer decided to start his own business in the Sydney suburb of Penrith three years ago, he began the venture from scratch.

"This business was brand new, we developed it from the ground up," he says. "At the time, a couple of retailers told me it was a silly thing to do because they knew it was tough.

Messer's plan had been to create a business with a small team of two

or three people. And he admits it was tough in the beginning, that people he had been certain would order from his new venture didn't always come on board. "Others would give us a go," he says. "Now, those guys are staying on board so we're working with quite a few customers I had never dealt with before."

With two sales reps on the road in NSW, the firm picked up customers in the state while building additional trade in Tasmania, Victoria and

Queensland as word-of-mouth recommendations gained momentum and advertising attracted an interstate trade.

“Service is core to our business as well as the expertise we offer, with myself having more than 20 years in the industry and our two sales reps, who are on the road, with 30 years plus experience,” he says. “We know the products and how they operate and that’s helped us grow.”

### EXPANDING INTO NEW MARKETS

After two years, the staff numbered five. In the last year, those numbers almost doubled to nine people. “Three years after we started, we’re stronger and introducing more product into the market,” he says. “The product range we offer today is nothing like what we offered in the beginning. At that time, we had four or five key products and now, the offering is endless and we keep adding to it.”

The firm’s initial focus was on curtain tracking as well as equipment for workrooms like curtain tapes and hooks.

“Our growth has come about because we listened to our customers,” he says. Gradually, new products have been offered as customers increasingly requested them. Recent new additions include vertical blinds and awnings. “We don’t just add product and say ‘hopefully it will sell’, we make sure there is a market, that customers will like it and that the price is right,” he says.



Also recently introduced were Designer Vogue 63 mm timber poles in eight colours with a range of finials. This product selection is expected to grow to include holdbacks, joiners, a 90mm pole and pelmets.

The company’s range now also includes roller blinds, panel tracks and cellular blinds as well as motorised curtain tracking and roller blinds. And Messer insists there are still plenty of opportunities to grow the range as he regularly looks for something different, a new style of curtain track or another way to produce a blind. “We add one at a time; if you do too many new things at once, you could fall over,” he says.

When introducing a new product, Messer and the firm’s staff spend time learning about the new offering before introducing it to the market. “We get training from the suppliers in Australia or, if it’s an overseas product, we’ll travel to get further training there,” he says. “We started looking into verticals four months before we introduced them to make sure we had the right product at the right price.”

### THE BLIND PACKAGE

Verticals were added to the range to ensure the firm could offer a more comprehensive blind package. “Verticals help us build our whole blind program,” he says. “Roller blinds are still the biggest blinds we sell but verticals complement them. If someone was doing a house of roller blinds and needed two verticals, we would previously have lost that business because we didn’t make them. By adding verticals, we can offer the whole package.”



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But S-fold curtains in five styles of tracking are the firm’s biggest selling item at the moment. “Today, S-fold is our biggest decorative style of rod,” he says.

Meanwhile, he points to freight as among the industry’s biggest emerging challenges, with companies increasingly reluctant to transport longer lengths. While finished blinds might more often be up to four metres, curtain tracks can reach six or seven metres. “We’ve been through three freight companies this year alone,” he says. “They say they can’t take long lengths anymore, nothing over four metres, and give us a week’s notice and we have to find someone else.”

The firm has set up its own transport to deliver its products within the Sydney metropolitan region and a staff member handles deliveries for the Central Coast, but it has had to act quickly to ensure goods can be delivered consistently to other customers around the country.

Yet another persistent challenge is the cost of imports at around half the price of Australian manufactured goods. “We try to overcome that by service, quality and follow-up if there is a problem,” he says.

But he also suggests it’s important to encourage retailers to buy local. “At the end of the day, I don’t think consumers know if a blind is made here or in China,” he says. “Most of the business is price driven so we need to convince retailers of the benefits, but it’s very difficult.”

Despite these challenges, Messer is committed to growing the business with a specialty in internal and external window furnishings. He has no plans to open a retail store or to sell online, convinced that would be tantamount to competing with his customers, a scenario he strongly opposes. “I don’t agree with a wholesaler having retail stores,” he says. “If you’re a wholesaler, that’s your bread and butter. I’ll never have a retail shop or sell online.”