

Carving out his own niche

Clothing shops' specialty is catering to the working woman

By Larry O'Connor
Staff writer

Sure, a woman who works has all day to shop... just like a farmer has time to count every piece of straw in the barn.

Martin Weiss knows quite well that is not the case. The president and chief executive officer of Hadley Arden, Inc., a Livonia-based women's clothing chain, realized that in the early 1980s. He could see with his own employees — most of whom were women — that shopping was done out of necessity and not as a pastime.

With that in mind, Hadley Arden has made a nice dime because working women don't have time.

"I think they're successful in attracting a certain type of customer," said Mark Rosenfeld, president of Jacobson's. "I don't know how many stores they have now, but they have grown steadily through the years and have carved their own niche in the market."

The market Weiss caters to is quite clear in his mind. The working woman of today has special needs.

"There were a lot of working women who didn't have time for a shopping day," said Weiss, whose clothing chain has 20 locations in the area including Westland, Garden City, Farmington and Livonia. "Their day was Saturday or Sunday and they didn't want to spend it all day shopping."

How does one cater to the working woman of today?

A specialty store, Hadley Arden usually can be found in neighborhood shopping centers. They are the kind of place a woman can go on her lunch hour or on her way home from work. Walk in, buy what she wants, and walk out.

The stores tend to be small. The average Hadley Arden runs about 400,000 square feet.

SINCE THERE isn't an abundance of space, fashion merchandise is priced for the best quality for the least expensive price. Hadley Arden buyers only buy clothing with the best value, so the customer doesn't have to spend time figuring that out, which is best for the dollar herself, Weiss said.

Judging by sales — \$15 million in 1987 alone — Weiss has figured out a way to make being small, yet large in terms of numbers of outlets, pay off. Along with 20 outlets in the Detroit area, plans include adding two or three new stores a year and eventually expanding to other states.

Success has followed Weiss since he merged his family business, Arden, with Hadley stores in 1982. He was indoctrinated into the clothing business at age 12 at the Arden

'She doesn't accept any dramatic changes in style. She's updating her wardrobe. She's constantly reworking her old wardrobe into a new wardrobe. We understand she can't afford to discard her wardrobe every season.' — Martin Weiss Hadley Arden

clothing store his father owned in Port Huron.

Weiss would work after school in the children's department, sorting coat hangers and cleaning up at the end of business day. After graduating from Albion College, he worked 2½ years in Jacobson's retail management program. He eventually took over the family business in Port Huron, which had grown to eight stores.

The retail business has changed considerably from when his father operated Arden. Today, computers register every sale instantly, allowing for management to spot instant trends in sales. In his father's time, they would simply take a pencil and put a check in a black book after every sale.

Some things haven't changed. Weiss learned that from his father.

"It's still a people business," said Weiss, who makes the 1½ commute from Port Huron to Livonia every day. "You have to be able to work at it in order to be successful. I think my father was a people person."

THOSE WHO work closely with Weiss refer to him as a rather modest individual. Unlike some entrepreneurs of his ilk, he doesn't espouse any grand philosophies about life. Married and the father of two children, he is an avid boater and exercises regularly by walking.

Sharply dressed in a navy blue suit and standing erect with both hands tucked in his pockets, Weiss is more comfortable talking about the clientele he serves and knows rather well. Hadley Arden has done two professional customer surveys to find out if the store chain was in tune with those it serves.

The woman who shops at Hadley Arden usually doesn't go with avant-garde trends. She is practical and discriminating when it comes to buying clothes.



STEVE JONES/staff photographer

Martin Weiss, president and chief executive officer of Hadley Arden Inc., a Livonia-based women's clothing chain, realized in the early 1980s that working women shopped of necessity and

not as a pastime. And he has made money addressing that problem.

"She doesn't accept any dramatic changes in style," he said. "She's updating her wardrobe; she's constantly reworking her old wardrobe into a new wardrobe. We understand she can't afford to discard her wardrobe every season."

Weiss understands that because he also serves as the firm's general merchandise manager and as a buyer of outerwear. He's often flying to New York, Dallas and Los Angeles

to find the latest trends. He is assisted in the day-to-day operations by Jim Thistlethwaite, who is merchandise manager, and Dave Goldfarb, who is director of operations.

"The advantage in a specialty store is that we can move a lot faster," Weiss said. "Hopefully, neither we nor our customers will be stuck with a trend going the opposite way. We normally spot it fast... it could be as simple as a color change."

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