



The North West Company

The enterprising spirit of the voyageurs is alive and well in The North West Company, a modern incarnation of the famed firm that helped shape Canada into the nation it is today.

And now this proud company has embarked on a new adventure, taking its brand of stores to the state of Alaska and countries in the South Pacific and the Caribbean — showing that a company headquartered in Winnipeg can be a leader not only nationally, but on the global stage as well.

In Canada, The North West Company operates more than 170 stores, under the names of Giant Tiger, Northern, NorthMart, Valu Lots, Solo, Quickstop, and Crescent Multi Foods.

Edward Kennedy, President and CEO, has been with the The North West Company since 1989. He was also raised in northern Manitoba, giving his current position a unique and valuable insight as a customer.

“Our Winnipeg head office is an important creative and support centre,” says Kennedy, adding the company has 400 employees at its recently renovated 77 Main St. location.

“It’s our Winnipeg-based head office knowledge that is working with our stores in Fiji, Calgary and Nunavut, Guam and the Cayman Islands. If there’s creative signage going up in Alaska, it’s being designed in Winnipeg. Our banking strategies for the U.S.? It’s out of Winnipeg.”

But Kennedy says the key aspect of their business over the past decade has been adapting stores to meet the needs of the local communities, the idea of “flexibility.”

This must be viewed as an innovative measure considering the prevailing attitude of the big box stores is to place identical stores — with the same floor layouts and products — in every community.

The complexity of tailoring stores may have seemed counter-intuitive, but for The North West Company, it has been a recipe for success.

In northern communities, the stores offer not only food and clothing, but items that are needed in everyday life, such as boats, used trucks and cars, ATVs and snowmobiles. In fact, The North West Company has become the largest seller of snowmobiles in Canada.

There are 46 stores that sell gas, while others have pharmacies, quick service prepared food, and most offer financial services, in the form of automated teller machines and cash cards.

Kennedy says that for people who live in the large urban centres in southern Canada, it may seem odd for a store to offer snowmobiles and boats, but, for people up North, these items are not toys.

“In the North, these products are needed for

everyday life. They’re a means for preserving a lifestyle on the land people live,” he says.

In Winnipeg, The North West Company’s Giant Tiger stores have opened in places that were deserted by big box stores.

“We specialize in community retailing — it goes back to our history and we use that to inspire and motivate,” says Kennedy, referring to the voyageurs, who brought goods to the people. “We’d like to see our stores perceived as good neighbours.”

Two popular Giant Tigers in Winnipeg are located downtown, at the corner of Donald Street and Ellice Avenue, and in East Kildonan, at 507 London St.

For many years, with no major business anchoring the strip mall in E.K., it saw few visitors. Now, it is bustling with shoppers young and old.

“We came back to that mall (in E.K.) and, in a way, brought it back to life,” says Kennedy. “We’re not that big that we can’t be nimble. We want to do well in regional markets, community by community. Where that takes us, time will tell.”

The downtown store has also helped revitalize the local community.

“It was an unmet need, especially on the north side of Portage Avenue,” he says. “We had people thanking us on (grand) opening day because we offered jobs and we were offering them low prices right in their neighbourhood and that you didn’t have to take a car or pay cab fare to access.”

The enterprising North West Company has now taken this same business approach to different countries, with very different populations and needs.

In late 2007, the company acquired the Cost-U-Less chain of mid-size stores serving the South Pacific and the Caribbean. For these stores, the same strategy of thinking and acting locally is being employed.

“We’re already used to travelling long distances,” says Kennedy, pointing out the extended canoe trips the voyageurs made to do business.

“Our flexibility allows us to deal with whatever comes our way there, and there are differences. Consider the extreme weather, for example. We deal with blizzards in the North and we deal with typhoons in the South. But we love meeting the challenges.”

The North West Company also strongly believes in giving back to the communities it operates in, and supports traditional activities such as York boat races, community renewal programs, and sports teams, and has raised over \$1 million towards diabetes awareness.



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