

The Right Choice

"I think the biggest thing that you learn as you're coming through is that a good leader builds good teams, and good teams provide good culture."

- Andrew Lewis

After improving the brand and implementing its strategy, Choices Flooring is better targeting the market and is now looking to continue its expansion.

Images courtesy of Choices Flooring

Over the past three years, Choices Flooring has solidified itself as one of the market leaders in retail flooring within Australia. Led by CEO Andrew Lewis, the board of directors, and the executive team, Choices Flooring has embraced technology and changed the way it has marketed itself to consumers.

"The whole retail change that we implemented has been based on selling to the female consumer and making sure that the decision she is trying to make is made easier through our processes," Andrew says.

Andrew started with Newfurn, of which Choices Flooring is a business brand, in late 2012 after leaving his role as managing director of Polyflor Australia. Upon commencement, Andrew and his executive team quickly realised change was needed in order to take Choices Flooring to the next level in retail flooring. With the support of extensive research and by speaking individually to the 144 member retailers, the new approach needed

to ensure it reconnected the brand to the customer.

It started with the tinkering of the brand to include the term 'flooring', then focusing in on a strategy of identifying opportunities to grow the new brand.

In the early 1990s, Choices Flooring as a brand didn't exist. Back then it was known as Carpet Choice, a strong retail brand within the industry. But in the late 2000s, the market had shifted and carpet was quickly losing share to other flooring types such as tiles, timber, and laminates. Coupled with the influx of DIY television shows, consumers were starting to look to alternatives when it came to flooring for their homes.

"It wasn't a major concern to start with," states Andrew. "We already sold many of the alternative flooring types consumers were relating more with; however, our name Carpet Choice insinuated that we sold carpet and nothing else."

The Choices brand was introduced in 2011, which was a step in the

right direction, but still lacked that key category identifier—flooring. It wasn't until Andrew stepped into the role of CEO that the brand changed from Choices to Choices Flooring.

After starting his career at Polyflor Australia, Andrew worked his way up through the ranks and learned about the business and the flooring industry. It was this experience, Andrew says, that gave him the education he needed on leadership, good business, and the running of a company.

"I worked my way through Polyflor Australia, starting as a state manager and eventually becoming managing director of Australasia. I reported directly to the board, which was an interesting time for me. I learned a lot in terms of working with a variety of different business channels—through good and bad times. It was during my time there that I started to appreciate the need for a good business culture. I think the biggest thing that you learn as you're coming through is that a good leader builds good teams, and good teams provide good culture. Part of that is creating a >



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team with one vision and one mission, with everyone knowing their role and playing within the team to achieve the common goal, which is obviously the business strategy, and make sure it works.”

By changing the brand at Choices Flooring, Andrew and the executive team had established a foundation to start implementing the strategy of reconnecting the customer to the brand. “To achieve this reconnection, we first needed to identify the touch points in which our customers, predominantly female, interact with our brand. This started at store level. We needed to start evolving our stores so that we could help our customers better visualise their thoughts and designs.”

As a result, a store evolution plan started rolling out across the Choices Flooring group which included less clutter, modern showrooms, and touch-screen technology. Dubbed the

‘Inspiration Stations’, these screens allow the customer to visualise their dream floor. By simply utilising the many room shots available or uploading their own image, the Inspiration Station allows customers to put any of the 2,400 different floors into a room, thus providing them with a better understanding of what floor or colour would best suit their home. “We are extremely proud of this innovation,” says Andrew. “We are the only flooring retailer within Australia that has taken the time to listen to the customer and provide them with a better understanding.”

Next it was about tightening the marketing strategy to alter the message to the customer that Choices Flooring was as much about design and trend as it was about flooring. “The customer isn’t really buying a floor; what they’re trying to do is create an ambiance within the home. We’re trying to create a design for them; they have a design in mind and we

have to try to help them realise that dream.”

To support this, the team at Choices Flooring created *Inspiring Choices*, the first retail-based flooring magazine. Well into its third edition, *Inspiring Choices* features inspiring trends and room settings where the floor complements the style. “*Inspiring Choices* has been hugely successful. With more than 500,000 distributed copies around Australia, our 104-page magazine was this year fully integrated into major lifestyle magazines such as *Real Living* and *Australian House & Garden*. Next year we are extending this to include *homes+*”

Support for much of the change in marketing was also done online. Providing customers with greater information, styles, and trends, the Choices Flooring website now boasts one of the largest selections of flooring online of any retailer within Australia. “We knew we needed to take the next step and

change the perception that customers had of flooring retailers—that of old blokes displaying rolls of carpet in stores,” states Andrew.

Enhancing the customer experience was one thing, but ensuring this was not lost among the store retailers was another. Training and business systems within the group needed enhancement in order to maintain this retail renaissance. “We have recently invested heavily into a new business-operating system for our stores. This system has been purpose built and is not something you can buy off the shelf. Dubbed the BOS, this system is a utopian business solution for the day-to-day running of our retailers’ businesses.”

With its showrooms meeting consumer expectations and a comprehensive business-operating system in place, the training of staff was another key aspect that needed addressing at Choices

Flooring. “Learning and development is vital to our success. In 2013, we were awarded a government grant to provide our retailers the chance to achieve a Certificate Three in Interior Decoration,” states Andrew. Based on this success, Choices Flooring has partnered with an RTO and established a training academy to assist staff in-store and attract new people and apprentices to the industry.

The overall strategy has been extremely successful for Choices Flooring. Its magazine and social media presence are giving more awareness to its new brand and targeting the right audience. For the future, the team is looking at expanding the Choices Flooring brand into New Zealand and then possibly worldwide.

“Expanding into regions within Australia where we are unrepresented is well and truly on track. With 144 Choices Flooring stores already operating, we have



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probably enough space within Australia for about 20 more before we start eroding into our stores’ retail trading boundaries. As a result, we’ll be working in the next 12 to 18 months to bring this model to the New Zealand market.

“It’s funny. When I go overseas and I show people our retail strategy and what we are doing in stores and how we communicate to the consumers, they say, ‘We don’t have anything like this anywhere in America or Europe. When are you bringing the strategy here?’ And although that’s probably a bit far off, there’s no reason why the whole retail strategy of Choices Flooring can’t be global.”

Ultimately, though, Andrew believes Choices Flooring’s success comes down to the willingness to change and reinvent the company. The team looked at their business, did research, and changed it to fit better with their customers, despite the challenges involved with that.

“It’s a big change. I think one of the reasons why we have been successful is we keep looking at it and we keep challenging ourselves. Change is always happening, and you’ve got to be able to adapt and be able to guide the whole business and everyone in it, from the executive team all the way down to the staff at retail level. That’s what sets us apart. We’ve embraced what our market is, and we’re working hard to ensure we continue to be the best in the industry.”

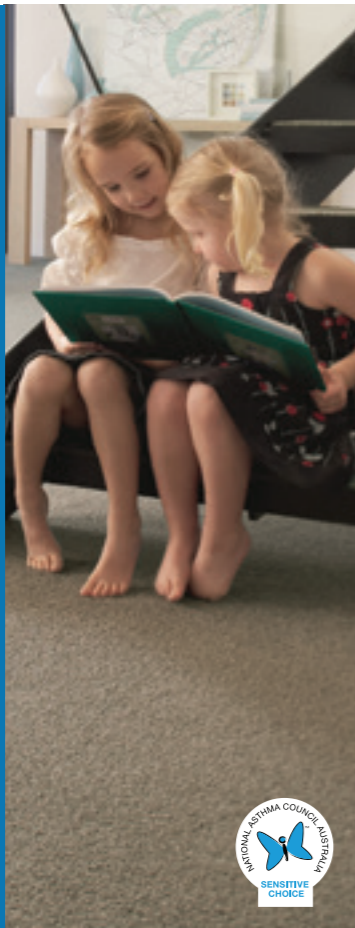
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