



# An Inspirational Entrepreneur

Hans Mueller founded a successful retail chain after he fled Europe as a refugee during World War II and made his way to Australia in 1947, building his future company with a dream and a lot of hard work.

Images by Scott Ehler

**C**EO of Lowe's, Hans Mueller, has the story of a true entrepreneur. He came to Australia with no money, almost no contacts, and with only his sheer determination to make a life for himself. Despite the obstacles he faced, Hans managed to buy Lowe's in 1981, now one of the most well-known menswear retail chains in the country.

Hans fled Europe as a refugee and ended up in China. "Leaving our home in Vienna, we were lucky to get on the ship to go to Shanghai amongst 20,000 other refugees. In Shanghai, I lived in great poverty for eight years; but it was also there I met my now late wife, Certy."

His journey to Australia, though, sounds like a story plucked from a romance novel: he met a girl in Shanghai and followed her to a new country.

"Certy had an opportunity after the war to go to Sydney because

her relatives were living there. And she promised me faithfully that she would do everything in her power to get me to come and join her, which eventually I did.

"I was really a boat person. I came on a boat—I had a permit to come to Australia issued by the Australian government; however, it had a clause in it that said I had to be married within three months of arrival, otherwise I would be deported back to Shanghai. So, I was a male war bride."

Now 90 years old, he has come a long way since he was forced to flee his native Austria as a young man before World War II. "Because of my religion, I was kicked out of Austria together with my parents, and my father was sent to a concentration camp," Hans explains.

Once Hans married and settled in Sydney, he turned his mind to how he was going to provide for his new wife. Through chance, he

decided to go into the menswear business, and opened his first menswear store in Sydney in 1948. His next step was to open a second shop for his father and mother to manage.

He continued opening more stores, creating the Manhattan retail chain, which would later be incorporated into Lowe's upon its acquisition. Slowly, the Manhattan empire grew to 22 shops.

"In 1981, I bought 37 Lowe's shops, which were founded in 1898 by an Irish immigrant William Lowe; and, with my 22 Manhattan shops, I then had a total of 59 shops.

"I eventually dropped the Manhattan name and every shop was branded Lowe's."

Since Hans opened the first store more than 65 years ago, he has always treated the stores and his staff like family. Hans is very passionate about ensuring every



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employee is included, and he values the opinions of his staff highly. “I believe in everybody being on the inside, not people being on the outside looking in. As far as Lowes is concerned, and I call it Team Lowes, everybody is on the team and, as long as you are putting in your best, you are going to be on the first team, and you are not going to be relegated to the bench—and, as yet, nobody has been.

“I consult widely. I don’t make snap decisions. I have some very knowledgeable people around me that help me to make the right decisions. We discuss everything in great detail and if I am not happy, I would say ‘now, let’s move on’. That is the style I have practiced all my life—and while I am still here, it will continue in that way. It’s inclusive; everybody is part of the team.”

This strategy has worked well for Hans, with Lowes having a small staff turnover, and his

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- Hans Mueller

employees staying loyal to the company. Hans treats them well, pays them well and, in return, has some of the most dedicated retail staff in the country. “Loyalty is important,” Hans says. “And many of my staff have been with me for 50 years.

“This is the only job that they ever had. We have approximately 2,500 people on the payroll and we hardly ever lose anybody. People love the job; are well paid and well treated and, as I said, they are part of the team, and they *feel* that they are part of the team. They really appreciate being on the inside. In other words, we value their opinion about the business.”

One of the other things Lowes is well known for is its iconic advertising. For years now, Lowes has used prominent National Rugby League (NRL) players—like Paul Vautin, Daryl Broham, and Mark McGaw—in their advertisements, all proclaiming the company’s now famous motto ‘At

Lowes!’. Hans says the idea to use football players was from his daughter Linda; and although he was unsure at the beginning, it has proved to be an effective marketing strategy.

“You know, the footballers are getting a bit older now; some are not actually playing anymore—but, to our customer base, they are still the footballers. Because when our customers were younger, those people were actually players. They get up to all sorts of antics in the ads and it’s a folksy type of advertising. We tell the people what they should buy at a price that they can afford—good quality merchandise—and it’s worked for us very well. We’ve worked with footballers now for 20 years and a few of the players are still the same.

“It’s done really well and we are reluctant to change it because, when they come on the television screen, people know right away that it is a Lowes ad. They are part

of Lowes; part of the Lowes family. We are also going to do a little bit of brand advertising now; in other words, we are going to advertise the Lowes brand more often to remind people we are still around, and that we now have 200 locations all over the country, and we have got the right merchandise for them at the right price.”

Now, with e-commerce and online marketing, Lowes is changing some of its advertising. The company has embraced social media and has had a website since 1998. Online sales are increasing but, unlike many other retail outlets, Lowes still has the majority of its customers shopping in physical stores.

“We are online and we are on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter,” Hans says. “And all the TV commercials go to many stations. The internet has some affect; about 4 per cent of our business comes through online. And then, we also have



something unique. We have a tablet in every shop, and if the shop doesn’t have an item, they order it immediately. That also accounts for 4 per cent of our business. But the vast majority of customers still like the bricks and mortar; they come to the shops and they like to be served.”

For the future, Hans says that although his time is coming to an end, he wants the Lowes name to live on and for the company to continue expanding. “We have a very big country and we’re not just in Sydney—we are in a lot of other places. As we have become more well known, we have been offered opportunities and we have been

offered sites in shopping centres. If the price is right, and the position is right, and the timing is right, then we go for it. As I said, at the moment we have 200 stores nationwide and the expansion has been ongoing. For instance, a newly refurbished store in Gosford, New South Wales, just opened last week—one of several still to open this year. It is neverending, and will continue even long after I have retired”. ◦

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