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JACK MITCHELL

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A Magazine to Benefit the Emergency Department at Greenwich Hospital

JACK MITCHELL

The Consummate Family Man Talks About Business, Community and Passing the Torch to The Next Generation of Mitchells

He has helped create a small family retail empire, but Jack Mitchell prefers to wear a simple cloth measuring tape as his signature accessory.

"I wear it as a reminder of where we come from and as a symbol of our philosophy to measure all aspects of a customer's life, not just the size of their clothing," said Mitchell, who along with his brother, Bill, has transformed their parents' mom and pop business from a store that sold three styles of \$65 suits and a handful of shirts and ties into one of the largest independent family of stores in the United States selling high-end designer clothing and accessories.

According to Mitchell, the secret to the success of the Mitchell Family of Stores — Mitchells in Westport, Richards in Greenwich, Marshs in Huntington and Wilkes Bashford in Palo Alto and San Francisco — is outstanding personalized customer service, or what he likes to refer to as "hugs."

For Mitchell, the author of *Hug Your Customers* and *Hug Your People*, hugs are more than just a physical embrace, although he advocates that as well. His brand of hugs means going the extra mile to develop a personal relationship with customers. It means befriending customers to share everything from birthdays, anniversaries and hobbies, to the names and ages of their children and the intricacies of their professions. It means sending his own navy blue overcoat to a businessman on a trip out of town when the store is out of stock, and arranging for a suit to be hand delivered to a customer in Japan who needs it for a business meeting. Associates, as employees of the stores are called, have been known to take a wardrobe to a female executive's office, and deliver a specific blouse to a customer staying in a hotel in Boston.

Hugging doesn't have to be a herculean effort, though. It can be as simple as remembering a client's name the second time they come into the store, a favorite shoe designer, an expedited bit of tailoring, or going to a client's home for a closet makeover. In short, a hug, explained Mitchell, is anything that might exceed a customer's expectation. That includes welcoming customers into a store as one would welcome a friend into a home. Shoppers are offered cappuccino or water and there is always a bowl of candy on the counter for a quick sugar fix. Moreover, the stores are designed with accoutrements typically found in luxury homes.

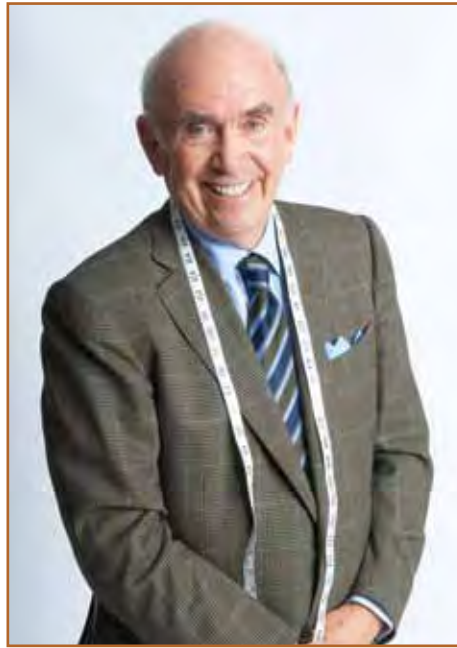
At Richards, this comes in the form of a massive marble staircase, carpeting and richly upholstered club chairs. There is a separate seating area equipped with a television for a spouse or friend to wait while a customer is fitted, or to keep children occupied while their parents shop.

"When someone wakes up in the morning needing a new suit or a dress for a party, we want them to think of us first," explained Mitchell.

Customers are not the only ones getting hugs, however. According to Mitchell, employee longevity within the company is a key component to their successful business model. While

there are goals and expectations set for associates, the Mitchell ethos of building personal relationships and treating people with respect extends to the employees as well. There are no time cards to clock, no binder of rules and regulations and no mold to fit. The only requirement is that they be nice people and possess a positive attitude and a willingness to learn. "We wouldn't be anywhere if we didn't have our wonderful associates," said Mitchell, "they become part of our family."

Associates regularly receive hand written notes from all the Mitchells for birthdays, anniversaries, and for giving outstanding customer service—hugs. Moreover, they are given latitude to take care of important personal matters such as attending a child's sports game, recital or other family occasion or for illness or a death in the family. Iwona Kelly, who has been an associate in the shoe department for 13



Jack Mitchell

years, recalled her first year at the store when her mother was dying in Poland. "I went back to Poland six times that year to be with my mother and everyone was so gracious about it. They never made me feel like I was doing something wrong or that I might lose my job. They told me to take care of my mother and that they would be there for me. I have been dedicated to them ever since," she said. "I've worked in retail for nearly 25 years and I've never worked in a place where you are treated with such respect as a person."

Judging from the longevity of the sales force, it appears that the hugs work. Dominick Condoleo, master tailor, began with the first Mitchell shop in Westport 53 years ago. Richard's manager, Jeff Kozak, has been with the company for 29 years, Rita Roman, 26 years, and the list goes on. When Bill's youngest son, Tyler, who manages the San Francisco Wilkes Bashford



All in the family. Two generations of Mitchells: Bill, Tyler, Scott, Bob, Jack, Chris, Linda, Russ and Andrew.

store, got married in Santa Barbara at the beginning of August, a number of employees flew out to California to celebrate the happy event with the entire Mitchell clan.

And though the business has grown from three employees to 267, at its heart it is a family business. All of the seven Mitchell sons — four are Jacks, three are Bills — have worked at one of the stores and six still do so today. Seven years ago, Jack and Bill turned the assets, real estate and day to day operations over to this third generation of Mitchells. Jack's sons, Bob and Russ, share the title as president of the overall company while his son, Andrew, is the vice president of marketing. Bill's son Scott is the vice president at Richards, Marshs is run by son Chris and Tyler heads up Wilkes Bashford.

And Jack's wife, Linda, whom he calls the "center of my universe," altered the Mitchells stores forever by introducing and expanding the women's departments, which now make up well more than half of annual sales.

Joked Mitchell, "I've never had to take time off to spend with my family because I am surrounded by them all the time."

While many family businesses fall victim to emotional infighting, the Mitchell family business has set up a structure, with the help of family business guru David Bork, so that decisions are made in the best interest of the business, not the family. There are weekly meetings attended by all family members who work in the business to discuss both successes and challenges and, with the help of an outside advisory board, weigh in on strategic business decisions. There is also a Family Council. But a place at the business table is not a Mitchell's right

by birth. Before working in the family business, offspring must cut their teeth for five years at an outside company. And if they decide to enter the business there must be an actual job opening — they are not entitled to a job just because they are a Mitchell.

Said Mitchell of the family succession, "They were well prepared to take over and Bill and I couldn't be more proud of how they have handled the transition."

Serving the community, however, is more than just selling clothing, Mitchell noted. Personal and professional philanthropy is an important element to the Mitchell presence in the communities where they do business. Jack and Bill's parents, company founders Ed and Norma Mitchell, set the

standards for community service in the early years and the family has followed their lead ever since. The business routinely donates to a wide swath of

local charities and the stores are open to host fundraising receptions for charitable causes. In addition, each family member lends their personal support to schools and other youth education programs, Greenwich Hospital, cancer research, environmental organizations and more. Jack Mitchell has served on the board of trustees at Greenwich Hospital for the past six years.

Bill's son, Scott, who lives in Greenwich, leads the charge in the Greenwich community personally and for Richards. "We do it because we can and we want to do something positive for the community," said Scott. By August of this year, for example, Richards had opened its doors to 12 separate organizations.

Although Jack and Bill are less involved in the day to day operations, they show no signs of slowing down. Mitchell said

"I feel VERY BLESSED to have had businesses in wonderful communities and to be SURROUNDED BY FAMILY. I pinch myself every day," he said.

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he still feels like he owns the business and makes it a point to be at Richards on most Saturdays to welcome customers to the store. And he still jumps out of bed every morning between 4:30 and 6:00 am to look over the sales numbers and the names of customers shopping from the previous day. "I think of it as a kind of game. How did we do compared to this time last week, last month, last year and how can we do better?"

These days his primary role, and Bill's, is in strategic planning for the future, from expanding the business into new markets to establishing an online store that can deliver the same kind of personal attention that has become the Mitchells trademark. And, with his oldest grandson starting college at Wesleyan, his alma mater, there's the fourth generation of Mitchells to consider. "But we have nine years to figure that out," he laughed.

With more spare time on his hands, Mitchell is writing his next book, keeping fit with tennis and daily workouts and making rounds on the speaker circuit sharing his unique message of hugs with such global businesses as Nike, Starbucks, Wells Fargo and Cole Hahn, to name a few.

And while he is teaching the ins and outs of building personal relationships as a standard for good business, he never discounts the role luck has played in his life.

"I feel very blessed to have had businesses in wonderful communities and to be surrounded by family. I pinch myself every day," he said. ♡



Central staircase at Richards, Greenwich.