



Putting the customer first

By Jim Carr

Everything was set for the grand opening of Ed Garman's new enterprise – except for one small detail. He still didn't have a name for it.

A lot of names came to mind but nothing really clicked until he was driving home with his family from the U.S. with supplies for his showroom when he spotted a Home Depot outlet and then an Office Depot.

"Nail Depot," he said, trying it on for size.

"That's it, we all cried out at the same time," recalls his daughter, Caroline, who, along with her husband, Dave Alcock, are taking a more active role in the business.

The name stuck and Nail Depot was born. That was 26 years ago and the company has been growing steadily ever since.

It was a big change for Ed, whose first job was in a film lab in Toronto, when he immigrated to Canada from England.



Before deciding on what business to go into, Ed studied a number of business opportunities, and settled on the nail business when he discovered there was no one supplier that offered all the products a nail salon needed under one roof.

Ed set out to fill that gap. It was a lucky hunch that made him one of the great success stories in Canada's beauty industry.

His first office and showroom was a 10-by-10-foot room behind the back of his wife's nail salon.

It was tough going at the beginning that saw him on the road visiting salons in the Golden Horseshoe area of southern Ontario and beyond. Nail depot clients order from coast to coast and throughout the USA.

But he had three big things going for him – charm and the gift of gab; competitive pricing for his products; and absolute honesty in his business and personal dealings that kept customers coming back again, and again.

"We had no idea what other suppliers were charging for their products and had to decide on our own what to price them at."

He settled on 40 points and less and kept it there. It made a difference from the outset. "People came to us because our prices were super competitive and they knew we were honest in our dealings with them."

"I believe we need to be fair and courteous to others, whether in business or in life. I try to treat everyone as I would like to be treated myself."

He also did a lot of research into the best products and who the manufacturers were, going out of his way to meet them, even traveling to their place of business, whether to New Jersey or California.

"He's a real charmer with the gift of gab," says Caroline. Men and women warm to him on sight. He's also a great listener and radiates a kind of caring people feel comfortable with and respond to.

He has one mantra that has served him well in business, and which he keeps reminding staff: "The most important client you have is the one you're talking to now."

Recently, an owner of a local spa came to Nail Depot, looking for a product from BCL. Nail Depot didn't stock that product but ordered it the same day. "When she returned and found that we were able to provide it for her, she was absolutely ecstatic."

Ed had a lot of help from his wife, Sylvia, who operated her own nail salon since 1970, providing him with insights into the needs of nail salons that proved invaluable, especially in the early years.

His showroom today in Pickering, just east of Toronto, is much larger and brighter. His trademark mustache has turned gray but it still has a smile of its own. His product offerings have grown larger over the years but Ed is still the same person and his clients appreciate that. It's the one constant in his business.

His mustache was a Centennial project in 1967. He shaves it off from time to time but somehow it always grows it back.

Like other areas of the beauty industry, the nail business has also changed dramatically over the years, with the rate of change coming faster and faster today.

The biggest change, he feels, has been the move from UV to LED curing. "We don't polish much anymore. Today, it's gel polish, which is baked on, and available only at salons ... LED was a big change. It takes just two minutes to put on and lasts three to four weeks."

With UV, it took two minutes for each of the four coats – eight minutes to bake on. With LED, each coat takes just 30 seconds or two minutes in total. "Customers just don't have the time today. We can now do a set of nails in 30 minutes – full colours and smudge free – thanks to LED."

What's more, he adds, LED products are just starting.

Also, with gel, there's no smudging, and no wearing off

on natural nails. Today, a client can get up from the treatment, put her hands in her purse, grab her keys, and head out the door – without any danger of smudging her nails.

With foot nail treatments, it pretty well lasts until you take it off. Even then, he says, it has to be taken off professionally, either by filing or soaking.

"Soaking is better," says daughter, Caroline. "We get phone calls all the time from people wrecking their nails because they don't know how to remove it safely."

The nail salon business, adds Caroline, is changing rapidly as it tries to keep up with the changing needs of its clients, and the growing trend towards individualism – especially in terms of colours.

"If you have a manufacturer with 70 colours, nail technicians can create just about any colour you would like. It's a simple matter of using three drops of this colour and two or one or two colours of another, and before you know it, you've got a new colour," says Ed.

The big challenge for the nail technician is keeping track of how she created the colour for each of her clients. The simple answer is keeping a written record for each different colour for every client but that's not always easy in a busy salon.

The change today is being driven by young people as well as new offerings from manufacturers and suppliers that reflect the interest of younger clients:

- Mood gels that change colour with the heat of your hands.
- Glitter and 3 D charms.

• Nail decoration and changing decorations frequently, perhaps to go with an outfit, or to reflect different themes, like Christmas.

• "No 10 nails are the same," adds Caroline. "A lot of younger people are doing two or four of their nails – perhaps ring fingers, pinkies or thumbs – in completely different colours. They're making it a lot of fun."

Much of it is inspired by the social media, she says. Kids today will try something different and they'll post it. They like to play with their nails and post the results on Instagram or FaceBook.

In addition to BCL, the Nail Depot carries a wide range of brands like Gehwol, Graham, NSI, INM, GiGi, ALLpresan, Perfection, OPI, China Glaze, as well as Nail Depot's own brands of polishes, wax, implements, etc.

Nail Depot's gel polishes come in 56 colours – "one of the best in the world," says Ed, noting that his gel polishes are not only cheaper but come in a larger in size.

If you get to know Ed for any length of time, you'll hear his favourite word – "Plonker".

And for as long as he can remember, he has always had a special love for nature in all its forms – plants, trees, insects, animals and especially birds.

"Birds just seemed easier to follow. They're everywhere. I have books about birds from many countries. When I see a bird, I try to take a

picture of it and use the photo to ID it."

"They're all favourites to me in different ways – in colour, song or even how they fly."

In Mexico, where he and his wife vacation frequently, his network of friends there refer to him as "the birdman".

He is not a typical businessman, says Caroline, who recalls seeing one of his customers who came in to buy an expensive item. "He didn't feel it was right for her and talked her out of it. For my father, doing what was best for the customer was always more important than making the sale.

"It's what got him to where he is today."

