

# ABED'S - THE CUTTING EDGE SINCE 1964.

A CASE STUDY ON HOW THE ABED FAMILY BUILT A SUCCESSFUL RETAIL BRAND IN BARBADOS.

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It all started with Shouket Abed who grew up in a poor village in the Middle East, with a dream of owning a large beautiful store built of marble that people flocked to. In the late 1940's when he moved to the Caribbean, a youthful Mr. Abed showed his adventurous streak by accepting the assignment of a traveling salesman, going door to door with a suitcase selling in the country. This is where he taught himself English, became street smart and gained vital customer insights.

In 1963, with his wife Milly, three kids, and a dream of becoming successful in the Barbadian market, Mr. Abed ventured into the world of entrepreneurship. The Abeds partnered with a family member believing that they could put down roots and create a strong retail business. Little did they know that this dream would be short lived, and it would all come crashing down. They were operating on Broad Street at the time, and the market did not respond as hoped. What they were trying to sell was already covered by existing retailers, and customers already had their favourites. After a year of trying, they ultimately failed, and lost everything they had. Worse, their partner pulled out, and left them to carry the burden alone.

## **NEW BEGINNINGS**

Not to be defeated, Mr. Abed, dynamic and determined, convinced his bank to invest in their business idea: selling better fabric at competitive prices, and targeting a wider cross section of Barbadians in comfortable surroundings. In 1964, Abed's was relaunched at #32 Swan Street, targeting the right audience, and opened the first air-conditioned store in Bridgetown. That was a big deal, especially in the hot Caribbean climate of Barbados.

Mr. Abed was a visionary in that sense, creating a destination that customers wanted to visit. He stocked the store with quality merchandise from around the world. Armed with a beaming smile, warm welcome and outgoing personality, Mr. Abed was the type of man that "could sell ice to eskimos". He was a risk taker and had the grit required to make a business work and form good relationships, backed by the sound book-keeping and organisational skills of Mrs. Abed which allowed the business to thrive. They were a good team, and she was his anchor.

## **CUSTOMER INSIGHTS AS A MARKETING TOOL**

As the years went on, Mr. and Mrs. Abed grew their business by listening to their customers, and outthrusting the competition. If the competitors were travelling once a year to buy, they travelled twice. They understood the value of staying fashionable, meeting their customer needs, and doing everything to keep them happy. They essentially built a 'people brand'; interacting with people of every race, class and creed who came into Abed's to shop, listening to what they wanted and making them feel special. This was one of the hallmarks of their business success.

Mr. Abed wanted his store to be synonymous with elegance and beauty, and this was reflected in his fabric choices, and the marketing ventures he undertook. He would go to New York to select fabric himself and once brought back a single small shipment of fabric that cost an unheard of \$6,000, which could buy a brand new car in the 1960's. When other stores got several containers full of material, he would get half of a container for the same money. Nonetheless, people responded to his taste for quality over quantity and Abed's prospered.

When Barbados' Independence came in 1966, a new culture was born. There was a new sense of pride across the land, which resulted in demand for homegrown businesses. Abed's was able to beat out the colonial businesses that previously dominated the market, because they had a real connection to the people. They were seen as a homegrown brand, and an organic part of society.

## **GENERATIONAL SUCCESS**

Mr. and Mrs. Abed built a strong organisational culture that has lasted from generation to generation. Their son, Mr. "Eddy" Abed, as he is affectionately known, steers the ship today. Like his parents, he deeply understands the necessity of keeping an open mind and adapting to current trends in order to remain relevant and desirable. It is this open-mindedness that allows the company to keep evolving and to embrace new ideas from the younger team members, while also adapting to new ways of doing things to increase efficiency and keep customers happy.

The business is now onto its third generation, with the founders' grandchildren now assisting in the running of Abed's. They contribute heavily to the operations, buying, and marketing of the brand, and their university education provides new avenues to take the company forward.

Abed's' Swan Street, Bridgetown store has tripled in size since it began in 1964. They have expanded from just Lot #32 Swan Street, to now include lots #30 and #31 Swan Street as well. However, the expansion didn't stop there. In 2003, they recognised the need for another store. The market was changing, and once again, Abed's was there to listen. Customers wanted the opportunity to shop outside of Bridgetown, and the convenience of late opening hours, which could be facilitated at Sheraton Mall - in a more upscale part of Barbados. Abed's has described the expansion as one of the best things they did for the brand.

When asked about their ability to adapt to the ever-changing market, Mr. Eddy Abed remarked,

“We're a 55-year-old company. It's tough to move a big boat as swiftly, as briskly and as effortlessly as you would a little fishing boat. That's always the challenge, so you have to ensure that you have a team of people who understand your vision, buy into your plan, and work with you to achieve it.

You can't ever forget what brought you to the party. What brought us to the party is to provide quality merchandise and service to our customers. And the day we forget that is the day we lose the game. So we're constantly listening, adapting, and growing.”

## **MARKETING THE BUSINESS**

Early on in the business, Mr. Abed's untrained but intrinsic flair for marketing led him to embark on several initiatives. These included: partnering with the now defunct British West Indies Airways (BWIA) to offer free trips to New York to the winners of store competitions, sponsoring contestants in the Jaycees and Independence Queen Shows in the 1960s and '70s, and then becoming a major sponsor of Crop Over from its inception. These initiatives created a buzz and positive PR that helped elevate and differentiate the Abed's brand.

Over the years, Abed's has understood the value of marketing, and has invested heavily in this aspect of their business using several media channels such as print, television, radio, live events and now online, through their website and social media platforms. As keen observers, they realize that their customer base covers a broad spectrum of society, and thus, need an inclusive approach to marketing communications where they can reach several different types of customers.

Abed's has embarked on some bold and creative moves to build a legendary brand. A study of 40 Barbadians conducted by Barbadian marketing firm, Kreativ Edge, was executed to test the market's understanding and relation to the Abed's brand. The focus

group spanned 4 age groups namely: Generation Z, Millennials, Generation X, and Baby Boomers, and revealed that Abed's has built a solid household name for itself. The participants all agreed that the Abed's brand is one that is known all across Barbados, with the average Barbadian having a clear understanding of what Abed's retail. Some participants in the study, mainly those in the Generation X and Baby Boomers groups recall Abed's having fashion shows that blocked the streets of Bridgetown, creating a large and exciting spectacle for all to see. The younger participants in the Millennial and Generation Z cohorts mostly recall Abed's from their radio and television ads, and yearly calendars. Feedback from Generation X and Baby Boomers also revealed that Abed's calendars have also proven to be an excellent marketing tool for all age groups. The Abed's calendars were described as "vibrant and beautifully designed", and mothers and grandmothers in particular look forward to receiving them each year. The calendars are prominently positioned in the home, mostly on the refrigerator, and this results in them being seen frequently throughout the day. Thus, aiding in brand retention for Abed's.

Abed's has built awareness of its brand through mass marketing techniques, positive word of mouth, and more recently, online where they are growing their digital presence. The company also invests in traditional advertising throughout the year, and strongly believes in giving back and being good corporate citizens. As a brand they actively support youth development through the DARE programme as well as various school uniform initiatives and cultural projects such as interior design shows, pageants, and even a national spelling bee competition, often unbeknownst to the public. The entire group of participants in the study, when asked how they first learned about Abed's, reported that it was through their mothers and grandmothers taking them to Abed's as young children. It is described as a brand that "you just know". Abed's has permeated the fabric of Barbadian culture, and has become an integral part of Barbadian community.

In recent times, Abed's has made significant investments into its digital marketing efforts. The company has built a website and a social media presence on Facebook and Instagram, which are both frequently updated with new content. Although they have a collective following of over 28,000 users to date, the average engagement in terms of comments, shares, and specifically Facebook likes per post is relatively low in comparison to the audience size. Abed's will have to work on actively engaging more of its online audience, especially when seeking to capture the next generation of buyers.

## **REBRANDING**

In 2014, when Abed's celebrated 50 years of business, the brand made some significant enhancements to reflect this milestone. They revamped their logo and slogan to be more modern and to reflect the direction that the brand was going in. The logo now has a simpler font, and a more sophisticated look, while the slogan was changed from "The Cutting Edge of Fashion" to "The Cutting Edge since 1964". The word "fashion" in the slogan was limiting, especially when the company's aim is to be on the cutting edge of every aspect of their business from home furnishings to school uniforms, menswear, fabrics and haberdashery. Placing "1964" in the slogan also reinforces the legacy of Abed's, and solidifies the trust that customers have in the brand, since it has been around for so many years.

Abed's not only modernised their logo, but also their advertising aesthetic and tone of voice. The brand is known for being friendly and helpful, while being inspirational and upbeat experts in their field. They have actively sought to create a consistent experience from their advertising through to the shopping experience in the stores. The updates to their stores have meant that they are more open plan, brighter, and the displays are much more in keeping with the modern overseas shopping experience.

## **THE FUTURE**

Abed's has big plans for the future, most of which cannot be revealed as yet. However, the retail brand intends to continue to be market leader by constantly improving its product offering and listening to customers. "What brings us to the party is our customers. We take their feedback. We listen and we act accordingly", said Mr. Eddy Abed.

Abed's has kept up with the times by building a brand of substance, modernizing their stores and more recently sourcing organic and recycled fabrics as well as investing in reusable bags for its customers. These bags prominently feature the company logo, and they aid in brand awareness as customers reuse them and walk around with the bags.

As the company continues to grow they are certainly seeking new opportunities to evolve the brand, while remaining grounded in knowing their humble beginnings, and what brought them success.

In closing, Mr. Eddy Abed noted, "Even though the business looks different, a portrait of my father, the founder and a photo of Abeds in the sixties is kept in the office to remind me of where we came from".