

VCF Department Stores RP 10/4/91 p. 9

Ford's launches a new era

But new president uses founder as guide

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The Charles A. Ford Co., the oldest continually-operating department store in California, is trying to find ways to survive in a time when many department stores are not surviving.

To do that, its new president is looking back to Charles A. Ford himself. What would he have done?

"He really responded to whatever the customers needed," said president and chief executive officer Jim Vicars, 42. In the 1850s, that was everything from dry goods to banking to shoes to blasting powder.

For Vicars, who has run his own specialized sporting goods shops, and held top management positions for specialty retailers and for Nordstrom, the department store of specialty stores, that means one thing: going specialty.

"So often in business, we get complacent and stop listening to the customers," he said.

"But customers vote every day with green ballots, and they have been electing specialty stores and kicking out of office the old department stores."

Specialty stores such as Victoria's Secret, the lingerie catalogue-and-shopping-mall success story, and Vicars' former employer, Williams-Sonoma, the nation's largest retailer of home goods, are examples of smart retailers, Vicars said.

"Specialty stores are always looking for special customers and merchandising and creating an environment that draws that particular customer," he said. "Department stores have been the antithesis of that."



Mike McCollum

JIM VICARS — Keeping the faith

But what does that mean for its flagship store, the anchor of downtown Watsonville?

Departments will be unnamed, for starters. Gone are general departments such as "Domestics" and "Linens," store officials say.

Sections of the store will be organized so that table linens go with place settings, and bed linens are displayed near mattresses, for example. Each department will have a dash of drama, excitement and fun, Vicars said.

"We're going to try to create such a presence (in each section) that we're not going to need to name (the departments)," Vicars said. For example, "When juniors see the videos and lights, see the clothes, they're not going to need to be told that that's *their* department."

The children's clothes and toy departments will have a number of surprises. A faux wall separating the two looks a lot like it's made of Leggos; something that looks a lot like a yellow brick road winds through the clothes area. Vicars said plans include a "kids' art wall."

"Ford's used to say, 'Here it all is, come and get it,'" said Hal Hyde, senior vice president. "We can't do that anymore."

The Ford's tradition of accommodating other businesses under its roof will continue, featuring Buckhart's candy, Vicky's Beauty Salon, a cafe run by the Bake Rite Bakery and a new travel agency run by Charlene Shaffer, former executive director of the Pajaro Valley Chamber of Commerce.

Burdick's will not return to the Watsonville store, and Ford's will no longer carry major appliances, such as refrigerators, Hyde said. It has also dropped its textiles (cloth and yarn) department. Managers haven't decided yet whether it will carry stereos and televisions.

Ford's will continue to carry smaller household appliances and furniture, and will have large houseware, giftware and bedding departments, Hyde said.

The leasees won't all be ready to open when Ford's does, Hyde said.

Old customers will see many changes

One of the first things Ford's Department Store's new president and chief executive officer did when he came on board several weeks ago was to cancel millions of dollars worth of merchandise orders.

Jim Vicars said that the discarded orders, meant to supply Ford's for the holiday shopping season, did not reflect the new store's planned focus on specialty fashions and housewares.

"We got together with the store managers and buyers, and they had some very strong opinions about our customers' ideas," Vicars said.

Vicars also did a little scout-

ing at Watsonville High School to see what local teenagers were wearing. In the future, Vicars said he'd like to set up a teenagers' advisory council that would tell Ford's what brands and looks teenagers want.

The result of the talks and the scouting in the first couple weeks was the canceled orders and a new start in the market.

"There was one line of clothing we've been after for 10 years, and haven't been able to get," Vicars said. "When we showed this company what we were doing to attract their target customer, we opened an account that day."

Vicars said that Ford's wants to keep its focus as a local merchant, and in fact, says he wants people to call him if they aren't finding what they want.

That underscores an apparent contradiction in the vision of a specialty/department store — Ford's is hoping it will appeal to a broad-based market.

When asked about plans to reach the Hispanic market, for example, Vicars said that "We're going to reach the Hispanic market just the same way we reach everyone else — we're just going to offer tasteful goods at reasonable prices."

Vicars is confident about the

decision to upgrade during a recession, even in Watsonville, which has also had to recover from the earthquake and increased competition from the Capitola Mall.

"These are tough times for everyone, but people are still buying clothes, they still want to look good, and they still want their houses to look good," he said.

"We're always going to be a store that offers good value — we're just going to offer it on much better merchandise," he said.

—Susanna Heckman