

Canadian Tire Retail: It's all about people

Andrea Marshall and her husband Jeff purchased the Canadian Tire store in Bolton three years ago, we recently sat down with Andrea to find out about their business journey, how they ended up in Caledon and why they chose to invest in the iconic Canadian franchise.

Tell me about Canadian Tire. How does it work? Is yours a typical franchise?

There's over 500 stores in Canada which are all independently owned and operated as franchises. You can't buy the store location you want immediately; it is all facilitated by the corporation. They facilitate how the store gets transferred from owner to owner and we own the store from drywall in.

It's very competitive. The year we applied there were 1500 applicants for 15 stores.

When you get your first store they tell you where you are going. You have to buy it if you want in ? it doesn't matter location or how it performs.

Our first store was in Saskatchewan.

We drove out there with our dog, in January.

Apparently, the day we went it was the coldest place on the planet. It was crazy.

The engine block froze every day. We'd drive to work, come out and the car wouldn't start.

The guys in the shop just shook their heads and informed us we had to plug it in. Being from Toronto we had just never done that before. But we learned quickly.

Do you get to choose how to stock the store?

We buy all the inventory SKU by SKU* ? the assortment is uniquely selected for the store by the owners based on the community you are located in.

So, we pick and choose quantities and items based on what we have learned is desired.

Here in Bolton, for example, we over-index in canning goods. We have a huge selection because it sells well ? many of the unique canning goods you can find here you wouldn't see in other stores.

Our last store was in Muskoka and we did really well in fishing gear ? we had the biggest marine assortment you can have. So in this store we have some of those goods but we are much more focused in other sporting goods, soccer for example.

We are very nimble as an enterprise, we can react quickly and bring in what people need based on what is happening in the community.

And how does it work with the flyer?

That is separate. We buy whatever is in the flyer. But the quantity is up to us so if there is something on the front page that we think will sell well here we overstock in it.

Is the Canadian Tire Gas Bar associated with you or your store?

No, that is not us, it's totally separate.

How did you get into this business?

Jeff, my husband, was on Bay Street and I owned a marketing agency, we lived in downtown Toronto. I was on the road four days a week to Atlanta, we were so busy.

We also owned a house in Thornbury?. We just decided we preferred living outside of the city and we wanted to find an opportunity that we could do together.

We looked at a lot of different franchises but once we started talking to Canadian Tire dealers it just snowballed, there was no reason not to.

How did you end up with this store in Bolton?

As I mentioned, we had our first store in Saskatchewan. We were there for 4 years, then we went to Prince Edward County, then Muskoka, and then made it here.

Once you own a store it's your choice to keep the store or put it ?back into the pool.?

We knew we wanted to get back into the GTA, that was the end goal. So we just kept moving and making changes until we ended up here. It took 14 years, but we've landed.

This is the size of store and community we wanted.

Does any other franchise work this way?

It is entirely unique to Canadian Tire ? it's a mobility system.

Do you have a relationship with the Distribution Centre in Bolton?

Recently we had a large group of investors here. People from Corporate brought a group to Bolton to tour the new distribution centre and then brought them here.

We partner with the DC on community events too, it's a great relationship.

Do you and Jeff each have your own jobs within the business?

Trip assurance is very important to us - meaning that we have what you need when you come in to get it ? and that includes what is in the flyer.

That is Jeff's focus. It is a lot of work and takes a lot of time ? buying properly is a skill ? it could be up to 60 hours a week.

I'm focused on operations. How the store looks, where things go, and staff. We have 80 to 100 staff depending on the season so it's also very busy.

Basically, he gets the goods to the door and I organize how it flows through the store.

What does good customer service mean to you?

We are very focused on giving our customers an experience that is positive. I like the store to be nice and neat. We converted the whole store to LED ? which is great for reducing energy costs of course but it brightened everything up.

We advocate for treating people the way you would want to be treated. Cultivating customer-focused service takes time, but we have a great leadership team and we've invested a lot in training.

Product knowledge is one thing, but we have 72,000 SKUs in the store. No one can know everything, but we strive to have people in each department that have a genuine interest and have some expertise in those goods.

It's about doing what you can to create a positive customer experience.

How do you create a positive work environment?

It makes a big difference when the owners are in the store I think.

Jeff and I are family people, we get it, things happen, we understand when there is a need to deal with something at home.

We care about the people that work here ? it's all about the people.

In our store we do a lot of team building.

We have 25 staff members that are part of a soccer team ? we play in an indoor league in Brampton and did pretty good ? well, after a slow start [laughs].

We also do a big Christmas party, have pizza parties and send them off to sporting events etc. We have a lot of training too, but that's the fun stuff.

Often in retail staff retention is a challenge, are you finding that here?

Corporately there is a very meaningful profit-sharing program. Whatever we give to staff is matched by the corporation and there's a good benefit plan so that helps.

We are very focused on bringing in young people who have a lot of drive. We often talk to them about how they can grow within the store, but we've also developed people right out of the store.

We encourage people to train for their career path, consider jobs with corporate or a larger role at larger stores.

It can't be that this is just a part-time job or a minimum wage job ? that is not what we are about, we are about developing people, so we have amazing retention here at the store.

It's okay for people to move on. When you focus on developing people it lifts us all up.

How important is community involvement for you?

Its huge for us and the corporation.

We work with Jump Start as our main charity. We were so thrilled about the \$1,000,000 donation for Bolton Camp ? so exciting!

With Jump Start every dollar raised is matched and goes directly back into the community. Any child that wants to participate in sport can be covered.

We are also involved in Canada Day celebrations, the Santa Claus parade ? so fun to be on the float [laughs], and other events.

Any favourite places in Caledon you want to share?

It's so scenic, even driving through Caledon is enjoyable. The golf around here is amazing, and I enjoy spending time at the equestrian park.

I also love it downtown, it's so quaint.

Courtesy of the Town of Caledon