



Irr placeable



Replacements

More than 26 years after Bob Page first envisioned a china, crystal, silver, and collectibles company, Replacements, Ltd., continues to draw visitors and attention to Greensboro.

BY NANCY DORMAN-HICKSON • PHOTO BY MARK WAGONER

ting!

A MUSICAL SOUND rings throughout the cavernous warehouse at Replacements, Ltd. "Hear that light tone?" asks James Flynt, an 18-year veteran at the world's largest retailer of china, crystal, silver, and collectibles. Tapping a china piece yields a telltale note — a melodious "ting" if solid, a dull "thud" if the dinnerware is cracked. "That's pretty much a clear bell sign," the expert says. "If it has a hairline crack — even where we can't see it — it would be more of a thud."

Ka-ching! The sound of a cash register might better fit the lucrative company. Replacements recently posted annual gross sales of \$80,904,000. Not too shabby for an enterprise that began as a happy sideline for an unhappy state auditor.

"My hobby had been going to flea markets," explains Bob Page, founder of Replacements. Page, the son of a tobacco farmer, grew up in Rockingham County and worked as an accountant before being drafted. After his military stint, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill-graduate began working for the state as an auditor stationed in Greensboro.

"Nobody was glad to see you," Page says of his former job. "I hated it." But he reveled in his after-hours pastime, scouring yard sales and flea markets for china and crystal. Soon the auditor wanted to make his fun time full-time. "Initially, I thought, 'I probably will never make as much money as I do in accounting,'" he says. "But I wanted to do something I enjoyed."

Now, 26 years later, the bottom line still isn't Page's primary motivation. "I love seeing the business succeed," the entrepreneur explains. "But it's not about



Clockwise, from top left: Chris Humble inspects crystal glassware; Founder Bob Page entertains his miniature dachshunds; A store aisle entirely devoted to the highly collectible Spode Christmas patterns; Bob Page checks in stacks of Lenox; A rainbowed wall of Fiesta dinnerware. *photos courtesy of Replacements, Ltd.*



the money. Too many people become crazed with money and success and lose sight of their values." Instead, Page continues to take cues about how to live from his father, who was never wealthy but always generous. "He cared for other people," the son says.

That's the lesson Page and his partner, Dale Frederiksen, try to pass on to their children, 8-year-old twins Ryan and Owen. "We support lots of different charities here in the community," Page says. "I give away far more money to the churches that I support than I spend on myself." His car, for example, is an 8-year-old Ford nearing the 100,000-mile mark. "In a lot of ways, I live a fairly meager lifestyle."

GREAT WALLS OF CHINA

Meager hardly describes Replacements' inventory — a whopping 11 million-plus pieces of product. Picture the Library of Congress, but with china instead of books. Some 50,000 shelves hold stacks and stacks of dinnerware in every pattern, color, and type imaginable. The company offers almost 270,000 patterns, many of them well over 100 years old. In place of the Dewey Decimal system, Replacements uses software developed by Page and his technical staff specifically for the company's specialized needs. The computer program neatly categorizes and labels every piece of Replacements dinnerware, rendering it easily accessible. It's the ultimate example of a place for everything and everything in its place.

Page's organizational skills and near-photographic recall are legendary, says Scott Fleming, a longtime employee who was named president of Replacements about two years ago. At age 62, Page says, "I can't envision retirement." Yet he enjoys sharing the daily responsibilities with Fleming — freeing Page to travel and do what he still loves: hunting for Replacements products in flea markets, yard sales, and discontinued inventory bins.

"My job has been and always will be to help turn Bob's vision into reality. To be a part of a company that is the world's best at what it does is great," Fleming says of his role.

REAP WHAT YOU SOW

"I take a huge amount of pride in the fact that we treat everybody fairly," Page says, referring to a philosophy that extends to the company's 575 employees. "One of our goals is to have a great place to work. I truly believe that's the way you should treat people. It's how I was brought up."

Gail Murphy, marketing director of the Greensboro Area Convention and Visitors Bureau, says she thinks Replacements is achieving this goal. "From its phone banks to the showroom to the stock room, there are just tremendous opportunities for people to get good jobs at Replacements. And Bob is noted over and over again as a great boss," Murphy explains. Both the company and the entrepreneur have received awards from such diverse groups as the Better Business Bureau, Arthur Anderson, and the Human Rights Campaign Corporate Equality Index.

Page says he believes strongly in providing a welcoming work atmosphere that focuses on ability. "People are much more likely to flourish when they don't have other things to worry about," he says.

It's a diverse workforce. "Close to 10 years ago, we started hiring former Yugoslavs that had been displaced from Bosnia," Page says. The company offered a class onsite to teach English. "Now we have over 100 former Yugoslavs here, as well as people from dozens of other countries. They hear that we're willing to give people a chance. Replacements is just a magnet."

The same holds true for tourists. Ranked by Rand McNally as one of the nation's top-25 free attractions, the company hosts about 95,000 visitors each year. Murphy lauds Replacements as a wonderful community asset too:

Pets in a china shop

Replacements, Ltd. invites the furry and feathered, the pawed and petted, to join the company's workforce and shop amid its delicate merchandise. The open-door policy on pets began when an employee gave Founder Bob Page a miniature dachshund for his birthday. "I started to think, 'I just can't leave this dog at home,' so I started bringing the dog to work," he explains. "I thought how much it meant to me." Soon the big-hearted businessman issued an invitation to employees and customers to bring in their well-behaved pets as well. Since then, the company has served as home-away-from-home for dogs, cats, and animals as varied as a pot-bellied pig, a squirrel, and a turtle — avoiding, so far, the proverbial bull in the china shop. "We had a hawk once," says Scott, who concedes, "It was tethered." The only breakage has been that of the occasional house variety. "I don't ever remember anything in our showroom getting broken by an animal," Page says. "Lots of times by customers, but not by pets."



Smart n Up
Wallcoverings
& window treatments

*Where beautiful walls and
windows are born,
and value is always in style*



*Wallpapers, Custom Draperies
Hunter Douglas Blinds & Shades*

2835 Battleground Avenue
336-288-9444

Southern Fun and Hospitality



A Fun and Friendly Resort Style Community

Bermuda Village is a resort style community where gracious living takes its cue from Southern hospitality. We offer a place where the benefits of modern life are everywhere — and the burdens slip away. Refined amenities and casual elegance blend to bring you unsurpassed quality living.

At Bermuda Village, you own your luxury condominium or villa, your home becomes an asset and an investment for you and your family.

Call (800) 853-5433 today to learn more about the wealth of opportunities that are yours at Bermuda Village.



A Gracious Retirement Community



Bermuda Village | 142 Bermuda Village Drive | Bermuda Run, NC 27006
(800) 843-5433 | www.BermudaVillage.net

"Anyone can enjoy seeing how someone has taken the business from a box of index cards to a multimillion-dollar corporation."

Although women clamor to visit the destination, guys often initially resist. "But the men come back, fascinated with the business aspect of it: the warehousing, the processing, the packing," Murphy says. "Greensboro has been very lucky to have Replacements in our backyard. We don't have many attractions that garner that type of attention. It's been on every TV show, talk show, and radio show. Even Oprah has featured them."

ALL ABOUT THE CUSTOMER

Indeed, Oprah Winfrey is both a fan and a customer, stocking up on the company's most expensive pattern, Flora Danica — first created by Royal Copenhagen in the 1700s and still produced today. A single dinner plate from the hand-painted, multifired, gilded pattern retails for \$899.95. "A soup tureen might go for \$15,000," Page reveals.

Other famous customers include television personalities Barbara Walters and Sally Jessy Raphael, novelist Anne Rice, musicians Courtney Love and Randy Travis, and politicians Ted Kennedy and Ross Perot.

However, every Replacements customer receives royal recognition, not just the famous. "If somebody is buying a \$2 item, we intend to treat them the same way we would somebody that's a celebrity," Page insists. Which is appropriate, considering the average customer can relate to a woman CNN once filmed in the showroom: "Her daughter lived in Durham," Page recalls. "She said, 'I come to visit her once a year and we always come to Replacements, Ltd. I love coming here. I have never been to Tiffany's, but this is what I imagine it would be like.'" ●

IF YOU GO: For more information about Replacements, Ltd., call 800-REPLACE or go to replacements.com. The main showroom is open from 9 a.m. to 7 p.m. seven days a week and free tours are offered every half-hour. A second retail location is open at Four Seasons Town Centre to accommodate the upcoming holiday shopping season.

Freelance writer Nancy Dorman-Hickson admits that although she serves on paper plates more often than not, she still loves to use her grandmother's china for special occasions.