

# ragtrader

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## WINNING CHAIN: General Pants

VISION, integration  
& EXECUTION

WHILE FASHION CHAINS HAVE THE EDGE over their independent cousins in terms of economic might and bargaining power, their very size often presents its own challenges. This is particularly evident when charged with ensuring a clear branding vision that integrates across all businesses and can be executed effectively across every store of the chain.

Positioned as a youth label with a surf and

streetwear edge, this year's winner in the chains category – The General Pants Company – has a clearly defined vision of its target customer that informs every aspect of its business.

Marketing and promotions is one example of this. Moving away from traditional advertising channels, General Pants the company has created a community around General Pants the brand, through music and club-style events, an unconventional advertising campaign and a commitment to charity and community initiatives related to key issues for its target market.

The acid test for many retailers is in the stores themselves – often a chain with a great

branding proposition is let down by poor execution and customer service at store level – but General Pants stores passed this test with flying colours.

Stores were well laid out with a broad selection of labels and style options offered and plenty of staff on hand, resulting in a positive first impression of youth, energy and confidence.

There was also ample opportunity for browsing, through the use of diverse areas of interest and innovative merchandising ideas – one store boasted handpainted murals while another used a dry cleaner's rotating rack to display product.

In addition, staff at all the outlets visited were relaxed, friendly and enthusiastic, displaying high levels of product knowledge and an eagerness to provide quality customer service. This was in no doubt thanks to General Pants' formal training scheme and a flat management structure designed to give staff a strong sense of job ownership.

General Pants clearly has a well-positioned product and a great advertising strategy, but it also understood that these make little sense if customers are not enticed to spend their time – and hopefully money – in the stores themselves.

Moreover, the company has taken this understanding a step further, ensuring that, while the stores are a defining point of contact for consumers, they are simply the starting point of a binding relationship between consumers, staff and the General Pants brand.



## WINNING INDEPENDENT: Harrolds

INDEPENDENTS ARE OFTEN DEPICTED AS the minnows of fashion retail, continually under threat from the all-engulfing might of chains and department stores.

They also have to battle for every cent of a consumer dollar increasingly diverted to other discretionary products and services, as well as the rising costs of fuel and property.

However, it's not all doom and gloom for the smaller players; their relatively diminutive size affords them an ability to react quickly to the market that frequently eludes larger entities. They also have the power to identify their target market and determine the character of their business accordingly without recourse to cumbersome corporate protocol.

Those that do so successfully can provide consumers with a much valued point of difference from chains, majors and other independents, often in the form a unique retail experience or exclusive product.

This year's winner in the independents category – Melbourne store Harrolds menswear – is a retailer that has achieved just such a point of difference.

The judges' first impression on entering Harrolds' Collins Street emporium – located in the CBD of Melbourne – was that they had entered a store like no other and were in for a treat.

This impression was largely created by the store's exquisite layout and visual merchandising, which conveyed the idea that every product on display had been hand-picked. Impressive racks of men's shirting provided swathes of colour and appeal by the store entrance, while numerous displays and cabinets created islands of interest throughout, often telling a story around a particular brand or product, many of which were exclusive to the store.

A premium level of customer service was also evident, including a bespoke tailoring service and an in-store coffee bar. Staff – many of whom had spent a significant portion of their careers working for Harrolds – displayed a solid level of product knowledge; they had clearly been trained to nurture long term confidence in male clients according to the store's philosophy of building a wardrobe dictated by style over fashion.



Harrolds' advertising strategy is well aligned to its target market, with print media campaigns including *The Financial Review* and a range of car magazines, but no advertisement can convey the unique feel of the stores themselves.

Excellent product, premium customer service and a second-to-none retail experience has worked more magic for this retailer than any conventional advertising or loyalty scheme, resulting in strong and steady growth since it first opened more than two decades ago. ■

Belinda Smart