

A piece of retail history

For over a century, Quebec retailer G. D'Aoust & Cie has been attracting a loyal clientele by offering a wide range of products, exceptional customer service and very generous credit terms

By Jennifer Cox

Nestled between Lac des Deux-Montagnes and Lac Saint Louis sits the historic town of Sainte-Anne-de-Bellevue (about 35 kilometres outside of Montreal), and there you'll find G. D'Aoust & Cie, a company that was founded an incredible 117 years ago. Carrying a wide range of unique products, from carefully selected furniture and artwork to high-end clothing, they also have an extensive selection of gourmet foods, gadgets and kitchenware. They have even begun producing their own products, and are currently carrying their own in-house line of coffee as well as homemade soaps.

It all began with Guisolphe D'Aoust,



In 1991, Philippe D'Aoust took over as president of the family business that was started by his grandfather.



Retail Profile: G. D'Aoust & Cie



When Guisolphe D'Aoust, shown left with wife Alphonse, opened his shop in the early 1900s, it was one of the first full-service department stores in the town of 500 people. Below, the store now covers most of the city block with plenty of windows for browsing.



who decided that, with so many smaller shops in the Ste. Anne area, he would open a larger store that would provide shoppers with a variety of items in one place.

"To open a store of this size in the 1900s, when the population of Ste. Anne was only 500 people, was a risk. My grandfather was a visionary," says current president, Philippe D'Aoust. "He realized that people were struggling to do their shopping, so he said, 'Let's create a bigger retail store for shopping in Ste. Anne. A one-stop shop.' So my grandmother gave him \$800 to start the whole company." This is why the name remains G. D'Aoust And Company.

People who came to the store could find everything they needed for the whole family, from hardware items and fabrics to shoes, and clientele were always impressed with the personal attention they received. Soon they had three delivery trucks, bringing their exceptional customer service right to peoples' doorsteps. "People weren't used to that in those days," Philippe says.

They were also trusting and generous lenders in the community, allowing people to purchase things on their accounts rather than pay up front.

"At the time people didn't have a lot of money, and with this trend of putting things on accounts, there was a lot of debt. But my grandfather always told his customers to pay him when they

could, which created exceptional loyalty to him and the company.

The store survived many challenges in addition to the lengthy accounting books. World War I, the Great Depression, and World War II intervened, but the store continued to thrive. In 1923, they expanded as D'Aoust's grandfather and his brother made extensive buying trips overseas.

"They would travel the world, to places like Europe, Africa, and Asia, and they started importing their own lines. They were returning with things that weren't available in any other stores," Philippe explains.

In time, Ste. Anne became a popular cottage area attracting affluent tourists, which helped bring in a lot of high-end customers looking to buy.

"My grandfather would be gone for months at a time, and when he'd get back, there was always interest renewed in the store," he says. "People would come in to see the latest perfume from France, new material from India, or beautiful silk from China."

In the ensuing decades, big-box stores and malls started to pop up in the area. After satisfying their initial curiosity, they returned to G. D'Aoust & Cie because of the customer service that they



Retail Profile: G. D'Aoust & Cie



have always offered. “We had a good reputation with our customers, and they had confidence in us,” he says.

From the very start, Philippe had been actively involved in the store. As a child, he would hang around the store with his father, who later took over the company from his dad with his brother (Philippe’s uncle). They all lived and breathed the store. At family gatherings the talk usually revolved around the business.

Philippe started his own retail business in the 1970s, opening several women’s clothing stores in shopping malls. “I wanted to prove myself, and at the time jeans were really hot so that’s where I started. I did that for 25 years,” he explains. But with his father and uncle getting older, the time came for the next generation to take over. Philippe was eager to change things up, modernize the company and make his mark, so in 1991 he returned to G. D’Aoust & Cie.

“We still carried hardware, yet the big box stores were taking over and the section was declining,” he recalls. He made some bold moves. First off, he stopped providing credit and began collecting on individual bills, even if it meant accom-

When Philippe took over the store, he cleared out all the hardware lines and brought in more clothing, gifts and housewares.

Retail Profile: G. D'Aoust & Cie

modating the client and going to pick up the payment instead of making them come in. “

“I hated it but it had to be done, and eventually, I collected all the money owed to us,” he says. “Then we started to change things department by department. We had to clear out all kinds of goods, including fabric and knitting supplies, in addition to hardware. In 1991, people weren’t sewing anymore.”

Today, the store is spread across three spacious floors and centred around a massive skylight. The 20,000-square-foot building – which was his grandfather’s design – is a perfect showcase for such an extensive and eclectic product assortment.

“We try to be a destination shop,” says Philippe. “Our shoppers know they’re going to find a perfect gift, or something unique to wear, or something original for their house. We also have a decor stylist who does home consultations, and takes time when customers come in to sit down and advise them. The products may have evolved, but it’s still all about the service. That’s why we’re still going strong.”

This high customer service standard is carried out in every department. “The people on the floor aren’t typical salespeople,” Philippe says. “All the employees have been here for at least 10 years and they have their own customers. When we receive something new, they always know who it will be perfect for.”

He adds, “in business, you have to learn to let go of things and put your confidence in other people. We work on having a ‘wow factor’, which is not something that’s easily defined. We want people to come in and say ‘wow’, whether it’s the lighting, the music, the colours or the incredible product displays. Of course, people also come in just to see our employees!”

G. D’Aoust & Cie is stocked with products that are sourced at annual gift and houseware shows, and despite having many privately imported collections, the store prides itself on selling Canadian-made goods as well as locally Quebec-produced lines.



The carefully curated assortment includes a mix of national brands, proprietary products and locally-sourced items.



The store does very little advertising, but twice a year they host popular VIP events for customers. Philippe sends out hundreds of invitations for the event. A red carpet is laid out, models walk around the store, and suppliers come in to offer samples. They’ve been doing the events for 20 years and they are always a big hit. “Everyone gets dressed up and we serve wine and cheese. These events just don’t happen anymore at retail.”

The store has also kept pace with the times on the digital side, and has hired

someone to manage their busy social media sites, which boast more than 20,000 followers. They also sell their products online yet still pride themselves on their traditional ideals of always putting the customer first.

“We can’t stop online buying, so we have to offer that to customers. But people are not going to spend their lives in the living room buying everything from a screen,” Philippe says. “People still enjoy a full shopping experience. And that’s what they get here.” 🐾