

Local Champion Bob and Judith Little, Australia

Bob Little and his wife Judith run a SPAR Supermarket in Maclean. The village has around 4,000 citizens but the supermarket is also important for the larger countryside area, doubling this population. The store has been trading as a grocery outlet since 1883, the longest running continuous grocer's store in Australia.



Contact International was fortunate to be able to interview Bob and Judith. We are pleased to share their story with you.

Who is Bob in a nutshell?

I was born in Sydney, lived in Como West for thirty years and moved to Maclean in 1980, working as an Electrical Ground Engineer. I have been actively involved in the community in various forms including through the store, for example with scouts and sailing. I support the Chamber of Commerce and was its President for six years. Judith says that I am a Meeting

Maniac, involved with everything. I value the fact that although supermarket retailing means 24/7 attention, my children have still always been able to talk to me and appreciated this fact.

How did you become a retailer?

My parents-in-law decided to go into business and we all began the supermarket together. I thought food retailing would be easy because everyone has to eat. In the end, it took me four years to realize that a business does not run itself and that one person has to be in

control. After much soul searching we decided to run the supermarket ourselves. Over the next 12 months, I learnt much more about running a business, attended a Business Management course and enlisted my invaluable Banner managers.

Can you tell us about the development of the store?

The store is the longest running Grocer in Australia (since 1883). We couldn't find a suitable location for a larger store so in 1999 we doubled the retail selling area. The challenges in renovating the store were to ensure that we kept the look and the feel of a good old fashioned store while still portraying a modern progressive supermarket. We thought that our over-trading issues would be resolved through this renovation. What we did not expect was that in a short time we doubled the sales and were back to the over-trading position! This creates enormous challenges for the day to day running of the store. Range and Customer service are our two main focuses and those two aspects mean a high labour content.

Tell us about Maclean...

Maclean is a small country town, about 15 km from the seaside town of Yamba and 40 km from the city of Grafton. With about

4,000 residents and a large rural area, there is a total population of 8,000. In Maclean the majority of services are provided. Because we have limited parking available we counteract this disadvantage by carrying the customers' groceries to their car. This has been a very effective service. Maclean has a Scottish heritage that everyone is very proud of; an attraction for visitors are the telegraph poles painted in various tartan colours. The main industries in this area are Sugarcane and Fishing.

How much are you involved with your customers?

Interaction with customers is vital for the running of any successful business. Both customers and staff need to see me regularly. I have always lived by the philosophy that you should never expect anyone to do anything that you are not prepared to do yourself. I believe that although the customer is not always right, they have to leave the store happy and must be given the benefit of the doubt in all situations. Complaints are invaluable feedback for the business; it helps you to improve the way you do business. My best skill is being a people manager. I can be a bit too soft in the discipline area but I do have the ability to listen and stay calm. I am fanatical about providing the highest possible level of customer service.

Can you describe your customers?

Our customers are a very loyal group of people. A high percentage is elderly and some of them have shopped in this store all their lives. A good percentage of young families and schoolchildren are attracted to the store as well. The trend is very strongly going away from 'once a week' shoppers and



The SPAR team in Maclean

customers are shopping much more frequently.

Can you tell us about special products/departments in your store?

We have a long standing reputation of having the best fresh fruit and vegetables in the valley! People from Grafton specially come to buy this from us. Our serviced Deli is a hive of activity where the staff interacts with customers. Our SPAR bake range is very popular due to the good quality. We work with a local butcher to supply pre-packed meats. We provide as many services as we can; always assessing what can be added. Currently, we have full EFTPOS facilities; Phone Recharge, Special Event ticketing, Fishing Licenses and Self Service Photo Kiosk.

Please share the shopping pattern of your customers

Being a country town, our customers have very traditional

habits. Our cooking aisle and fresh departments are the most popular sections. Being a true Scottish Town, value is sought after and most customers seek bargains. There is strong support for anything locally produced and there is a growing interest in Australian made products. We would really like to get involved in a large range of 'Food to Go' as I believe that the market will grow as more people move to the area.

Can you describe a great day in your store?

A great day is seeing my staff interacting with the customers. Sometimes, the team sings along or even dances. The music is specifically selected by me. Not a week goes by without comments, usually compliments. The same music goes through the 'music on hold' for our phone and I regularly get asked to put someone back on hold so that they can hear the rest of the song!



Bob and Judith's SPAR store in Maclean