

## Speaker Series: Almost all change

By Trisha Harris on April 6, 2016 in Convenience retailers, Insights, News, People / Services, Retailer news



Judith and Bob Little outside their store. The signage "We pack, We carry, We care..." reflects the store's service ethic.

Situated in the Northern Rivers region of New South Wales, the town of Maclean is a popular tourist destination with sugar cane production, farming and river-prawn trawling among its industries. Situated on the Clarence River, the town is near the Pacific Highway and boasts a population of around 2600 people.

Maclean is also the site of Australia's longest running grocery store, with the original 'Argyle Store' built in 1883 on the site of today's SPAR Maclean.

It was this store that Bob Little, together with wife Judith and his in-laws, purchased in December 1980. After a career as an aircraft electrician at Qantas in Sydney, Mr Little was looking for a change of scene and a new challenge.

SPAR Maclean has since provided Mr Little with plenty of change and challenges. In its long history SPAR Maclean had already seen seven changes of ownership, several renovations and a number of name changes and was operating under the name Four Square Maclean in 1980 when the Littles came to town.

On first examination taking over the reins at a well known and locally loved store might seem a straightforward task. After all, Australia's longest serving grocery store is hardly going to suddenly go "belly up" – is it?

Certainly the store appeared successful, however despite making a modest profit the business was struggling. Sales were good but profitability was a major issue. With very little business knowledge, running the store proved to be a steep learning curve.

Mr Little says he has always believed in the store and when his in-laws left the business five years later he struggled to get the bank to provide the finance needed to purchase the remaining shares in the business.

As Mr Little searched for answers as to what was wrong with the business and how to fix it, the bank reluctantly provided finance on the condition the store must continue to show signs of improvement. And so, Mr Little embarked on a quest to learn everything he could to make the business live up to his hopes and expectations.

Attending management courses and asking for help from the store's banner group produced results and the store gradually began a long process of transformation. It took quite a few years to turn the business around.

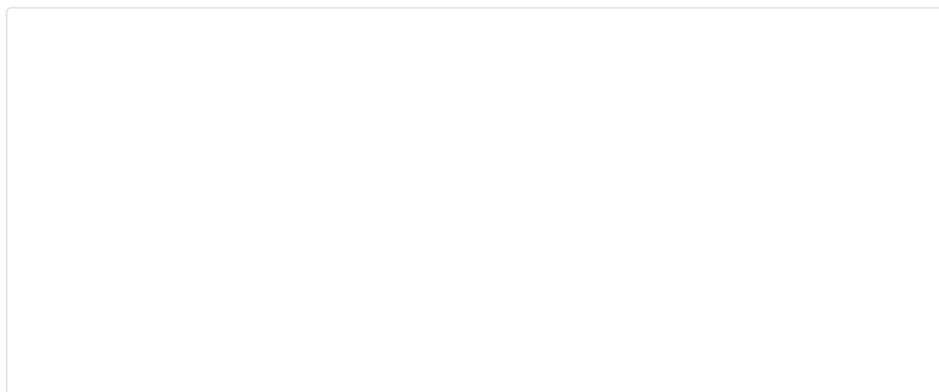
One of his strongest memories of that period is of visiting the accountant. On entering the office the accountant informed Mr Little he had some very bad news to deliver; the store would have to pay tax. That, Mr Little says, was the best news he had had in a long-time; finally the business was making money! In line with the philosophy of the SPAR group, Mr Little began to reinvest some of the returns into the business.

A major renovation in 2000 saw the store double in size and the addition of a new deli. The results really changed the store dynamics and sales – and profits – increased.

Competition from stores in town, plus the Coles store at Yamba (a 15 minute drive away) as well as the Woolworths, two Coles and Aldi at Grafton (half an hour way) remained fierce.

Determined to maintain the growing business he realised SPAR Maclean needed a point of difference in order to maintain its position in the community. And, the point of difference SPAR Maclean offers – and which Mr Little says he is fanatical about – is customer service.

Mr Little acknowledges providing good customer service costs money and that it is reflected in store pricing. Nevertheless with its motto “We pack, We carry, We care”, SPAR Maclean continues to demonstrate the value of caring about your customers. And your staff.





Australia's longest running grocery store, with the original 'Argyle Store' built in 1883, SPAR Maclean has seen plenty of changes in its time. The store is proud of its history (note photo display on rear wall above) and customer service is a top priority.

With the longest serving employee clocking up 26 years of service and a further 10 staff each with 10 years or more years of service the culture at SPAR Maclean is all about customer service. Something Mr Little encourages and fosters through his own attitude to his staff.

Formal training is key to ensuring staff are aware of policies and procedures and importantly OH&S requirements. Mr Little personally trains new checkout staff himself before the newcomer passes on to the supervision of a senior staff member. Department supervisors also formally train young staff members to make sure they are readily able to provide the best possible customer service.



Some of the team at SPAR Maclean.

Long serving members of staff are quick to point out expectations and standards to the younger members of the team passing on first-hand knowledge and antidotes. Mr Little says there is a lot of pressure placed on younger staff by the long term staff who 'train by example'.

Even through difficult times, the supportive team ethos endures. Even through a second round of renovations, completed in January 2015, customer service has been a priority and not one hour of trading was lost as the renovations went ahead.

The staff were fully supportive of the proposed renovations and continued to provide the customer service patrons have come to expect from SPAR Maclean. The renovations resulted in a significant change to the look of the store, opening up the space and creating big changes within the fresh department layout. The revitalised store has been well received by customers who appreciate the new and improved store layout and by staff who find the new store environment easier to work in.

Looking back over his time at the store, Mr Little notes it is not just the store itself that has seen changes. Changes in customer tastes have been some of the noticeable trends that have impacted the store. Back in the early days he says he would never have expected some of the changes.

In particular, the beverage shelves have undergone huge transformation and now still water is one of the largest selling items – Mr Little says that the town of Maclean has beautiful water on tap and he would never have expected to sell so much bottled water.

Likewise, the more recent uptake of products such as coconut water – and all things coconut – has been something of a surprise to him, particularly as Maclean is a town less influenced by the latest trends.

Despite all the changes SPAR Maclean has undergone in his time with the store Mr Little says one thing that hasn't changed over time is the proud history of the store and this heritage is immortalised and acknowledged in the latest renovation.

**Bob Little will be speaking at the 2016 C&I Convention and Expo in Melbourne this August. For register for the Expo, click [here](#).**