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CEO GOES UNDERCOVER

Sam Dushey took the reins of his family-owned business, discount department-store chain Shoppers World, when he was just 27. The company was founded by his grandfather, an immigrant from Syria, in the 1930s, and then expanded upon by Dushey’s father, uncle and cousin.

During his 10 years as CEO, Dushey has grown the New York City-based Shoppers World from eight stores to 40 locations in 11 states and up to $250 million in annual retail sales. But he is really just getting started: The ambitious CEO wants to expand the company to 500 stores nationwide.

Looking to gain what he calls “field intelligence” about his employees and the day-to-day goings on in his stores, Dushey decided to put himself on the front lines, appearing on the hit CBS television show, “Undercover Boss.” (His episode aired on Jan. 3, 2016.)

To disguise himself as an entry-level employee named “Alex,” he grew a beard, dyed his dark-brown hair to a platinum blond shade, wore glasses, and put on a diamond stud earring. He took on different tasks while undercover, from working on the sales floor to marking down items for clearance to checking people out.

Chain Store Age editor Marianne Wilson spoke with Dushey about going undercover and his plans to expand Shoppers World.

Why did you go decide to go undercover, and what was the experience like?
I’m a fan of “Undercover Boss” and saw an opportunity to get some of the best intel I could for improving the family business prior to increasing the number of stores from 40 to 500.

I barely recognized myself while undercover. I visited several stores, including two in New York City (one in Brooklyn and one in Queens); one in Cleveland, Ohio; and one in Morrow, Georgia. From meeting several exceptional employees to receiving unbiased feedback from employees and experiencing firsthand what it is like to deal with faulty equipment and theft — my eyes were truly opened by going “undercover.”

What were your biggest takeaways from the show?
Some of my biggest takeaways from being on “Undercover Boss” were that I realized our employees needed to be acknowledged and rewarded. They are part of the Shoppers World family, and our success is their success.

Another big takeaway I found was that ensuring that our employees and stores had fully functioning tools would increase the

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Sam Dushey, President and CEO
Shoppers World

Undercover
employees’ success and enjoyment within the company. The employees don’t speak up because they don’t feel they or their opinions matter. But everyone matters — everyone should have a voice.

A theft occurred at one of the stores you were working in, and you were told the store had no formal security. Did this incident result in any company-wide changes?
Since the episode, to ensure our employees’ safety, we hired two of the country’s top security and loss-prevention firms. We invested more than $1.5 million in the top loss-prevention software and surveillance.

Are you planning to make any other company-wide changes based on your experience?
Absolutely. Since the episode we also upgraded our IT and network systems, which allows for a quicker inventory scanning and smoother checkout process.

We are also ensuring that the employees’ voices are heard because they know their jobs better than anyone else.

Would you encourage other retail CEOs to go “undercover”? Yes. I would definitely encourage and recommend that other CEOs go undercover. It was a great way to get real insight into the company. Chief executive officers sit in their corporate offices without knowing how the decisions they make impact their stores, customers and employees. It was the best intel I could have asked for within my company.

What is your vision for the company going forward?
Our goal is to expand to 500 stores throughout the country. We moved from being only a children’s retailer to a discount merchandise store that carries items for all ages, including housewares and home furnishings. In the future we look to expand our product offering.

Will you be entering any new markets this year?
Yes. Based on the “Undercover Boss” experience, we need to improve internal operations first. The next stores we open will be the most critical to our success.

Shoppers World is a family-owned business. Are there any other family members involved in its operation?
I am the only family member left in the business. I rely on my father and other family members for their feedback, as they walked in my shoes.

What is your ideal location and store size?
Our ideal store locations are suburban areas where people want another option to Ross or other chain stores. We look for buildings between 50,000 sq. ft. and 100,000 sq. ft. We consider our stores small, medium and even large depending on the size of the space they occupy. Each store has 50 to 100 employees.

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