



Eric Sana: Altering How Fashion is Made

Founder of alteration shops branches out with expanded lifestyle brand

In many ways, Eric Sana, founder of Altered Image, a nationwide chain of alterations shops, and Eric Sana, a lifestyle brand that began with bespoke suits and now produces ready-made shirts for men and women, has reverse-engineered a typical growth strategy. Unlike many businesses that build a service offering onto a product line, he started with the service business, which continues to grow and thrive, before creating his own brand and products.

The decision was by design, a natural evolution of Oakville, Ont.- based Altered Image.

"All of our experience in the made-to-measure world of fit and styling can now be poured into Eric Sana. The businesses complement each other. It made sense to me as a good way to diversify and grow," says Sana.

And that's exactly what's happening for both businesses. Altered Image, which launched in 1996 with one retail outlet housed inside a grocery store in Oakville, is now a mainstay of almost every Hudson's Bay (The Bay) flagship store across Canada. It recently acquired Vancouver-based Townline Tailors, a tailoring house that will begin featuring Eric Sana products in its showroom in September. The acquisition will increase the footprint of both Altered Image and Eric Sana.

Sana is excited about this next stage of development and growth for his businesses, and he is particularly pleased that it is taking place in Canada, the country he adopted in 1987. He was just 22 and well on his way to a law degree from his native Bosnia before a trip to Toronto to visit family led him to make the move to Canada.

"I'm in love with this country," says Sana. Still, it was difficult, particularly since he did not speak English. "I had to find my way and my niche." He worked in a few industries before settling in retail and moving up the ranks at Tip Top and Aldo Group, where he built up the experience he needed to start his own business.

"I've always had a passion for fashion and style, and dreamed of owning my own business even though I had planned to become a lawyer," says Sana. He credits supporters and coaches early on, as well as provincial and federal programs to help new entrepreneurs, with his ability to launch Altered Image.

The concept was to provide alteration services to both consumers and retail stores. "It was a very small shop and it was very successful. We tripled our business in less than a year," says



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"We're taking a holistic approach to growth," says Eric Sana, founder of Altered Image, a nationwide chain of alterations shops, and Eric Sana, a lifestyle brand.



Sana. In 1997, he bought a then-restructuring Eaton's alteration business serving its 35 GTA stores. This included an 80,000-sq.-ft. hub in Yorkdale shopping mall with a staff of 40.

With the demise of Eaton's in 1999 and a proven track record serving large retailers, Altered Image joined forces with The Bay that same year. Today, Altered Image has 13 locations within The Bay outlets. "It's a two-pronged system. We are a licensee, meaning we rent space to serve walk-in customers, but we also exclusively serve their flagship locations in Toronto, Vancouver, Victoria and Calgary by providing fitting and alteration services," says Sana. "We work on everything from a \$10 pair of pants to an \$80,000 dress."

Moving Forward

For the past six months, Sana and his team have been working with retail consulting firm JC Williams Group to define and position the brand, which launched in December 2012.

The challenge with any lifestyle brand is that it can quickly run away from you, says Christopher Dippell, president of Vellum Marketing in Richmond Hill, Ont. "If you branch out to too many different categories at the same time, you end up losing focus in terms of the underlying story and theme that ties it all together."

Dippell points to Apple as an example of what to do right when building a lifestyle brand. "It started with a single product in a particular category tied to innovation. Once it established itself in the computing space, it moved into new categories."

For his part, Sana has taken steps to build his reputation into a unique and stylish brand of clothing in terms of Eric Sana designs. Initially focused on shirts, Sana has added accessories and fine leather goods to his offerings and is currently preparing for the launch of the full assortment on his ecommerce site, www.ericšana.com.

"We're taking a holistic approach to growth," says Sana. "Our objective is to present the finest garments with the highest level of service our customers are demanding."

CIBC Tips: Taking a Measured Approach to Growth

1. **Know what you do well** The first step to any type of business growth is to ensure that you have a thorough understanding of your business in its current state. No one knows your business, your products or your customers better than you. Conduct a thorough audit to see what works and more importantly, what could be working better.
2. **And do what you know** Expansion can take many forms; building upon your current successes or looking for an opportunity to overcome gaps in your existing model. Concentrate on your company's strengths and keep the client top of mind with every decision.
3. **Start with a plan** Every business needs a road map to point the way to success, whether you're thinking of starting a new business or contemplating changes to an established one. By mapping out your goals and strategies, you'll get a clearer picture of what your business really needs. In addition, an effective business plan is essential if you want to attract investors.

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