

A PERFECT FIT

Silver Jeans Co. builds stores, and the customer experience, around mobile POS by FIONA SOLTES

With a 93-year heritage of making denim, Silver Jeans Co. — a 22-year-old brand extension of the Winnipeg-based Western Glove Works — didn't want to walk into retail with an already-worn concept. Rather, the goal was to find a technology partner that could grow and experiment right along with it, including developing a fully mobile point-of-sale system with no fixed station.

Silver Jeans has had a wholesale business since 1991, selling through department stores and specialty retailers. But even though there was much excitement about the “blank slate” opportunity afforded by the opening of its first store last July in suburban Houston, vendors kept pushing the company toward an expensive traditional polling-based fixed POS. Everybody, that is, except Island Pacific.

“Island Pacific had a mobile solution, but it didn't come across as slick,” says Darren James, senior director of retail operations for Silver Jeans. “It didn't come in a nice, shiny box. There was work to be done on it, and that was attractive to us. We wanted to find

a company that could be a partner within the store.”

From the outset, he says, the vision was clear. The use of mobile would not only add to the customer experience, but also be an integral part of the store's operations. The result is that the store's mobile POS works off an Island Pacific omnichannel server, allowing for seamless visibility of transactions and inventory across all five stores.

It's a welcome feat; James recalls Black Fridays spent working with another retailer, when checking on sales required “an elaborate phone tree.” There's still room for experimentation and growth in the visibility of inventory, he notes; it's one thing to see it and know where it is, but another entirely to transact and ship it.

“We still have some infrastructure work on the back end to leverage that,” James says. “But we feel confident that we've at least built the infrastructure for it, and won't be doing big legacy system work down the road.”

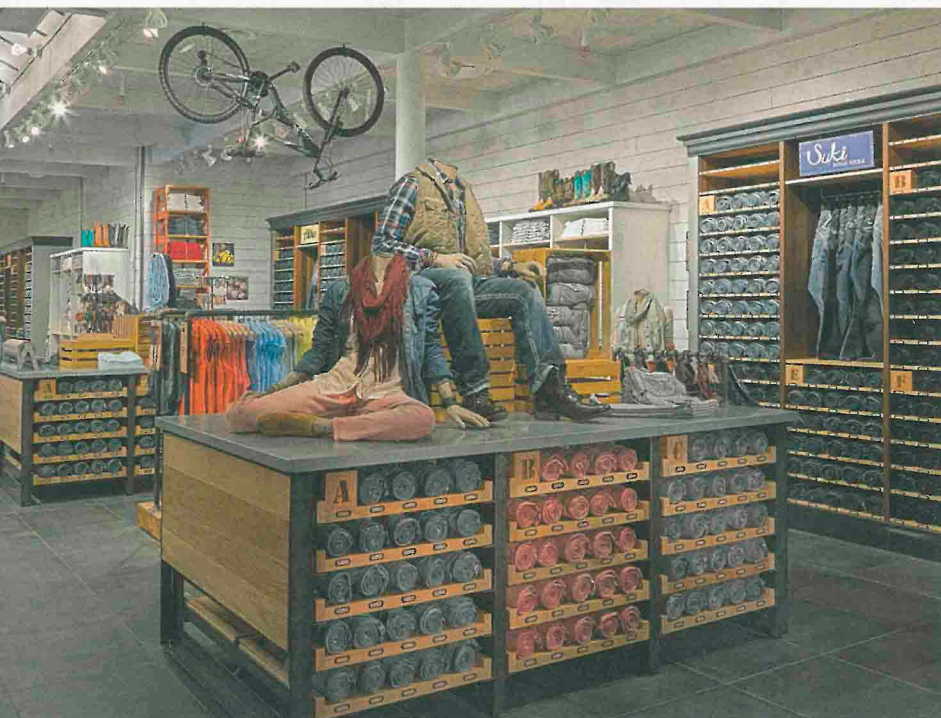
ENHANCING ENGAGEMENT

The customer experience starts with technology-enabled, apron-clad “jeaners,” associates who walk clients through the system to find the right fit. Silver Jeans prides itself on its large breadth of sizing in specialty denim, including offering three different “curves.” Jeaners use a measuring tape to help find the right cut.

“We really believe we can fit anybody in denim,” James says. “But it is a high-touch business.”

Purchases are rolled in butcher paper rather than folded to prevent creases, and customers pay via mobile POS. There is a small concierge desk with a wireless cash drawer and receipt printer, but since the stores are small — ranging from 1,500 to 2,000 square feet — there's no space wasted on a fixed POS.

“I don't think anybody really no-



tices there's no cash register until they go to check out," James says. "They've just been with the jeaner the whole time." Removing the barrier of a counter between the customer and associate allows for more engagement and helps build more authentic customer relationships, he says. In addition, the company's breadth of sizes allows Silver Jeans to be democratic and inclusive, "and when you walk into our store environment, you feel that. Denim can be a very exclusive type of product."

When the company decided to establish its

retail arm, it looked closely at other jeans brands across the globe. What they found was that most picked a niche in a size range — and those who weren't that size couldn't "play the game." Coming from such a longstanding family-owned business, however, the emphasis was on values like heritage, creating a family of friends and delivering a positive experience. Mobile was an important part of making that happen.

But like many retailers who have consid-

ered incorporating technology such as a mobile POS system, Silver Jeans discovered that it all comes down to making it operational.

"What do you do when there isn't a physical space to stand in a wrap?" James says. "Because we started from scratch, we were very conscious of creating an environment that could support mobile. If you haven't considered the non-technical aspects of it, it could come across as a little clunky."

It might also impact what a retailer looks for in an associate; Silver Jeans hires "against core competencies instead of a skill set." The top priority is landing people who are comfortable in their own skin — and most likely representative of the store's 18-34 demographic — as so much of the job is about engaging the customer and staying right by her side.



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CONTINUING THE CONVERSATION

The sixth Silver Jeans store opens this spring, and plenty of lessons have been learned along the way.

Rich Gibsen, Island Pacific's vice president of global services, says his company also has learned much through the partnership. Although the Island Pacific SmartStore solution had been rolled out internationally, Silver Jeans was the first U.S. customer to take full advantage of the mobile solution.

"As they were new to retail, they were able to think about their mobile strategy from the ground up," Gibsen says. "That was good for us, as it was still a brand new product. They had a flexibility that other retailers might not have. They could be more agile in their requirements and flexible in their approach. We needed that type of partnership, too."

Aside from the technical aspects, however, Gibsen says his key takeaway from working with Silver Jeans is centered on the associates and how they use the store's mobile devices.

"Mobile allows them to not think about the transaction in the traditional way," Gibsen says. "They don't want to queue the customers behind the POS. They want to continue their conversation. It became about, 'How do we design a device that enables that conversation, all the way through the tendering of the credit card?'"

As a "boutique software house," Island Pacific was "big enough to understand the industry and bring quite a bit of depth and product knowledge but small enough to be agile and able to bring a new product to the market quickly," Gibsen says.

And James considers that the perfect fit.

"You can quickly become someone else's culture when you buy something right out of the box," he says. "We're a blue collar, roll-up-the-sleeves-and-get-things-done culture. We're very Canadian that way."

"But the reason we've been around for 92 years manufacturing jeans is that we're about continuous improvement, about making it better. We're able to sell jeans at an \$88 price point that you would buy at another store for \$150. That comes with a certain work ethic. We know how we want things done." **STORES**

Fiona Soltes, a freelancer based near Nashville, Tenn., loves a good bargain almost as much as she loves a good story.