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THEBUZZ

Craft and hardware stores to share HouseMart brand

You might not think a company whose Hawaii origins stretch back to the early 1900s would dare to think of re-branding, but that is exactly what the parent company of Hawaii's Ben Franklin Crafts and several island Ace Hardware stores is doing.

After years of careful consideration and employee input, Maui Varieties Ltd. (MVL) is re-branding its stores to HouseMart Ben Franklin Crafts and HouseMart Ace Hardware, said Guy Kamitaki, a third-generation co-owner.

"Saturday, April 13, our Oahu Ben Franklin Crafts will launch our new branding name, HouseMart Ben Franklin Crafts," said Joy Shimabukuro, creative director for HouseMart's retail concepts.

The Oahu celebration will have at least one member of the founding family at each of the four Ben Franklin Crafts locations Saturday, and "we are having five of our customers' favorite craft

vendors in our stores to do free make-and-takes to help us celebrate," Shimabukuro said.

The signage hasn't changed drastically, so regular customers won't be too alarmed.

The overhead sign now has a circle containing the letters "HM" ahead of the familiar Ben Franklin Crafts sign.

"Not H & M," laughed Kamitaki, referring to the global clothing and accessories retailer that plans to enter the Hawaii market.

So, was HouseMart chosen because it sounds like How Smart?

Kamitaki laughed. "Actually, we had a contest in our company. It was really hard to find the name."

Third-generation co-owner Lynn Ushijima acknowledged that it was a play on words but also was attractive and "fit both hardware and crafts," as both stores are geared for things done around the house, she said.

Window decals and floor mats also introduce customers to the new logo, Shimabukuro said. Also, employees are getting "a new logo shirt." On Oahu, employees will begin wearing those new shirts Saturday.

When the Kauai Ace Hardware store was re-branded HouseMart Ace Hardware in November, Kamitaki and his cousin Paul Mizoguchi were on hand to greet customers. Customers congratulated them, perhaps thinking they had just bought the business, he chuckled.

Not all of Hawaii's Ace Hardware stores belong to MVL, though it does have 14 on Hawaii island, Maui and Kauai; four in the Las Vegas area; six in Washington state; and one in Oregon.

MVL also owns and operates four Ben Franklin Crafts stores on Oahu, one on Maui and one on Hawaii island. Its first Ben Franklin store, in Kahului, was a so-called five-and-dime that opened in 1951. Five-and-dimes went out as big boxes came in, but by then the company had figured out its new direction. Sometimes both directions can work at once: Some of the stores contain both hardware and craft supplies. Re-branding for Maui's stores will occur over the summer, and Hawaii island's will roll out in the fall.

The fourth generation of



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Six Ben Franklin Crafts stores statewide are being re-branded as HouseMart Ben Franklin Crafts, with overhead signs adding a circle containing the letters "HM."

the family also is being brought into the company's operations, to see that the family-owned retail legacy continues.

The re-branding serves to differentiate MVL's Ace Hardware stores from the others and also will serve as a common link to the Ben Franklin Crafts stores, so customers can see that "we're the same family, still the same company," Ushijima said. "We wanted to grow, and so this HouseMart (brand) ties in all the companies that are affiliated with us."

It also helps the employees of both retail concepts

feel more unified, and they have shared a great deal of positive feedback, Ushijima said.

The re-branding is not a prelude to either the Ace Hardware or Ben Franklin names going away. That's "not the plan at all," Kamitaki said.

"We have two good brand names," Ushijima said. The plan is for the HouseMart brand name to become more visible over time.

The company's Ace Hardware stores stage regular

community events for nonprofits, and the HouseMart name will align the brand and its longtime ownership in the minds of nonprofits, consumers and donors, Shimabukuro said.

The stores also create fun and cool "Hardware Science" projects that are sometimes demonstrated on "The Joy of Crafting," Ben Franklin Crafts' original show on OC 16. Otherwise, "Hardware Science" videos can be seen on the company website, while Ben Franklin Crafts has a YouTube channel featuring its "Crankin' Out Crafts" videos, offering tutorials on wide-ranging craft, gift and art projects.

More extensions of Ben Franklin's widespread marketing efforts are the blogs linked on the company website. Shimabukuro blogs, as does Lynn Kamitaki, wife of Wayne Kamitaki, a founding family member. Both write about various types of crafting (including many edible projects), replete with pictures, as crafting and jewelry-making blogs should be.

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