

Ace, Ben Franklin stores thrive on strong family ties - Hawaii News - Honolulu Star-Advertiser

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The Maui-based parent company of 31 Ben Franklin Crafts and Ace Hardware stores in Hawaii and three mainland states is marking its 60th anniversary this year.

Maui Varieties Ltd. has six Ben Franklin Crafts stores and 21 Ace Hardware stores:

Ben Franklin Crafts

- >> Hawaii island: Hilo, plus hybrid stores in Kamuela and Kona
- >> Kauai: Kapaa, Lihue (hybrid store within Ace Hardware)

>> Maui: Kahului

>> Oahu: Enchanted Lake, Kailua; Mapunapuna; Market City; Pearl City

Ace Hardware

>> Hawaii island: Captain Cook, Hilo, Kamuela and Kona (hybrids), Keaau, Pahoia, Naalehu, Ocean View

>> Kauai: Eleele, Kapaa, Lihue (hybrid)

>> Maui: Kihei, Lahaina, Pukalani

>> Nevada: Desert Shores, Flamingo, Lone Mountain, Southern Highlands, all in the Las Vegas area

>> Oregon: Milwaukie

>> Washington: Des Moines, Lakewood, Longview, Olympia, Renton (two stores)

On the Net:

>> www.mvlhawaii.com

>> www.benfranklinhawaii.com

Facebook:

>> is.gd/FB_BFC

>> is.gd/FB_AceMVL

Twitter:

>> [@bfcrafts](https://twitter.com/bfcrafts)

>> [@joyofcrafting](https://twitter.com/joyofcrafting)

>> [@acehardwarehi](https://twitter.com/acehardwarehi)

Third-generation family business Maui Varieties Ltd. is run by siblings Wayne Kamitaki of Hilo, Guy Kamitaki and Lynn Ushijima of Oahu, and their cousin Paul Mizoguchi of Maui.

Leaders of the business since 1975, the four plan special events and promotions at both store chains, including prize drawings, celebrity crafting competitions and birthday cakes beginning in September with an event at the Ben Franklin Crafts store in Mapunapuna.

Way prior to the 1951 establishment of Maui Varieties, the family matriarch, Japanese picture bride Shikano Kamitaki, opened a small dry-goods store in the early 1900s. The K. Kamitaki Store sold customized aloha shirts and other merchandise to plantation workers and others in the community. It eventually became the Kahului Dry Goods store run by siblings Tadami Kamitaki and Matsuko Mizoguchi. They acquired franchise rights to open Ben Franklin variety stores in Hawaii, and in 1951 the first store debuted in Kahului.

One of many national five-and-dime chains, Ben Franklin's customers shopped for everything from housewares to school supplies and underwear to Christmas presents — and enjoyed freshly popped popcorn in many locations. But the retail landscape changed, five-and-dimes gave way to Walmarts and Kmarts, and "Ben Franklin couldn't survive as general merchandise stores anymore," Mizoguchi said.

The stores became niche retailers of craft supplies until the stores' parent eventually went bankrupt and the name was purchased by Wisconsin-based value retailer Promotions Unlimited, of which MVL is a licensee.

MVL's Ben Franklin stores began altering the merchandise mix in 1989, and "by 1993 they were completely converted," Ushijima said.

In-store workshops, demonstrations and make-and-take classes have been key to business success. In the past nine years, the craft supply stores also have gotten a boost from "Joy of Crafting," a show on OC16 hosted by Ben Franklin Creative Director Joy Shimabukuro. She started with the company on the sales floor and now handles merchandising and other tasks in addition to hosting the show and blogging. New shows debut at 6:30 p.m. the first Sunday of each month and on either the third or fourth Sunday, depending on the number of Sundays in the month.

In 1980 MVL got into hardware retailing with Coast to Coast hardware stores, a chain no longer in business, but in 1984 the company became a member of the Ace Hardware buying cooperative. It has expanded to 10 stores on three neighbor islands and 11 in Nevada, Oregon and Washington. Four stores

— in Lihue, Kapaa on Kauai, and Kailua-Kona and Kamuela on the island of Hawaii — are hybrid hardware and crafts concepts.

"I think that might be our future as we move forward," Mizoguchi said. "It broadens the market," drawing men, women and families with children who could grow up to become another generation of customers.

Both Ben Franklin and Ace "are basically used to decorate and improve homes, which is most people's primary focus," said Wayne Kamitaki, president. Both are sources of great "satisfaction when we're able to solve a problem or help someone with a project," he said.

While they work very hard at the business, the four owners and 10 children across their respective households also maintain close family ties separate from the day-in, day-out of the company, Ushijima said. "That's how we keep the family business concept going."

In addition to supporting nonprofit organizations, the four are active with the Family Business Center of Hawaii in the Shidler College of Business at the University of Hawaii at Manoa.

"They are an example of a great family business," said John Butler, associate dean for academic affairs, via email from Thailand. The siblings and cousin are "very willing to share their experiences with other family businesses."

They also are working on a succession plan to transition eventually and hopefully, they say, to the fourth generation of family ownership.

The percentage of first-generation, family-run businesses is very high, Ushijima said, on the order of 80 percent to 90 percent. However, the percentage of third-generation family-run businesses plummets to 15 percent, which further drops to 3 percent by the fourth generation.

As the fourth generation, often more highly educated and less connected to the business during its youth, finds its own successes in other professions, "there's less desire to work in a family business, and that's a challenge," Wayne Kamitaki said.

If MVL does not succeed as a family-owned business, "we do want to make sure the business continues. Besides family, we do have a strong sense of obligation to our employees who helped build the company with us." The company employs 330 people in Hawaii, about 450 in total.

Honoring that obligation and continuing to provide service to the community is "just as important as family succession."

Each of the four is grateful to customers for 60 years of support. "Okage sama de," Wayne Kamitaki said, means, 'I am who I am because of you' in Japanese. "Our business is here" because of the customers, "and we hope to continue providing that service to the communities we serve."