

Rolling up the rim for success

Former Tim Hortons' Director of Marketing reveals the story behind the company's accomplishments

by Tony von Richter

In the annals of Canadian business, few firms have transcended their nature of simple corporations to become a part of Canadian culture. Tim Hortons was one of those success stories, and the company's former Director of Marketing, Ron Buist, was in Fredericton last Thursday to speak at the Canadian National Institute of the Blind's Vision Dinner fundraising event.

While serving as the Director of Marketing for 24 years would be impressive enough on its own, Buist has another item on his résumé that's just as impressive.

He invented the "Roll Up the Rim" campaign.

Buist says the idea came to him after a trip to the printers when he found out he could print under the blank rim at the top of the coffee cup.

"It's something rather unique I guess, never been done before," says Buist. "I was looking at the manufacturer of paper cups to try and come up with some idea of a contest and something that wouldn't double the cost of the paper. Roll Up worked that, because all we had to do was change the printing plates, change the message, and we could print underneath the rim of the cup. It's so basic that I had thought someone else would have thought of it, but nobody else had by that point. Just roll up the rim, there's an answer underneath and away you go."

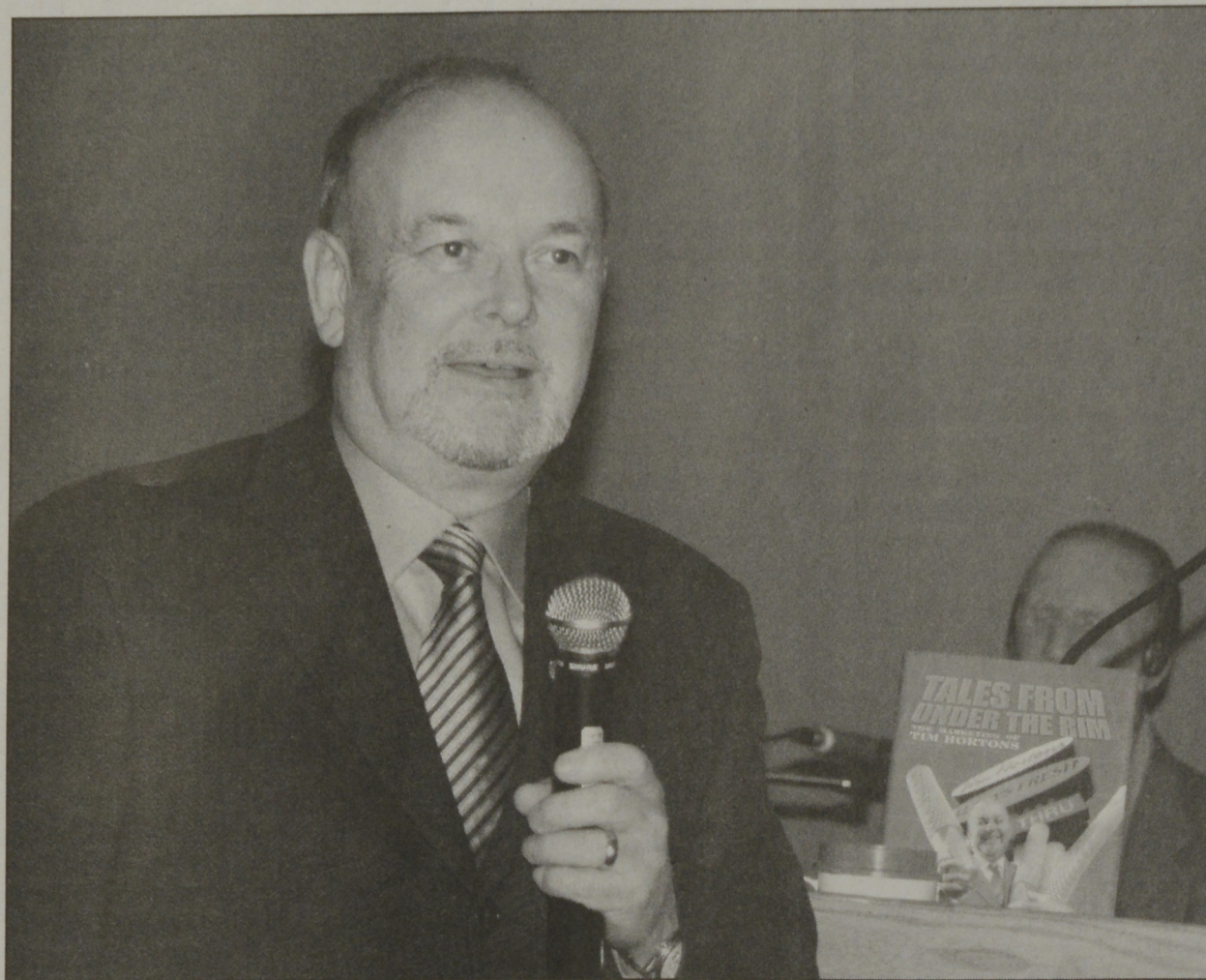
It is this type of story that led CNIB to ask Buist to speak at their events last week.

"We thought he had an interesting story to tell about a product and how it was developed and how it's become a cultural icon," said Duncan Williams, Service and Operations Director of Nova Scotia, PEI, and New Brunswick for CNIB. "We thought the business communities in Fredericton, Moncton, and Saint John would really like an opportunity to hear his story and hear the Tim Hortons story."

Buist found the arrangement with CNIB somewhat ironic as, unbeknownst to the current staff, he used to record books on tape for the organization years ago.

About to enter its 22nd year, Buist credits the longevity and success of the Roll Up promotion to its ease of entry and the high odds of winning.

"It's a very interesting promotion. One of the main reasons it succeeds, which sometimes people overlook, is



Tony von Richter / The Brunswickian

Buist was the keynote speaker for the CNIB's Vision Dinner at the Fredericton Inn this past Thursday.

that you usually win something. People like that, that you have an opportunity to win something. The famous line is 'I never win anything; all I ever win is a ...,' but you win something. It's very easy to play, there's no difficulty to it, and I defy you to hold the cup in your hand and not roll it up."

Buist says the promotion wasn't intended to become the visible part of Canadian culture that it has, rather it was started because the company had three goals in mind. "One was to reward our current customer base, second was to be able to attract new customers, and the third was to be able to increase sales of the product, which in this case was coffee."

Although he has found fame for creating the Roll Up campaign and serving as the Director of Marketing

for Tim Hortons, Buist didn't actually begin his career with the company, as he was working with Black's Camera Stores when he became aware of the position through an article in Marketing magazine.

After reading the article, Buist called the company and was hired within three weeks – not with a contract or a complicated negotiation or hiring process, but with a handshake from the head of the company himself, Ron Joyce.

"It was on a handshake. Ron met with some of the other fellows on staff and talked about me, came out from the meeting, put out his hand, and said welcome to Tim Hortons. That started a 24-year career. We had faith in each other I guess."

That faith is still evident today as Buist calls Joyce "remarkable" and "one of the most astute businessmen

I've ever known." According to Buist, Joyce's greatest strengths are his vision, foresight, and his ability to motivate his employees.

"He's a good motivator. He's a person who motivates by making sure it's worthwhile working with the company; he takes pride in it. Takes considerable pride in the storeowners and one of the things he teaches you is really they're the ones that make the company work and he's quite right. Without their cooperation, there just wouldn't be a Tim Hortons, so it worked very well for us."

Many credit Joyce and Buist for taking Tim Hortons from the mere 79 stores when Buist started in 1977 to over 2,000 when he retired in 2001, but he's quick to point to the often overlooked real estate department headed up by Henry Svazas.

Once Svazas acquired the real estate, Joyce would go out and find the franchises and then Buist would step in and the company would begin to develop the Tim Hortons brand in that market.

Buist explained the branding strategy by saying that rather than going out and blitzing the marketplace with advertising to generate as much awareness and interest as possible, the Tim Hortons product had to be refined and working within the stores before customers flooded in and experienced it for the first time.

According to Buist, the real reason for the rise of Tim Hortons wasn't due to the efforts of himself, Joyce, or Svazas; it was the individual store owners that made the difference.

"One of the reasons for the great success of Tim Hortons is that it's not just a matter of coming up with ideas, it's a matter of it being accepted by the store owners. That's your key. Ron Joyce had the talent to get the storeowners really working with him. That's what makes it work, because it was the store owners who pushed to get things done, had the interest in them."

That relationship with the store owners was so strong that many were willing to utilize ideas and concepts that they didn't necessarily agree with.

"I think one of the best compliments I've ever had was one storeowner that

conditions released his book. He says that over the years with Tim Hortons, he has fallen in love with Atlantic Canada, and believes that it's the Atlantic Ocean that unites the region.

"The ocean is the common thread. If you have something go wrong,

like a horrific plane crash that happens in Eastern Canada, everybody stops, they open their doors, they open their fridges, they say 'take my home, take my house – it's yours.' They don't lock the doors, they just invite people in. That is a unique thing. Very, very unique."

Buist said that he experienced a fraction of this Eastern Canadian hospitality first hand during last week's speaking tour.

"I was checking into one of the hotels here. It was one of those single doors that swung open and my luggage got stuck in the door. A man of about my age was going the other way, put everything down,

jumped up on my luggage cart, turned the luggage all around and helped me get it out of the door."

"That's something you can't buy: the people of the east coast I find are very great. My family immigrated to this country in 1834 and they happened

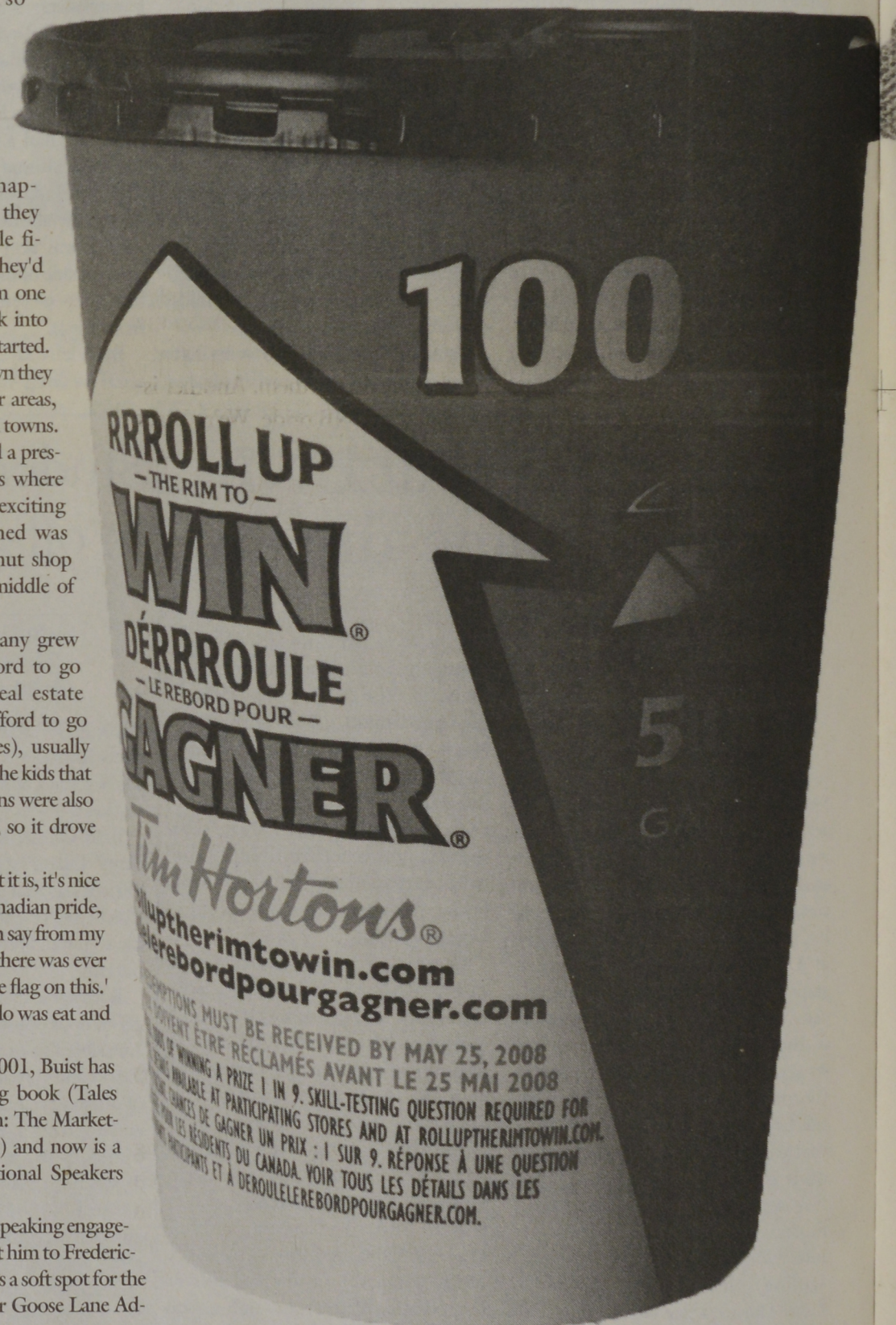
to immigrate to Nova Scotia, so I've kind of taken over their tartan and like it," said Buist.

It's clear when speaking with Buist that he remembers his time with Tim Hortons fondly, and is thankful for the opportunity to work for the company agreed to so many years ago on a handshake with Ron Joyce. It's also clear that even though he and Joyce are at times largely credited with the rise of the company, Buist has another theory.

"To my mind, the secret of Hortons has been the cohesiveness of franchisees and management. We work together. It never was an 'us or them' thing. We worked together, and made an awful difference. It really has."

"I THINK ONE OF THE BEST COMPLIMENTS I'VE EVER HAD WAS ONE STORE OWNER THAT SAID TO ME ONCE 'RON, THAT IDEA YOU'VE GOT IS ONE OF THE DUMBEST IDEAS I'VE EVER HEARD. I'LL TAKE 500 OF THEM AND GIVE IT A TRY.'"

- RON BUIST



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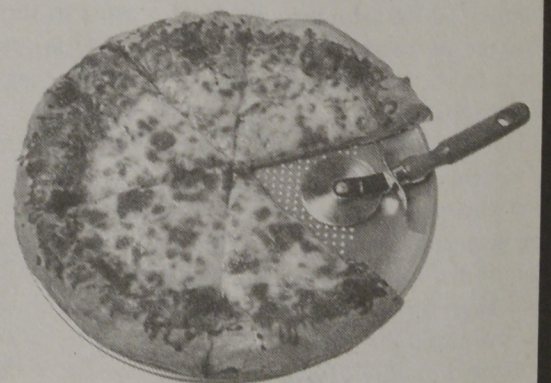
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