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Jon Stanfield

Stanfield's Ltd. North America

Stanfield's Limited has been making underwear for Canadian men since the mid-19th century. Now in its fifth generation of family management, the Nova Scotia company has branched out into lingerie and winter sports gear. Behind the business is a family committed to long-term goals and to the community where the business is based. Those values have been ingrained in the stewardship of Jon Stanfield, who is determined to keep the business in family ownership, despite intense competition.



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Jon Stanfield,
President, Stanfield's Ltd.
North America

When it comes to images of the frontier folk who forged the modern nation state of Canada, underwear might not be the first thing that comes to mind. But a local maker of essential undergarments for men can justifiably claim to have played a role alongside those decked out in checked cotton lumberjack shirts.

That’s because Stanfield’s famous “unshrinkable” and “80/20” wool underwear became the crucial undergarments of the Klondike Gold Rush of the late 19th century. Generations



From those early beginnings, Stanfield’s began supplying underwear to the male population of Canada.

of Canadian loggers and fishermen also wore Stanfield’s hardwearing and toasty long johns. That helped to establish in the minds of Canada’s population that Stanfield stood for underwear – indeed, it was the “underwear company” of Canada.

In Nova Scotia since 1882

Behind this iconic brand is a family business that can trace its history back to 1856. Back then, Charles Stanfield – an immigrant from the UK – and his brother-in-law established the Tryon Woolen Mills in Prince Edward Island. After selling that business and moving to the small town of Truro in the province of Nova Scotia, Charles set up a woolen mill business that eventually became known as Stanfield’s Limited. From those early beginnings, it began supplying underwear to the male population of Canada. Later, Stanfield’s developed the highly

successful “shrink-proof process” and, later still, helped to popularize the T-shirt in Canada.

Today, Stanfield’s is still based in Truro, Nova Scotia. The company has continuously has produced Canadian-made products in the same factory since 1882. It is managed by the fourth and fifth generation: Tom Stanfield and his son Jon. There’s much to be proud about when it comes to the company’s provenance. “It’s difficult to imagine these early



Annual Stanfield’s Stag Party in August 1935.

days of the business,” says Jon, who manages Stanfield’s North American business. “But I hope the legacy of the entrepreneurial endeavors of Charles and subsequent generations remains embedded in the business for years to come.”

Stanfield’s still makes hard-wearing long johns and many men’s briefs, all well suited to Canada’s famously harsh winters. But in recent years, it has branched out to become a broader apparel company, making winter sports base layers, socks and accessories, women’s lingerie and intimates, fire retardant apparel and accessories.

“In the years ahead, the challenge for us is to expand our brand into different categories and different channels of distribution, and to move away from the image of just being an underwear company,” says Jon.



The family business is managed by the 4th and 5th generation.



The Company continuously has produced Canadian made products in the same Truro factory ...



... since 1882.

As part of that strategy, a few years ago, Stanfield’s acquired the women’s underwear brands Elita and Hanna. “We have traditionally struggled on the women’s side of things, so these acquisitions have helped us to address the issue and become more important to our customer base,” says Jon.

Stanfield’s might be well known among Canadians – and increasingly to both sexes in the country – but it has to compete with huge international companies such as Calvin Klein, Fruit of the Loom, Jockey and Hanes. “These are very big companies,” says Jon. “Staying ahead in this industry is tough, as you always need to be creative and innovative – whether it is with a new fabric or a level of expertise in manufacturing.” Over the years, Stanfield’s has also expanded geographically, namely into the US market through acquisition. This has been crucial for the business’s long-term profitability and growth strategies.

Added to the rivalry from big brands, the apparel industry has been squeezed hard in most advanced economies as competition from emerging markets has intensified over many years. This trend has put pressure on Stanfield’s margins.

A legacy to protect

“The textile industry in Canada has been under pressure for years,” says Jon. And that’s often made it harder for Stanfield’s to offer their “Made in Canada” brand proposition. “I think Canadian consumers are willing to pay more for product that is made there, but it has sometimes been a struggle to convince them or, in some cases, make them aware that there remains a viable option.” Today, Stanfield’s does import some products, but the majority of its products it sells in Canada are still made in Canada.

Having more than 160 years’ experience certainly helps the family business to get through tough periods, says Jon. “We’ve experienced difficult periods in the past, and that helps us deal with any problems we encounter today. A long-term approach is crucial in this business.”



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Jon started at Stanfield’s aged just 13. He recalls sweeping the factory floor and stocking shelves. After studying, he gradually moved up the ranks, reaching a management position in 1994. He says there was no pressure from his father to come into the business, but Tom warned him about the challenges he would face if he did join: “Once you get here, it’s going to be very hard for you to leave.”

Now 44, Jon appears to be a testament to his father’s words. Jon says he’s hooked and isn’t going to leave. “I suppose it’s true with so many family members that come into a family business. It’s more than just the business. There is a legacy to protect. In some ways, it becomes a way of life and you become very passionate about the company and its brands.”

He’s adamant that this legacy will remain intact for the next generation. “There will be tough battles along the way, but it is obviously a goal to allow the business to pass to the next

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This was done with great success in 2012, when Stanfield’s launched an internet advertising campaign featuring testicular cancer survivor Mark McIntyre. The campaign was called “The Gitchhiker”, and involved McIntyre hitchhiking from Vancouver to Nova Scotia in less than a month to raise awareness of testicular cancer and cancer research. It raised thousands of dollars for the Canadian Cancer Society, and Stanfield’s online underwear sales and awareness grew tremendously during the campaign. Gitchhiker’s prequel was “Guy at Home” in 2010, and, in 2014, “#StreakWeek” was the main driver. Both raised awareness of the brand and cancer research for below the belt cancers.

“All three worked well for us,” says Jon. “The challenge is to come up with other similar exciting initiatives, which help sales and also have a good cause behind them.”

Given Stanfield’s role as one of the great family businesses in the pioneering history of Canada, coming up with those ideas might not prove too burdensome.

generation to continue the evolution of the venerable companies and brands. It won’t be easy, but certainly, I would like it to be in as good a state as it was handed over to me,” he says.

Fresh ideas to increase brand awareness

But not all Stanfields have wanted to work in the business. Perhaps the most famous one who didn’t was Robert Stanfield, the grandson of Charles and brother to Jon’s grandfather Frank T. Robert, who fought three general elections as leader of the country’s Progressive Conservative Party in the late 1960s and 1970s. A man of considerable honor, Robert has often been referred to as the “best Prime Minister Canada never had”.

Part of Stanfield’s strategy to develop its brand is to use novel advertising ideas. “Underwear for men can often be a challenge to market. So you need to come up with fresh ideas to increase brand awareness, particularly among younger consumers,” says Jon.

Jon Stanfield President	
Company name:	Stanfield’s Ltd. North America
Generation(s):	5th
Founded:	1870 in Truro, NS, Canada
Industry:	Clothing
Employees (2014):	Approx. 600 (in North America)