

Style

Family Principles



An Interview with Jack Mitchell,
Chief Executive Officer, Mitchells/Richards/Marshs

EDITORS' NOTE Jack Mitchell was named one of the top ten retail visionaries of his time by the Daily News Record. He graduated from Wesleyan University with a BA in 1961 and obtained an MA from the University of California–Berkeley. Mitchell is the author of the Wall Street Journal best-seller *Hug Your Customers* (2003), and his second book, *Hug Your People: The Proven Way to Hire, Inspire, and Recognize Your Employees and Achieve Remarkable Results* (www.bugyourpeople.com), was published in March 2008. A recipient of numerous Community Leadership awards from Sacred Heart University, the Anti-Defamation League, and the Menswear Division of the UJA-Federation of New York, Mitchell is an active speaker for the Harvard University School of Business, Build-A-Bear, Payless, Nike, and Morgan Stanley and serves on the Yale Cancer Board and Greenwich Hospital Board of Trustees.



Jack Mitchell

COMPANY BRIEF Mitchells/Richards/Marshs (www.mitchellsonline.com) is a nationally renowned men's and women's clothing store specializing in the personal touch. With roots in Connecticut and New York, the three-generation family business is well known for its employee longevity, excellent customer service, and the exquisite detail of its merchandise. Beginning as Ed Mitchell, Inc., the company evolved over the years from Mitchells of Westport to Mitchell/Richards in 1995 and finally to Mitchells/Richards/Marshs in 2006. The company has received honors from multiple retailers, including Store of the Year in 2000 and Retailer of the Year in 2001 by MR Magazine.

Are you optimistic for growth in the real estate and retail industries?

The answer is categorically yes on both counts. There is no question that the economy is struggling. Customers are hungry for extraordinary customer service from great people. You don't get customer service in a vacuum, as I say in my books. Those who know us know that our people give extraordinary customer service, whether it is for the Cartier, Brioni, Dolce & Gabbana, or Armani brands. We have the greatest products in the world, but our driving force is the customer service provided by our people.

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We focus on the three Cs: customers, clients, and community.

We plan with our family. We have seven sons who are in the family business. My brother and I are not retiring, but our roles are changing as we pass the torch to our sons. At the right time, in the right place, there's opportunity for significant growth in our own current stores and for additional stores and locations.

Many leaders in retail talk about high employee turnover, yet you have built a culture where that is not an issue. How do you retain talent?

Retaining talent is fundamental. It is the essence of my new book, *Hug Your People: The Proven Way to Hire, Inspire, and Recognize Your Employees*. Hiring nice people is the first principle. We take our time doing that, and make sure that people are genuine and trustworthy. These simple principles are family principles that my Mom and Dad shared with us when they started the business 50 years ago. Now my brother and I are sharing them with our sons. Trust is the second and most important principle. This ties into the principle of integrity. Our third principle is including people in the decision-making process. We don't include everybody on every decision, but on key issues, we genuinely try to have five sets of eyes involved in reviewing them. When people are included, they become invested. When that happens, they feel ownership, even if they don't own the business. They become a part of the family business. The little things make a difference. So those basic principles form the basis of why people stay with us. They feel good about working with us.

Many brands today focus on brand extensions. Are there opportunities for new products?

We try to introduce new products in the marketplace from time to time. Jewelry and watches are providing the strongest growth in our business. One of our sons, Todd Mitchell, received the prestigious Graduate Gemologist diploma from the Gemological Institute of America and then began to build a really great jewelry team. Currently, we're excited about building our jewelry business to service our customers.

Today, the focus on community and corporate responsibility is in the forefront. From a leadership point of view, how

important is it? How do you motivate your employees to get involved?

It is very, very important. We are very much involved in the community, and we host many charitable events. We live in the community so we should give back to the community. We have a lot of wonderful philanthropic employees. We can leverage our position in the community with our stores. We have two very large and attractive places to shop that we often use as the locations for events that help raise money for many different causes. We hold an annual event with Near & Far Aid, which is a group of mostly women volunteers in the Fairfield and Westport areas that issues grants for local charities. We've been doing it for 11 years. We have a major fashion show, a wine tasting, a wine auction, and a silent auction. Matt Lauer, Joseph Abboud, and Dave Price have all contributed at some point and have served as auctioneers. Last year we raised more than \$1 million in our store in Westport, Connecticut, and had fun doing it.

We're very involved with another organization, the Inner-City Foundation for Charity and Education, which holds its event at the Greenwich Hyatt. Jack Welch and other GE folks, such as Bob Wright, got a lot of the corporate community involved and raised between \$2 and \$3 million in one night.

Those are the big things. We also do many little things. There's always something going on in our stores, which we use as a platform for giving in addition to the money we give to the community.

What would your employees say it's like to work for Jack Mitchell?

I hope that they would say that I'm a real person; that I'm an honest, genuine person who is passionate about people and trying to find the best I possibly can in each and every one of them; that I give them the opportunity to be themselves, to grow, and to have fun with their colleagues and families; and that I help them to earn self-confidence and to earn enough money to live in the community and give back to the community.

I'm someone who they can share something confidential with. I will keep their confidence. I'm hardworking. I have a real passion. I work, but I enjoy it so much it doesn't even seem like work to me. ●

A Mitchells display aisle