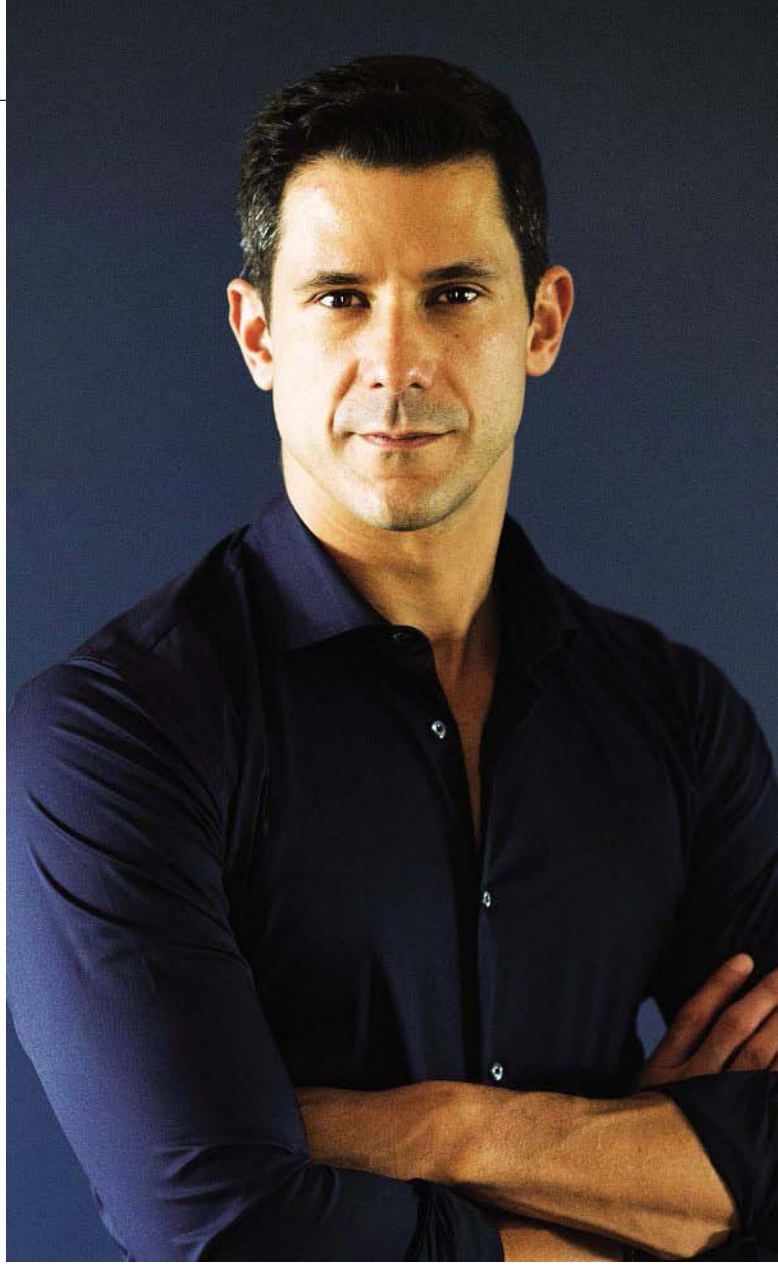


PUTTING THE CUSTOMER FIRST

Paul Jason has hit rock bottom and picked himself up to become a force in the retail business, writes ***Greg Ardé***

Paul Jason remembers sitting on the floor of his shop sobbing. That was eight years ago and seems impossible, looking at him now. The 38-year-old looks like he's stepped right off the pages of ***GQ*** magazine – trim, taut and terrific, brimming with confidence.

But the Durban born entrepreneur remembers the sad day only too well. Circumstances had created a reluctant grocer of him and precious few shoppers were visiting his supermarket.

One evening after work it all got too much for Paul. He closed the shop, sat down on the floor with his head in his hands and sobbed. He remembers bemused window shoppers peered through the glass. Utterly dejected, Paul couldn't even lift his head.

He'd sweated blood to become a chartered accountant, then left the interminably dull profession for a heady life in property development. But the last leg of the journey took an unexpected dog's leg and there he was, wearing a Spar shirt with a name badge and selling fruit and vegetables, baked beans and toilet paper.

Not quite the glamour he had hoped for, but in hindsight a gift for the young man whose immigrant Portuguese and Jewish grandparents arrived in South Africa with nothing.

Soon after Paul finished his articles, he and his siblings were given a choice. They could either inherit a property that was about to be liquidated to service debt in the high interest rate climate, or auction the property on the site of what is now Glenore Centre, near Virginia Airport on the M4. The centre was built by their mom's father.

Paul is lively, well read, and engaging. He went to Michaelhouse and grew up comfortably. Life as an accountant would have been a breeze, but he hated it – and leapt at the chance to redevelop the crumbling inheritance. With the advice of his brother Mark he turned the building around and signed up Woolworths in his soon-to-be re-launched centre. On the strength of such a big player as an anchor, other tenants flocked to be there.

He got stuck in, battled municipal red tape and spent weekends painting, gardening and generally sprucing up the property.

Things were looking rosy, and then to his horror, Woolworths pulled out, saying the area was over traded. This, in turn, prompted the other tenants to bail. Paul needed to secure another supermarket tenant in a hurry, and when he connected with the Spar group, it was a godsend. Spar wanted to be at Glenore and he was elated. Except, he misunderstood the Spar representative and discovered at the 11th hour that they were selling him a Spar franchise.

On November 20, 2009 he swapped a hard hat for grocer's outfit. It was a baptism of fire, of shelf packing and desperately trying to drive people to the store.

Soon he started learning



tough retailing lessons and ended up crying on the floor.

"I'd like to say I was a tough guy, but I was a little jerk who was terrified. I didn't know anything about retail and my ego was damaged by the prospect of failure. I was competing against retailers who had been in business in the area from before I was born."

But the realisation was a wake-up call. Mark Jason sat his brother down and encouraged him, asking what was the worst that could happen? He could have one last stab at the venture, and if it failed in a set time, he'd have to get a job and pay off the debt.

Having internalised the worst case scenario, Paul committed. He had to distinguish himself quickly to attract customers. He borrowed more money to stay afloat and threw himself into his shop, developing a zeal for customer service.

"I couldn't afford to build a bigger, better store to compete. There was only one way I could make baked beans and toilet paper remarkable and that was with exceptional customer service."

Paul started walking the aisles and shaking his customer's hands. He wore the Spar shirt and name badge with pride and preached the gospel of customer service to his staff. "We had to have fun doing this, so we workshopped actual customer service scenarios. If the customer is king, then how do you actually treat him like that? You make eye contact, you smile, you greet him sincerely. It's in your body language. It's about getting to know what the customer really needs. If you don't have something in stock, offer to get it and drop it off at home."

The reward for the culture that Paul developed has been phenomenal. For seven of the eight years he has been in business, his Glenore Spar has been among the country's top 20 stores in its category of over 1 000 stores. He has also grown turnover by 583% since he opened. A kitchen assistant has become a manager and Paul has addressed a national convention of Spar franchisees on the value of training.

He was paid a huge compliment when, during a break in the conference, a Spar retailer approached him and said: "Hey lightie, I've been in retail longer than you've been alive and you've made me see by business and my staff in a new light."

> **"Paul has since grown his business to include the Glenore KwikSpar and Tops and a KwikSpar and Tops in Blair Athol in Westville"**

Paul has since grown his business to include the Glenore KwikSpar and Tops and a KwikSpar and Tops in Blair Athol in Westville.

His fundamental rules in retail are simple. Empowering staff so they love servicing their customers; be immersed in the community you serve; and understand the difference between price and value.

"We talk about a relentless pursuit of perfection. We do sweat the small stuff because every little pixel counts in a beautiful picture." *

