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SPECIAL REPORT



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Shifting focus to protect a legacy

For half a century, the Frank family has been carving a niche in Perth's retail space.



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“He could repair just about anything photographic and he gained a reputation for that - Saul Frank

SOME of Saul and Howard Frank's earliest memories are of the red glow in the darkroom in their father's camera store as still images sprung to life in front of their eyes.

Their father, Ronald, had dabbled in metal work, sales and even diamond trading during the 1960s, after colour blindness curtailed his dream of becoming an electrical engineer.

His true passion, however, lay in street photography and, when servicing his camera became a quarterly expense, Ronald set about learning to do it himself.

He got pretty good at it, too.

So much so that, before long he was attending auctions, acquiring large quantities of second-hand camera gear to repair and resell.

What was once a home-based hobby quickly became a fully-fledged business, and in 1968, he officially founded Camera Electronic Service Company.

An ever-growing customer base and his impending wedding (to Valerie) served as the catalyst for the opening of his first shopfront.

According to Saul Frank, his father had realised home needed to be home and business needed to be elsewhere.

On June 11 1971, 27-year-old Ronald opened his first Camera Electronic store on Angove Street in North Perth.

The first few years proved challenging, with much of Ronald's time taken up with establishing himself in the industry, securing accounts with major brands, and gaining a reputation for his technical skills.

“He could repair just about anything photographic and he gained a reputation for that,” Saul told *Business News*.

But the company was outgrowing its North Perth premises, prompting a move to a larger store on Fitzgerald Street in 1988, complete with a custom showroom and workshop.

By the age of 14, Saul was spending his Saturdays learning the inner workings of the business.

He worked part-time in the store after finishing high school, attending TAFE classes at night and developing prints in the dark room until the early hours of the morning.

Several years later, Howard joined him, crediting those early years with having instilled their father's appreciation for old-school photography, his love of dealing with people, and trading.

Howard went to university to study business before returning to work in the shop, training in electronic servicing and working in repairs for more than seven years.

But when the time came to move to its new Stirling Street store in 1996, Howard transitioned into the financial side of the operation.

While being the boss's sons had its benefits, it also increased the pressure to perform.

“Dad having the shop was good fun and gave us the opportunity to meet countless wholesale representatives and learn the business,” Saul said.

“But being the boss's son, you really had to prove yourself.”

The Stirling Street store became a haven for professional and amateur photographers, offering new and pre-owned equipment, servicing and repairs, and helping the company position itself as a leading photographic imaging service.

In 2010, the Franks purchased the adjacent property and opened



Saul (left) and Howard Frank with a photograph of their father, Ronald.
Photos: Camera Electronic

education affiliate partner Shoot Photography Workshops, hosting educational courses for budding photographers.

Taking the reins

Having run the business for four decades, Ronald formally retired in 2008, handing over to Saul and Howard.

But the Frank brothers agree their father never truly left the business.

“I say ‘retired’ ... but in his own mind, dad never retired,” Howard said.

“Even after throwing him a retirement party, he would tell people he was ‘semi-retired’.

“It was his philosophy on life and work that you should never truly retire.”

In the years leading up to the handing over of the business, Howard concedes its direction and the transition from film to digital had become an issue of concern.

The market had changed drastically, with most of the population now carrying smartphones fitted with cameras.

The business provided a comfortable life for the Frank family, but Saul and Howard were becoming increasingly

aware that they would need to adapt to new technology if it was to survive.

“We realised pretty early on that we would need to constantly diversify in order to maintain our relevance,” Howard said.

“Dad was an incredible technician and he was amazing in the film days, but we knew we needed to evolve, to take on new technology.”

The pair hit the ground running, attending their first international trade show in 2010.

“For us, diversifying was crucial,” Howard said.

“There was a time when we couldn't really afford international flights, but we knew we had to do it for the future of the business and get an idea of what was out there and what was possible.

“We saw it as an opportunity to see trends happening in much bigger markets than Australia, and stay ahead of the game.

“You have to try and stay ahead of the game and have the groundbreaking ideas rather than following the crowd.”

Five years later, Camera Electronic launched Photo Live Expo, Australia's largest consumer photographic expo.

By 2016, the event was drawing 3,000 attendees daily.



1971, Camera Electronic's first retail store in Angove Steet, North Perth.

Meanwhile, the brothers were busy preparing to take on their next challenge, opening a second Camera Electronic store.

Saul and Howard wanted to take the business to Murray Street, the heart of Perth's central business district.

Ronald inspected the premises once the pair had acquired it, but his sudden passing at the age of 72 meant he never got to see it completed.

A new chapter

The COVID-19 pandemic brought with it significant challenges for a swath of industries, particularly retail.

But it also provided the opportunity to reshape and refocus the business, according to Saul, as it approached its 50th anniversary.

Despite the lockdown, the growth of e-commerce, cautious consumer spending and a reduction in foot traffic due to ongoing restrictions, Saul and Howard took a risk and opened a new bricks-and-mortar store.

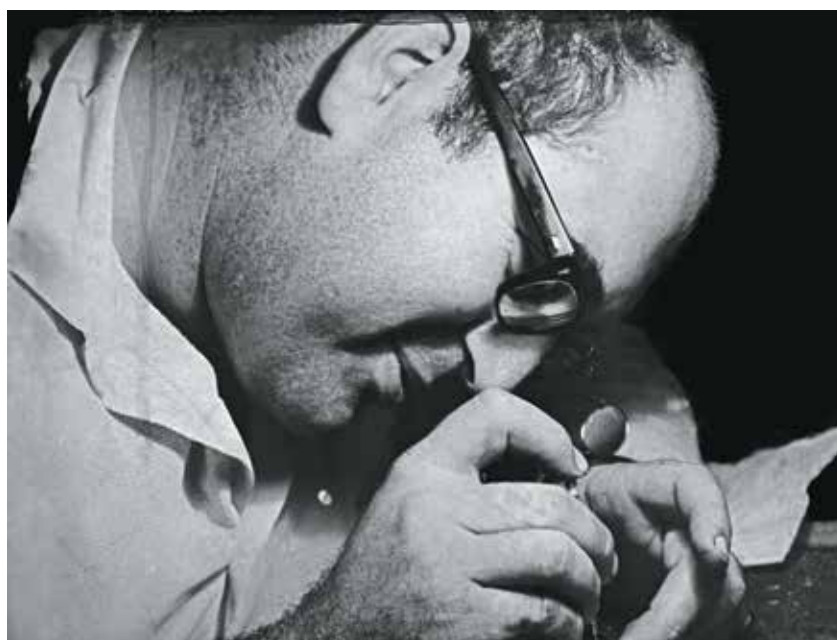
The purchase of electronic goods had fallen 15.5 per cent, and dwindling office occupancy rates threatened to compound the challenges for retailers in Perth's CBD, but the pair remained committed to their latest business venture.

The new store, Wanderlust, has brought some of the latest in high-tech gadgets to Western Australia, with family, friends, and suppliers helping the Frank brothers take the store from concept to opening in just five weeks.

The Hay Street pop-up store opened on November 20 2020, bringing everything from e-scooters to electronic pets' toys to the city's CBD.

"We'd been talking about it for years before we did it," Howard said.

"Photography was still a fantastic industry, but it was in decline.



Ronald Frank, founder of Camera Electronic.

"Our suppliers had headphones and speakers, but we just didn't have the right message and connections to make it all work.

"Wanderlust was an opportunity to diversify while drastically expanding our potential customer base and opening our doors to tech adopters of all ages.

"Photography is always going to be in our DNA, it's in our blood; we have a host of really loyal customers and we would never let them go.

"But Wanderlust really allows us that future growth."

The store was supposed to be a trial but it ended up bucking the retail trends.

By the eve of its one-year anniversary, Wanderlust had found a new home sitting alongside the company's Murray Street Camera Electronic store.

It was a larger premises, one that underpinned the company's expansion

with new modern technology, including e-bikes and e-dirt bikes.

The team spent several evenings renovating the new space and removing the interior wall to create a 'superstar with a camera' department and a tech department.

Family first

Being a family operation has shaped the culture of the business, with employees from the 1990s being re-employed by the company and the 30 staff having an average tenure of seven years.

The pair has been keen to ensure the business retains its family roots, acknowledging the additional impact it has had on its ability to keep its customer base.

"I think people appreciate that there is that family feel to the business," Saul said.

"We're approachable, we're here almost every day and our door is always open."

But Saul and Howard admit running a family business has proved challenging at times and emphasised the importance of being able to separate work from family life, acknowledging that the lines could become blurred.

Though their father had an affinity for jazz music and photography, for the most part he dedicated his life to family and business.

After witnessing business bleed into their home life as teenagers, the pair said it was a balance they were committed to mastering, one that relied heavily on open and honest communication.

"I think a key part of being a family business is understanding what's family and what's business," Howard said.

"But trying to get the balance right can be tough, because it's a legacy, you know. It's supporting your family.

"Sometimes there is that extra passion you need to learn to balance with the business side of things, and it can take years to learn that.

"There was a period where the business was growing and our family was growing and it's crucial that you get that balance right.

"We've really mastered that, but it was tougher when we were kids.

"We'd be around the dinner table with dad talking [about] work and mum would be there trying to balance it out.

"I think the key is to have passions and interests outside of work, something else you can sink your teeth into."

Leaving a legacy

Both Saul and Howard view the opportunity to continue and expand the business their father built as a privilege.

"It's really exciting to work within a family business," Howard said.

"It's certainly challenging at times, but I wouldn't have it any other way.

"It's a real privilege to continue a legacy that someone else in the family started, to expand and grow on that and future-proof it."

Among their biggest regrets is not keeping more memorabilia and paraphernalia from the business's earlier years.

Despite the specialist photography store having been located at the North Perth premises for almost two decades, the Franks have kept just one photograph of the inside and outside.

"Our staff would probably laugh because they think we're hoarders, that we keep so much stuff, and we do, but we don't have a large number of photos of the first store he had," Saul said.

Data & Insights

WA'S LARGEST FAMILY BUSINESS DYNASTIES

Ranked by year established in WA and then by number of generations that have managed the business



Photo: Attila Csaszar

Rank	Company name	Senior executive and title	Year est. in WA	Number of generations that have managed the business	Total staff in WA
1	Lionel Samson Sadleirs	Mr David Cole Chief executive	1829	6	468
2	Bowra & O'Dea	Mr Joe O'Dea Managing director	1888	5	WND
3	Betts Group	Mr Todd Wilner Chief executive	1892	5	353
4	AT Brine & Sons	Mr Christopher Brine Managing director	1894	5	NFP
5	Mannwest Group	Mr Ron Manners Executive chair	1895	4	NFP
6	W Fairweather & Son	Mr Peter Fairweather Managing director	1895	4	WND
7	Dawson's Garden World	Mr Ian Dawson Owner	1903	4	80
8	AE Hoskins Building Services	Mr Michael Hoskins Managing director	1911	4	87
9	Richard Noble & Company	Mr Alex Gregg Managing director	1913	4	NFP
10	Richgro	Mr Geoff Richards Managing director	1916	4	75
11	AJ Baker & Sons		1920	4	WND
12	Hiddlestone Electrics	Ms Natalie Hiddlestone Managing director	1920	3	7
13	R Moore & Sons	Mr Neil Moore Chairman	1920	3	65
14	Craig Mostyn Group	Mr Patrick Walsh Chief executive	1923	3	450
15	Bannister Downs Dairy	Mrs Sue Daubney Managing director	1924	4	60
16	Shellabears	Mr Chris Shellabear Owner, principal	1925	3	25
17	Baileys	Ms Genevieve Bailey Co-general manager	1926	4	38
18	Oakover Wines		1929	4	WND
19	Kakulas Brothers		1929	3	WND
20	Galvin Engineering	Mr Chris Galvin Executive director	1930	3	80

21
50

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WND: Would Not Disclose, NFP: Not For Publication, N/A: Not Applicable or Not Available.

“I think a key part of being a family business is understanding what’s family and what’s business - Howard Frank

From page 47

“It’s ironic, we know.

“We do regret not having more, because we think it’s a really valuable thing, both for us as a family and for the staff.

“It’s also a great thing to share with your staff.”

With five children between them, the brothers acknowledge they could soon be passing the skills they’ve gained onto the next generation.

But they’re comfortable with allowing the children to find their own path, reflecting on the way their father encouraged them to do the same.

“We wouldn’t push them, because we certainly weren’t pushed,” Saul said.

“The youngest loves the photography side of it, while the eldest probably wasn’t as interested in cameras, but is far more excited by the tech.

“They’ll find their own way in life and we’ll see where life takes them.

“We’ve built a business with many departments, so there will always be a space for them.”

It’s now been five years since Ronald’s passing, but his love of photography continues within his children and the business he built from the ground up.

While acknowledging he may not have fully understood the new direction the business was taking, Saul and Howard are confident Ronald would have supported their pursuits as long as they were both happy.

“He had a specialist business and a real niche, he knew how to build a camera,” Howard said.

“He loved new tech and he adored audio, and he made attempts to move into that space, but it just ended up being a purely photographic store.

“We’re doing it; we’re expanding into new tech, we’re moving into high-end retail.

“If he were here now, I think he’d say that he didn’t fully understand what we were doing, but that if the business was doing well and we were happy that he’d be happy, too.”



Saul and Howard Frank at Wanderlust. Photo: David Henry

COMMERCIAL CONTENT



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According to figures released earlier this year by the Australian Small Business and Family Enterprise Ombudsman 54 percent of family businesses have no succession plan and with the highest proportion of business owners in the 45 to 58 year age bracket and approaching retirement age, that’s a problem.

It’s one that HHG Legal Group Special Counsel Janene Bon and her team tackle daily in providing succession planning services and advice for businesses to ensure a smooth handover when the current owners retire or die or can no longer run the business because of poor health, injury or other reasons.

Ms Bon says it’s not just large multi-million dollar

enterprises that should be succession planning – even the smallest businesses should be putting future plans in place.

These plans should be cemented sooner rather than later and once completed, regularly reviewed and updated.

“Every privately owned business, whether it is run by a sole proprietor, two mates who’ve gone into a business together, or a multi generation, multi entity family run group of enterprises – they all need to have a business succession plan,” Ms Bon explains.

“Not only do businesses need to plan for the future, business owners need to ensure their personal estate planning is in order.

There is no point having a detailed business succession plan without the owners having a personal wealth succession strategy, including a comprehensive Will, Enduring Power of Attorney and other estate planning documentation.

“This process should begin as soon as a person starts or takes control of a business, because succession planning is not just about putting retirement plans in place.

“It means that the business owners have decided in advance what’s going to happen in these events, reducing the risk of unintended consequences.”

HHG Legal Group is well positioned for this work with five offices throughout

the state and a large team of lawyers working in the business succession and estate planning area.

Ms Bon says the Group’s business succession and estate planning team works closely with their other practice areas, including the commercial and property lawyers, family lawyers and commercial litigation team to provide comprehensive legal services for clients, as these areas often overlap.

“Expertise from all our teams provides solutions to issues that can arise in business succession planning,” she says.

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Showing 6 of 1331

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consider family business dynasties , there's probably few as ...

Moore tech a sign of the times

is uncertain whether the dynasty will continue. Mr Davis said ...

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electrics, the Hiddlestone dynasty has played a significant ... Hiddlestone said the family dynasty was never at risk. Proud ...

Dynasties

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