

Dave Veale interviews Paul Simmonds, founder of popular retail store, [Robert Simmonds](#) in Fredericton.

Here's the full interview, as published in the Telegraph-Journal on Thursday October 11th, 2012

## THE JOB OF A LEADER IS TO LEARN

When you meet Paul Simmonds you cannot help but notice how well put together he is. The guy clearly understands style. I quickly learned that his ability to build trust, recognize a person's unique style and create an "exceptional customer experience" are critical elements at Robert Simmonds, a contemporary clothing store in downtown Fredericton, the business Paul and his wife founded fourteen years ago.

Paul has an incredibly deep understanding of the retail sector. He is a 2012 inductee to the Canadian Retail Hall of Fame along with being a Retail Council of Canada board member and current chair of the Canadian Independent Retail Committee. To date, Paul has 34 years of experience in the industry.

What makes Paul unique in the retail sector is how he continually looks for new ways to advance and refine the retail experience for the customer. For example, he recently built a unique on-line presence at [www.robertsimmonds.com](http://www.robertsimmonds.com) including a Virtual Closet where Robert Simmonds shares new menswear and womenswear from this season's runways.

Paul, a believer in lifelong learning, is presently enrolled in the Wallace McCain Institute's Entrepreneurial Leaders Program. I began our interview by asking him what initially inspired him to take the entrepreneurial leap.

A: The inspiration came from the support of people close to me as well as the realization that you have to believe in yourself and you can't be afraid to fail. You have to take a chance and risk everything. When we founded this business, I left a job. We started from zero and built this business over the last 14 years.

Q: Was there anything else pushing you to "start from zero"?

A: Well, in my job, I'd gone as far as I could go. I wanted to put my mark on the business world. I was in my mid-thirties and I just thought that the time was right for me to do this.

I had two kids and a mortgage. I walked out of a good career and moved forward to start this new fresh business that was unknown and untapped in a competitive environment.

Q: You've expanded your business a number of times since 1998. What has been your approach to growing your business?

A: We started with about 1,800 square feet. The one thing that I knew for sure is that you don't know anything until you try it and you learn from both your mistakes and your successes.

We've expanded into a ladies market, we've expanded into a denim-urban market and we've expanded into shoes, handbags and accessories. What we've always done to maintain our business is to look at different avenues to service different demographics and address different business needs. We look at our business in terms of the Greater Atlantic Area (GAA).

We also have had the good fortune of having clients who have been with us for many years, and they'll come home or to this area to shop and make a point to shop with us. They come from as far as Geneva, Vancouver, Edmonton, and Calgary □ we're very fortunate.

**Q: You have a strong desire to continue to grow the business and the customer experience?**

A: Yes, because as you grow your business, and if you're entrepreneurial, you're testing your limits. You're testing the business limits of your business and you keep pushing, pushing, and pushing. Some of the doors open, some of the doors close, but we felt it was important to push and to give our customers as much access to premier lifestyle clothing as we could.

If you're shopping in Fredericton, we want it to feel the same as if you were shopping in Toronto, New York or anywhere in the world. I believe that our service level and product offering needs to be as complete as if you were in one of those major centres.

**Q: What are some of the ways you go about meeting your business goal of creating an exceptional customer experience?**

A: That's been our mandate from the beginning. An exceptional experience for our customers every time is our goal. As an entrepreneur, you're always innovating and looking for something. I have found through my career that the most important resource for learning and for gaining experience is the connections you make, and the people you meet throughout your business and social life.

My peer groups have been wickedly important to me for growing our business. We're members of the Fashion Center Group in Canada, which is a group of retailers from Nova Scotia to B.C., who get together twice a year to discuss their business models and how to make their businesses better.

We visit the stores in the Fashion Center Group and, through these visits and being critiqued, we learn how to make our business and our customer experiences better.

**Q: What advice would you give to leaders who are trying to understand what it takes to help their customers have an exceptional experience every time?**

A: I think it's with trust. You build relationships with your clients over time and you work on repeat business. In terms of our particular experience, we are like a concierge for our clients whether they want a coffee, or a quick lunch, or something carried to the door. If they don't know the best place to buy a product and we don't have it, we'll recommend a competitor or a similar product. We look after their best interests as opposed to just getting a sale. It's important to build the trust of your customers.

**Q: What are important qualities for your staff to have?**

A: The most important quality is integrity. We try to give our team as much education and opportunity as we can for them to stay with us. We have a number of people who have been with us for over ten years now.

We're a small business, but we try to look at our business as a big business and act accordingly. We have policies and opportunities in place, which helps with finding the right team members to work with you. We want a consistent experience within our store. It's important that everyone is on the same page.

**Q: What's the biggest challenge in retail?**

A: Getting customers in the door. Our biggest competition is the Internet and cross-border shopping. There are duties and taxes that make it impossible for us to price our products at parity because of restrictions the government puts on bringing goods in, which the general public doesn't necessarily know. But that's certainly a challenge.

**Q: What's the biggest opportunity for you now?**

A: The Internet, one of our biggest challenges, is one of our biggest opportunities as a tool to promote our business within the GAA. If you have quality products, an excellent environment and engaged staff, then there's a lot of opportunity out there because there will always be a place for quality.

**Q: What advice would you have for a newly minted entrepreneur jumping into the retail sector?**

A: Every day is a new day. In the retail sector every day we open up with no money. It's a challenge but also an opportunity. Persistence pays off. If you don't try, you'll never know. I'm always learning. "Just ask" - two very powerful words that might get you things that you don't even think about. If you "just ask," you never know what you'll learn.

**Q: How would you finish the following sentence? A leader's job is to**

A: A leader's job is to learn. By constantly learning, you can pass along that knowledge to your team. As a leader, I have a lifelong ambition to learn and to continually find more efficient ways of doing things.