

Purpose-built for success

With origins dating back to the 1880s, Provans has been transformed by the Rosenberg family over two generations into a showcase Melbourne timber outlet.

During Melbourne's land and population boom before the turn of the last century, David Provan saw an opportunity to open a joinery business in the working class suburb of Clifton Hill. Subsequent generations of his family evolved and grew its vast operations until it was put up for sale in the mid-1960s.

Barry Rosenberg was there for the next step. "My father wanted the property, not the business," he says. "But the Provans wanted to keep them together. My father was retired at the time, so he asked me out of the blue if I'd like to go into the timber industry – 1 July 1966 was the first day our family had Provans and I'm still here!"

The Rosenbergs decided to retain the Provans family name on the business, since it had such strong local heritage. In those days the area was the centre of the Melbourne boot trade, and they sold timber and joinery almost entirely to local factories.

"It was a real workers area. If we needed a driver, we'd go down the street and knock on doors until we found someone who

wanted a job," Barry says.

But time brought gentrification. Factories moved away and developers moved in to rebuild or convert old buildings to flats. "Our business needed to change to match the customer landscape. We started to run skirting and architrave, because we had our own joinery shop and the demand was there."

To this day, Provans remains famous for its extensive range of mouldings, even though they now buy them in from other suppliers rather than manufacture on site. "We can commission specialist profiles," Barry says.

"But even though people come for miles for our mouldings," Barry's son Jarrod Rosenberg adds, "we're no longer just a mouldings or joinery place. Our size allows us to carry more varieties of timber than almost any other outlet in Melbourne."

Like the Rosenberg family, Provans has grown and adapted over the years.

MOVING HOME

The biggest change came in September 2015. After their century-old site was

"People know to call us when they can't find a particular timber species."

compulsorily acquired by the government, the business was moved to new premises 200 metres away on one of Melbourne's main thoroughfares, Hoddle Street. Both Barry and Jarrod describe finding the new property as a bit of luck, where they could design the "store of their dreams".

"It's a much bigger property but there's a logical flow for customers," says Barry. "It was three separate buildings but we've turned it into one. The main one on the corner is an old heritage wool store that we're proud to have transformed."

The old wool store now contains hardware, the building on its right is the receiving end of the business where trucks come in to unload timber and hardware, and beyond that is the customer drive-through.

"Our timber offer is all undercover," says Jarrod. "Nothing is left out in the open."

The shift in location presented an opportunity and the Rosenbergs used the move to make several changes to the business, including an ILID electronic ticketing system.

"It was an expensive initial outlay," says Jarrod, "but it's meant a saving overall. Price changes are frequent in our industry, especially in the hardware area. Rather than having to change the tickets every time there is a price rise, we have everything on an electronic file and we download it and it updates automatically."

He adds, "Visually it looks good, and it means that you don't need to reprint tickets every time there's a price change. Our hardware has probably quadrupled in size since the move, and this system is a lot less work and looks a lot neater."

TIMBER EXPERTS

The company's reputation as a timber specialist has survived all its changes. Most of their general trade business is in standard structural timbers, but they also carry a big range of furniture-grade hardwood and a large supply of western red cedar.

"We specialise in unique species," Barry says. "People know to call us when they can't find a particular timber. We may not have it in stock, but we'll know where to get it directly, because we have the contacts."

Upstairs from the main hardware offer is a large showroom that contains finishing items including doors, flooring, skirting and architraves, cladding and decking. While it was conceived as a place builders and architects could bring clients, it's open as a display

"Our site is fully undercover. It protects customers loading and the timber."



Clockwise from top left: Provans' new location combines a heritage building with capacious warehouses; an expansive and fully undercover timber drive-through and storage; company heritage is celebrated; convenient layout for customers to get in and out quickly; the finishings showroom on the mezzanine level.

centre for all. As Barry says, "Although we're a trade centre, there are plenty of customers who come in and pick their archs, skirting, flooring and doors and then send their builder in to buy it – or some buy it themselves."

The relocation allowed the Rosenbergs to be generous with space. "Our site is fully undercover with the drive through," says Jarrod, "so our customers can load inside on days when it's boiling hot or raining sideways. It's better for the timber as well, as it's not sitting outside."

Wide aisles allow for side-loading forklifts that make accessing sheeting a breeze. "We invested in Combilift forklifts," says Jarrod. "If someone wants 10 sheets you can switch the forklift over to a sideloader and it goes down the aisleway and can pick up a whole set of sheets, slide them out and put them onto a trolley or onto the customer's vehicle."

The same system has made it easier for Provans staff to unload and shelve their deliveries. "It's definitely increased sales in

that product range," says Jarrod, "because it's so much easier to get an order ready and for customers to come and get what they need."

GOING THE EXTRA MILE

Barry's 50+ years of service may be the company record, but he's not alone in his long service. There are outstanding staff members across the business who have worked there for 25+ years, and the general manager has been with the company for nearly 40 years.

The Rosenbergs put this staff loyalty down to the simple rule of treating staff as they'd like to be treated themselves, which effectively makes everyone a part of the family business. It's definitely a key part of the exemplary service the store is known for, but to Jarrod, that level of commitment to customers is simple good sense. "We've only got one store and you have to live by something," he says. "If you can't serve customers well, then you probably won't be

in business as long as we have. We've recently started opening at 6.30am on weekdays which was a decision we made from listening directly to our tradies."

One new addition that's also helped staff and customer satisfaction is the introduction of a food truck/coffee van in the drive-through. As Jarrod says, "The owner is an ex-customer of ours who used to come here when he was fitting out his catering business. When he approached us about this, we said yes, and it's worked well. He does coffees, egg and bacon rolls, burgers, sandwiches... He looks after staff, customers, and especially tradies. When they come in to do a pickup they can also collect lunch for the guys on site. It benefits everyone."

Barry adds with a laugh, "We have some regulars from the surrounding businesses who come in every day even though they don't buy any timber. I guess we're building a new reputation" **T**

For more details, visit provans.com.au



From left, Jarrod, Barry and Marnie Rosenberg, who have driven the transformation of a heritage business.

PHOTOS: XXXXXXX