



The Dandan Family Business

Building a dynasty since the turn of the century

WE MEET MOHAMMAD AND JOANNE DANDAN WHO TELL US HOW THE FAMILY BUILT A MULTI-SHOP BUSINESS IN SYDNEY BASED ON TRUE FAMILY VALUES, CUSTOMER SERVICE AND SUSTAINABLE BUSINESS RELATIONSHIPS.

Mohammad, the eldest of six brothers, takes us back to where it all began. He is Australian born and the eldest son of Lebanese parents. Mohammad started his apprenticeship at George Nolan in Rydalmere and his dad, Hussain, took a “guiding hand” from the outset. “Dad would take most of my weekly pay and put it aside for me, which he also did for my brothers, so we could build a nest egg for the future. Little did he know this would become the foundation of the business we have today.”

In the late 90s Mohammad was working as a panel beater and his younger brother, Fred, was working as a spray painter, with different companies. They were also in high demand on weekends, so Hussain

suggested they should establish their own business.

“Dad found a location in Asquith, two small factories side-by-side, which we bought and set one up as a panel shop and the other as a paint shop, using our ‘nest egg’ to get us underway. We opened the doors of Hornsby Prestige Smash Repairs in Kelray Place Asquith in 2000, although the initial two years were fairly tough as we struggled to gain insurance work, so most of the work was private.”

Mohammad and Fred’s younger brothers, Shady, Khalil and Bill all took up apprenticeships in this new venture, which was to be a real benefit as the business developed – but more on this later.

As the business grew, tow trucks

became an important source of work and it was then that insurers started to notice the quality of the work. AAMI was the first insurer to get on board, although as the years passed, other insurers began to provide work, in particular IAG who became a serious work provider by around 2009. That’s when the business really took off.

“We reached out to another local business, Asquith Body Works, which was literally just across the road, and our timing was just right as the owner was looking to get out of the industry. We initially bought the business in 2010, then went on to also acquire the property.”

Joanne points out that as the business grew, the family’s ability to develop business relationships



Q-West Collision Centre in Castle Hill.



Mohammad (L), Joanne and Shady.

strengthened. Hornsby Prestige continues to work with IAG, in addition to QBE and Auto and General, while Asquith Body Works maintained its relationship with Suncorp. "It was critical for us to establish relationships with various work providers, particularly as the industry continues to change and evolve. We made a conscious decision to diversify and spread our risk."

Never one to rest on his laurels, Mohammad continued to focus on growing the family business. "We had previously purchased a factory in a block of four units, literally around the corner from Hornsby Prestige, but when the owners of the other factories were looking to sell, we acquired the building in its entirety and in 2017 Quest Collision Centre was open for business. The business focuses purely on rapid repairs for IAG, which allows us to be extremely efficient."

The most recent addition to the Dandan Group of Companies is Q-West Collision Centre in Castle Hill, which was established to take customer service to a whole new level, with features such as a customer café and an elevator to the main reception. However, getting it up and running was no mean feat as Joanne and Mohammad faced significant resistance from other established businesses, including a legal battle over the approval process. According to Joanne: "Mohammad is very determined and resilient, so the fact

that we overcame these obstacles is a testament to his perseverance. We are also very proud that Q-West was awarded Best New Shop in NSW in the 2019 industry awards."

As the business has grown, so has the family involvement. Fred, of course, has been involved in the business since the outset, but with their growing experience, Shady, Khalil and Bill have all gone on to more prominent roles around the business network that Mohammad has built with his acquisition strategy. "We currently have four facilities: Hornsby Prestige Smash Repairs, Asquith Body Works, Quest Collision Centre and Q-West Collision, which combined repairs, on average, 200 cars per week, so it's fair to say we are happy with our progress over our first 20 years. However, make no mistake, while the team of brothers are very much in the engine room, Joanne has her hands firmly on the steering wheel and makes sure the business goes where we want it to go."

On the topic of people in the business, Joanne and Mohammad have been side-by-side the entire journey, and with Joanne well and truly embedded in the business, it's a far cry from the early days when answering the phone was her primary task. The rate of growth has increased Joanne's workload exponentially, but she keeps on top of things by being organised and having great staff to fall back on.

There are now approximately 90 staff on the payroll, many of whom have been with the business for in excess of 10 years, with several going back all the way to day one. It is self-evident with such a growth trajectory there is a great mix of experience and young talent running through the business. Joanne is proud of their history with apprentices, which of course goes all the way back to the three younger brothers, and in fact, they have produced two Future Leaders of the Industry in the past 18 months.

"We have always had apprentices in the business, and today we have more than 12 currently on the books, some of whom are on the verge of graduating. We have a strong retention rate as we work with our staff to make them feel part of our extended family. Although, like many businesses, it can be difficult to find good staff, particularly in the Hornsby area for various reasons, when we do find them, we tend to keep them."

We turn our attention to the changes in the industry over the past 20 years and how they have impacted the business. Mohammad is philosophical about the role of the insurers. "Although we see insurers now having equity in the industry, our relationships continue to be solid, even when there is an insurer-owned shop in the same neighbourhood. For example, we still do work for IAG, at both Castle Hill and Hornsby – where we also do their rapid work. We are an IAG Partner



The workshop is ready to go.



Repairer, and in Hornsby, an Exclusive Repairer. We see this as a reflection of the quality of our work, our ability to meet the insurers' needs and the strength of the business relationships that we have built over the years."

Mohammad is all too aware that as the industry evolves, the insurers' needs will change and he sees it as his role to ensure he keeps up to date with these changes, and adapts and adjusts his proposals accordingly.

Regarding the growing influence of OEMs and their onboard technology, Mohammad sees this as just another phase in the development of the industry. "Anything we can't fix ourselves we do not hesitate to refer it to the dealer. As the manufacturer's representative, we see them as the authority on the technology. Alternatively, we sublet the work to independently qualified diagnostic technicians. Either way, we ensure we deliver a safe and proper repair first time, every time."

Mohammad is also enthusiastic about the company's key supplier partners who have been with him on his journey. "When we acquire a business and there are long term relationships, we are very loyal to our supplier base. However, when we opened Q-West we reached out to Axalta who has been great with their support, technical service and willingness to help." In a similar vein, the business uses a range of equipment from key suppliers, such as Car-O-Liner and Car Bench and, as Mohammad says, "if it works, why change it?"

With four separate facilities, it is critical to stay on top of things, especially the quoting system as it's important to capture every task and, of course, to get paid for everything they do. Therefore, they use iBodyshop, which Joanne says is without doubt the best cloud-based estimating and body shop management system available.

We discuss what differentiates the group of companies. Mohammad has no hesitation: "With several family members – who are also directors – involved in running the various shops, we have an unwavering commitment to excellence in everything we do. We all take this

ownership very seriously indeed."

He is also quick to point out how much the directors get the staff involved in the business, help them when they need it, and engender a degree of ownership that flows on to the high quality of their workmanship.

"Ultimately, it's the customer who really matters and our culture flows on to the highest level of customer service and, of course, an ongoing commitment to continuous improvement."

Mohammad was keen to make a short comment on the impact of COVID-19 in 2020, which he says has been challenging. "We opened Q-West in late 2019 and were just gaining traction when COVID-19 hit. However, we were very fortunate to have the support of our work providers, particularly IAG, who kept the work coming in spite of the challenging times. I'm sure this was related to the strength of our relationship and, of course, having a strong commercial agreement." He is also conscious that there were many other repairers who found it challenging and hopes that the overall resilience of the industry prevails when things get back to normal – well, settle into a new normal.

Although it is clear that this is a business that has never stood still, we do touch on the plans for the future, and true to his track record, Mohammad continues to look for growth. "We have another project in the pipeline, albeit in the developmental phase, so we prefer to keep it under wraps for now. I just can't help myself – when I see an opportunity and it stacks up, I just need to make it happen." Clearly there are no

signs of slowing down, so one can expect to see further expansion of their network of prestige collision repair facilities.

Before we wound things up, we discussed the importance of family to the Dandan clan. Joanna is also Australian born of Lebanese heritage and reinforces the value of the extended family in the Australian-Lebanese culture.

"Mohammad is one of 10 children – six boys and four girls – so family is a big part of our lives. We have been married for 20 years and have three boys, aged 18, 15 and 5, and we are consciously providing 'guidance without pressure' as they grow up." Then Mohammad reflects on the ongoing influence that Hussain has in the business.

"Interestingly, Dad did not approve of the growth strategy, preferring a more conservative approach. Although he is not operationally active in the business, as the patriarch he continues to express his view. 'Work hard, but take the time to enjoy life,' he would say. I think it's reflective of his own upbringing and typical of his generation. Even now, Dad and I 'lock horns' over the plans for the future, but it's more about work-life balance than having any issue with the opportunities. However, we get through it and so long as we are successful and happy, he's happy."

Editor: With a business model built on a foundation of strong family values, hard work and commitment to excellence, it's not difficult to envisage that the future of the Dandan Group of Companies will be every bit as successful in the future as it has been in its first two decades.



Up and running.