

RetailWorld

ESTABLISHED 1947

JULY, 2021



FOR FAMILIES
BY OURS



Northern Territory

RICH IN AUSTRALIAN HISTORY

Rich in Indigenous Australian history and culture, and renowned for its vast outback desert landscapes, the Northern Territory is home to Australia's most iconic landmarks such as Alice Springs, Uluru and Kakadu, with a majority of its population living in the capital city of Darwin.

By Lorna Gloria.

The Northern Territory's remoteness and vast geography provides a unique setting for retailing and accessibility challenges for the region.

Outback Stores thrives in the NT

Outback Stores works alongside Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in a holistic way to improve health and nutrition outcomes, while providing employment, training and economic opportunities for Indigenous Australians.

Outback Stores was founded in November 2006. It was set up by a group of retailers from large, mainstream retail businesses, with the support of Indigenous Business Australia.

"The company emerged from a need to improve the health of Indigenous people in remote Australia by addressing nutrition related health problems, unreliable food supplies, stores closing because of poor governance and build-up of debt," Outback Stores CEO Michael Borg told *Retail World*.

The first NT stores assisted by Outback Stores, in 2007, were within the remote communities of Imanpa (160km east of Uluru) and Canteen Creek (500km north-east of Alice Springs).

Outback Stores provides retail store management and support services on a transparent fee-for-service basis to Indigenous owned community stores.

Currently, Outback Stores is engaged with 42 remote community stores, 27 of which are within the NT.

"If the store is commercially self-sufficient, the store owners work with the store committee to decide how to spend the profits for the benefit of the community," Mr Borg said. "However, not all community stores are commercially viable, due to small populations and remote geographic locations.

"If the store isn't commercially self-sufficient, Outback Stores supports the store financially.

"Those businesses that require financial assistance to fund ongoing operations we call 'supported stores', and those that are commercially viable are called 'managed stores'."

Within the NT, around half of the community stores are managed and half of them supported.

Adapting to the new norm

"Covid-19 certainly had a pronounced effect on our business," Mr Borg said.

"In light of travel restrictions in and out of communities, the Australian government increasing welfare payments, and mainstream retailers facing challenges in maintaining stock, collective action was required to ensure food supply to remote communities was prioritised at this uncertain time. In response, a food security taskforce was created under the leadership of the federal Minister for Indigenous Australians, Ken Wyatt."

Members of the taskforce, consisting of key suppliers, manufacturers, fellow retailers and state and territory governments, collaborated with the goal of overcoming any hurdle that would challenge the continuity of a secure and affordable food supply. This group remains active today.

"We understand that there's more to transpire in relation to Covid-19," Mr Borg said. "However, the lessons learnt from the challenges faced over the last year have placed our business and the wider industry in a good position to react to any rapid changes in the future."

Shopper and market trends during the pandemic

According to Mr Borg, year-on-year sales at remote community stores across the NT increased strongly

in 2020 due to a combination of biosecurity travel restrictions and increased welfare payments.

For three months, community members were not permitted to travel to regional centres such as Katherine, Alice Springs and Darwin, which led to more people shopping in their community and increased demand for speciality items, including white goods, electronics and clothing.

"During this period, we also saw a 49.1 per cent increase in the sale of fresh fruit and vegetables, which we consider a positive outcome for health in the community," Mr Borg said.

Support for locally sourced products

Most of the stock ranged at Outback Stores is sourced from Territory based businesses.

"Where possible, we try to support local growers," Mr Borg said. "For example, we've sourced watermelons from a farm near Ali Curung, which is 370km north of Alice Springs."

Remote community initiatives

Territory Day, held each year on 1 July, is a unique and popular holiday in the NT.

"It's the only day of the year when fireworks are allowed to be sold to the public," Mr Borg said.

"This year, it's great to see four of our remote community stores in the NT are organising a firework display for their community."

Navigating cross-cultural relationships is one of the unique aspects of this work, according to Mr Borg, "as well as the extreme inaccessibility of the remote communities that we service".

"For example, during the wet season many communities in the Top End are cut off from road access for months every year, which means coordinating deliveries by plane and barge in order to ensure food security," he said.



“The delivery of fresh fruit and vegetables can be especially complicated when navigating the vast distances that we deal with.”

Trend towards local sources

According to Mr Borg, given the restrictions on movement since Covid-19 emerged, reliance on internationally sourced products will slowly diminish in favour of locally sourced Australian products.

Community support

The store at Beswick, east of Katherine, represents an example of the kind of service Outback Stores provides to remote communities.

“The store board of directors last month initiated the largest ever social development distribution to the community, in the form of white goods to each household, a community bus and a cheque to the school for \$20,000,” Mr Borg said.

“Outback Stores started providing retail services to Beswick in 2008, when at first the store was recording losses.

“The past 13 years have seen the store rise out of administration and build up its financial position each year to allow this year’s distribution.

“It’s great to see how the success of the store can benefit the whole community.”

LARGESSE FROM THE LARGEST IGA

Zuccoli IGA in Darwin is owned by Ken and Shellie Lay, who are strong believers in always putting the community first.

This, the largest IGA store in the NT, is the winner of 2021 IGA Community Award for South Australia and the Northern Territory.

In their two years as the store’s owners, the Lays have implemented many community initiatives, including “setting up the only mobile library in the NT, to improve literacy rates.”

They also provide weekly fresh fruit platters to all schools and playgroups in the area, along with free kids activities such as face painting and craft days, which have cemented their role in the community.

Adapting to the new norm

Since the beginning of the pandemic, Zuccoli IGA has attracted many new customers.

Like most other supermarkets, the retailer needed to put on new staff to keep up with demand.

The store launched an online store in under four weeks to enable Australians

in quarantine at Howard Springs, 30km south-east of Darwin, to access essential items that were not supplied by the quarantine facility.

“We currently receive up to 70 orders every day via the online shop and deliver twice a day to the facility,” Ms Lay told *Retail World*.

“Not only did we have to quickly come up with an ordering solution, but we’ve also had to take on additional staff to fulfil the orders, train everyone on the new ordering system, and even buy a van so we could make these deliveries.”

“What hasn’t changed is our commitment to our local community. Our number one priority has and always will be customer service, and this – who we are and what we stand for – will always be the same.”

Shoppers back independents

The customers who, during the pandemic, have begun shopping with Zuccoli IGA

TO PAGE 56

LOOKING FOR ADVENTURE AND WANT TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE?

We are hiring **retail managers** eager to take the next step in their careers.

With Outback Stores you can:

- + Explore diverse landscapes
 - + Learn about Indigenous culture
 - + Contribute in a meaningful way
- All while saving most of your earnings!*

Apply to be a Remote Community Store Manager.

- + Competitive salary
- + 7 weeks annual leave
- + Fully furnished, free accom
- + Annual flight allowance
- + Certified training

Put your retail experience to a worthy purpose and be rewarded with a unique outback experience that you will remember forever.

Apply now!

For **job description** and online **application form** visit

outbackstores.com.au/work



OUTBACK
Stores
Working With Communities