

## The People Business

An Interview with Jack Mitchell, Chief Executive Officer,  
and Bob Mitchell, Copresident, Mitchells/Richards/Marshs



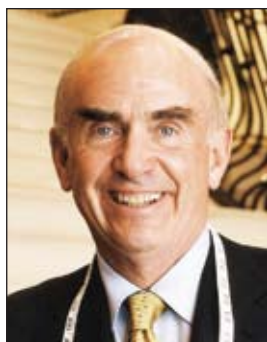
**EDITORS' NOTE** Jack Mitchell was named one of the top 10 retail visionaries of his time by the Daily News-Record. He graduated from Wesleyan University with a BA in 1961 and obtained an MA from the University of California, Berkeley. Mitchell is the author of the Wall Street Journal best-seller *Hug Your Customers* (2003), and his second book, *Hug Your People: The Proven Way to Hire, Inspire, and Recognize Your Employees and Achieve Remarkable Results* ([www.hugyourpeople.com](http://www.hugyourpeople.com)), was published in March 2008. A recipient of numerous community leadership awards from Sacred Heart University, the Anti-Defamation League, and the Menswear Division of the UJA-Federation of New York, Mitchell is an active speaker for the Harvard University School of Business, Build-A-Bear, Worldplay, Payless, Nike, and Morgan Stanley. He serves on the Yale Cancer Board and Greenwich Hospital board of trustees.

Bob Mitchell grew up on the selling floor of the Westport-based specialty store founded by his grandfather, Ed Mitchell, in 1958. After graduating from Dartmouth College in 1987, he worked at Sports Illustrated for five years before rejoining the family business in 1991. He was made Copresident in November 2000. Mitchell is the past President of The Forum Group and is a current member of YPO.

**COMPANY BRIEF** Mitchells/Richards/Marshs ([www.mitchellsonline.com](http://www.mitchellsonline.com)) is a nationally renowned men's and women's clothing store specializing in the personal touch. With roots in Connecticut and New York, the three-generation family business is well-known for its employee longevity and excellent customer service and the exquisite detail of its merchandise. Beginning as Ed Mitchell, Inc., the company evolved over the years from Mitchells of Westport to Mitchell/Richards in 1995 and finally to Mitchells/Richards/Marshs in 2006. The company has received honors from multiple retailers, including Store of the Year in 2000 and Retailer of the Year in 2001 by MR Magazine.

**Many people today talk about the challenges in many industries, including the strain on retail. Have you seen a major impact on the business? Are you optimistic for growth?**

**Jack:** We feel that our business is very solid and secure. We're not doing the double-digit increases that we were, but when our clients and customers come into our stores, they still



Jack Mitchell



Bob Mitchell

deeply appreciate the extraordinary personalized service we try to provide them with. They are looking for the world-class deluxe brands we carry – the best-selling products we have are the upper-end products. So I wouldn't say we're looking for any spectacular growth, but we are doing what we know how to do best, one customer at a time.

**What key characteristics do you look for in deciding to take on a brand, and how do you determine if it's going to be the right partnership?**

**Bob:** We always look to maximize the business with our existing brands as much as we can. As much as our business is based on relationships from a customer standpoint, we also consider the vendor perspective. We've built a level of trust and a serious business with these people. When we look at a new brand, we look to see how it fits in with other brands we have in the store. If we see it as a direct competitor without enough market differentiation, from a static source or from price point, we usually pass.

**Jack:** We truly listen to the customers. We're trying to buy clothes that the customers really want to wear. It's about buying products at the right time and at the right price to service our customers, and that means making sure our buyers understand the customers and the customers give their feedback.

**Bob:** Another difference is we live in these communities, and our strategy has been to look for growth within the markets we're in as opposed to running to a new market to build another store. That has given us the ability to be dominant in our market and really understand the customers who live in this market. We're buying specifically for people we know, which gives us a big advantage from a buying and merchandising standpoint.

**How critical has it been to keep the family feel to your business? As the business continues to grow, is that more challenging?**

**Jack:** For us, it's everything. I wrote two books about this topic. *Hug Your People* is my latest book, and it's all about how we try to build personal and professional relationships with each and every one of our associates – I call them associates rather than employees. It's critical that our associates be our most important asset. They feel that they are part of the extended family, and most days, when they wake up, they want to come to work. We're very blessed that my brother's three sons and our four sons are now in the family business. My role is changing as our sons are leading the business from an operational point of view, and they all have the commonality of servicing the customers in a personalized way.

**Bob:** It has gotten harder, but our management team has also become bigger. Everyone knows that we're in the people business, not the clothing business, and if the people are operating efficiently and happily and are taking care of customers, then the greatest result is happy customers. If the customers leave here happy, sales will follow. Everyone in the organization is comfortable talking to everyone and creating this culture of high-level communication, which has allowed us to maintain our staff. I'm most proud of the tenure of our people, which is unheard of in this industry. The average sales associate has been with us for more than 10 years.

**Jack, has it been challenging to give up some of the control? And if you see something, whether it be with Bob or somebody else, being done differently from how you would do it, is it hard not to get involved?**

**Jack:** It has been a very smooth and rewarding transition for me. Of course, there are times when I have some ideas and I hold back because, generally, the ideas from the new generation are better, even if they're somewhat different, and they turn out just fine. The proudest part of my entire career is being a part of the transition to the next generation and making it successful and having the family in harmony. I still want to be part of the business, but my role is clearly changing, and I feel very comfortable in it. ●

*The main aisle of Mitchells*