

CRAIN'S CLEVELAND BUSINESS

Max-Wellness launch next on OfficeMax founder's agenda

Thursday December 3, 2009

By SHANNON MORTLAND

4:30 am, November 30, 2009

Michael Feuer's business ventures seem to follow his own path through life.

In launching OfficeMax Inc. in 1988, he sold office products when he was a mid-career businessman. He's starting a new retail chain called Max-Wellness, which aims to help boomers and other generations live well and stay well.

Max-Wellness plans a January opening of four stores, with locations in Westlake and Woodmere in the Cleveland area and in the Florida cities of Naples and Sarasota; four more stores are planned for two undisclosed major markets by the end of 2010, Mr. Feuer said.

Plans call for the chain's growth to take on a feverish pace in 2011 with the opening of 30 to 50 stores a year. The pickup in openings would follow what Mr. Feuer did in building OfficeMax, which was sold to paper manufacturer Boise Cascade Corp. in 2003 for \$1.5 billion.

"Max-Wellness will carry products that will perpetuate or improve people's health," Mr. Feuer said. "It's a toy store for adults."

The stores will carry high-end wellness products in categories such as sports nutrition, vitamins, and health and beauty aids. Some products available at Max-Wellness will have never been sold in retail stores and none of them can be found in drug stores, he said.

In the fashion of makeup retailer Sephora, customers will be able to test the products sold at Max-Wellness before buying, he said.

It's such marketing tactics and inventory that Mr. Feuer believes will enable Max-Wellness to compete for



Michael Feuer, who started OfficeMax Inc. in 1988, has created a new chain called Max-Wellness.

Photo credit: JESSE KRAMER

a different customer than the one who shops at drug stores for wellness items. He wants to avoid competing with drug stores because one of the cardinal rules of retail is “never pick on your own size,” he said.

The stores will be designed with the consumer — not the health care provider — in mind. Large, flat-screen TVs will inform patients about the products sold in the stores, and kiosks will suggest products that will help with certain problems, Mr. Feuer said.

No snickering here

He'll also protect customers from the “snicker factor,” which applies to embarrassing problems many people must deal with as they age. A “confessional” — a room surrounded by smoked glass — will enable customers to discuss health issues privately with employees to figure out what products might be helpful to them. Purchased products will be put in translucent bags so other people can't see what the customer bought, he added.

“It's all about treating the customer and patient with dignity, respect and being able to empathize with what's ailing them,” Mr. Feuer said.

After selling OfficeMax, Mr. Feuer said he wanted to do something to help the community, and his excitement for Max-Wellness is evident as he talks about the new chain quickly and passionately. The idea for Max-Wellness occurred to him as he learned more about how people are aging while serving as a board member at University Hospitals Case Medical Center.

He found that people want to live healthier lives, especially as they are expected to work longer and put off retirement.

“People will enter the store ... for solutions; they see themselves as they want to be, not as they are,” Mr. Feuer said. “(But) for people to live well and stay well, they have to take responsibility.”

To bring his new idea to life, Mr. Feuer linked up with Jared Florian, founder and chairman of Universal Screen Arts Inc., an Internet and catalog company in Hudson. Mr. Florian owns a minor stake in Max-Wellness, Mr. Feuer said.

Well-timed start

Mr. Feuer currently is stocking and staffing the four stores that will open the first week of January. Though he had planned to open the stores this fall, he decided to wait for the economy to start to recover.

Daniel Butler, vice president of retail operations for the National Retail Federation in Washington, D.C., said he believes waiting to open the store in January was a smart move because people tend to buy more for themselves after the holidays.

Though there are a lot of wellness-type stores across the country, the recession and rising health care costs have forced more people to focus on their health, Mr. Butler said.

“The consumer is still very focused on their well-being,” Mr. Butler said. “We see (wellness) stores that focus on those products faring better, and as the economy turns around, they're going to be out in front.”

