

Bloomington's Tony Spring: 'The In-store Experience Is Going to Need to Be Exciting'

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Tony Spring has been president and chief operating officer of Bloomington's since 2008. He is responsible for all of the company's stores, corporate marketing, creative services, finance, operations and restaurants. He joined Bloomington's in 1987 as an executive trainee in the White Plains, N.Y. store, after graduating from Cornell University's School of Hotel and Restaurant Management.

Knowledge@Wharton High School: How did you get interested in a career in retail?

Tony Spring: Bloomington's came to recruit on campus. I had worked in fast food restaurants and a series of hotels in college, and I decided to try something different. I interviewed with a bunch of people and fell in love with the Bloomington's folks and the brand and the business opportunities.

KWHS: What are the most important skills necessary to do well in retailing?

Spring: Intellectual curiosity. Having an interest in why things work and what other people may be doing. Our business is influenced by history, culture, current events, travel — it all feeds into why people wear what they do and why something becomes popular. You also need to be passionate and have an ability to inspire and excite other people, which leads into the ability to develop people. It's not just about your ability to get something done, but your ability to inspire other people and get them to develop and grow as well.

[And be sure to] read. Have a series of things you do to learn about what's going on, whether it is current events, travel, fashion, pop culture. Don't be limited just to the Internet or the latest game or your favorite team. Find ways to make time to socialize with people in person vs. through technology. Read a newspaper, even if online. Keep up to date with popular stores and restaurants and social happenings where you live because all of that influences what happens in business.

KWHS: What might be the highlight of your career?

Spring: The highlight was the opening of our California stores in 1996 when we finally became a national retailer. We opened four stores in a week. We had a lot of special events and raised a lot of money for the UCLA Medical Center. We had Phil Collins and Jerry Seinfeld and other interesting people as part of the opening. It was a lot of fun and made me realize the incredible draw that the Bloomingdale's brand has when we saw the number of people who came and who were curious about what we were all about. It made me want to know how we could provide an even better shopping experience than existed in the stores in that marketplace at the time.

KWHS: What was a low point

Spring: We went bankrupt. In 1990 I was at a trade show in Chicago walking around talking to vendors and trying to make them comfortable with our current business. Then the next day we went bankrupt, and I had to go to them and tell them everything would be fine and they should continue to ship to us.

KWHS: How might a high school student begin to prepare for a career in retail?

Spring: I would say get any kind of job. Find something with the opportunity to sell and see what the customer is interested in. See how the business operates, whether in merchandising or selling, in the back-of-the-house or the front-of-the-house. It could be a restaurant, like I did, or a retail store. But see if you have the passion for this kind of business.

KWHS: How do you think retail will be changing in the future and how might those changes shape future careers in the industry?

Spring: I think the whole omnichannel, social media influence of technology is going to continue to shape traditional retailing and create a very different business model where probably more business will be done online than exists today. The in-store experience is going to need to be exciting and more consistent and probably will be more personal. The retailers that remain are going to know they need to do a much better job of taking care of you when you're shopping in the store.

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