



Sportscraft Highland Go-Together Game, New Wool, Advertisement. c.1965, Image Source: Sportscraft Archive, Sussan Corporation, Melbourne.

Sportscraft: The 'Great Australian Classic': A historical case study in brand marketing and entrepreneurial strategies in the fashion and retail industries.

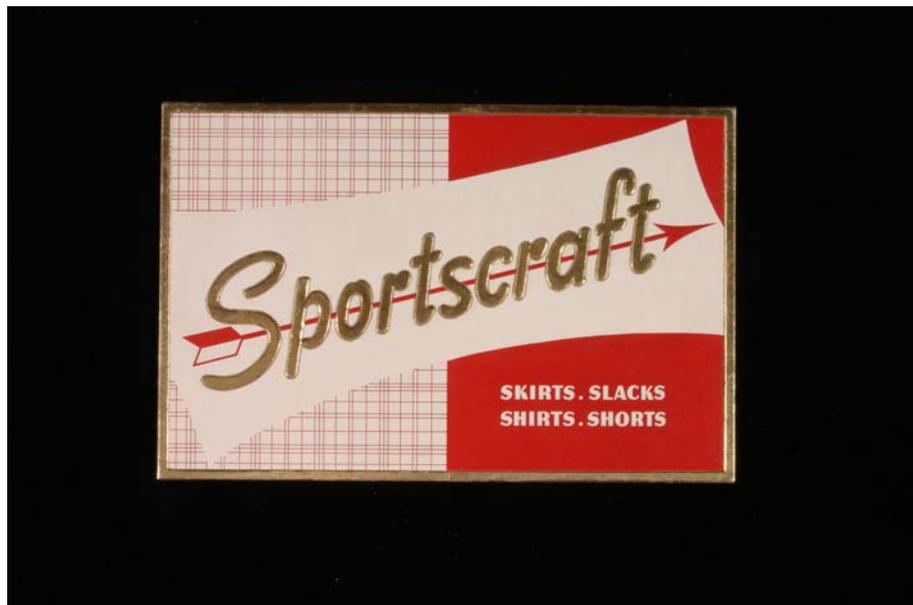
By Denise Whitehouse

'To be successful your name has to stand for something. Customers have to associate your name or label with a certain position or quality'. David Bardas.

The Sportscraft name is one of Australia's great, enduring fashion brands. Established by Wolff Bardas in Melbourne in 1914 as a small tailoring business (Sportsleigh) specialising in pleated skirts, Sportscraft grew into a fashion empire that by 1990 included nineteen women and men's fashion labels with sales of \$50 million dollars a year, a stable of retail stores including the Sportsgirl empire, eight manufacturing plants in Victoria and NSW, off shore production facilities and an extensive property portfolio.

This case study concentrates on the development of this 'Great Australian Classic' as a brand enterprise during the 1950s and 1960s when the Bardas family, under the successive leadership of Morris and David Bardas, shifted the company's culture from that of a small family business into that of a major fashion manufacturer and retailer. The key to their success lay in the entrepreneurial use of brand marketing and design to actively engage women in the game of fashion consumerism through the spectacle of advertising, window shopping, in-store displays and promotional events including fashion parades.

The seeds for Sportscraft's expansion into a fashion brand were laid in the mid 1950s by the Board Chairman, Morris Bardas, who was responsible for leading the company's post war reconstruction. As the name indicates, Sportscraft's speciality was tailored casual wear, predominantly jodhpurs, slacks, pleated skirts and shirts. And as was the case for most clothing manufacturers Sportscraft was reliant on the big department store network for the retail and promotion of its products. Lost in the maze of the stores' huge women's departments the Sportscraft label was just one in a sea of many. With its sales and marketing controlled by the department store the company had little opportunity to build a rapport with its market or grow its products.



Original Sportscraft Logo. Designer unknown, c. early-mid 1950s. Image source: Sportscraft Archives, Sussan Corporation, Melbourne.

In the 1950s prosperity and the consumer boom ushered in the new modern consumer who, young, female and fashion conscious, had disposable income to spend. Fashion was no longer the exclusive domain of the wealthy but an activity for the new middle classes who wanted a choice of fashion *looks* to match their different age groups, identities and activities. Travelling widely Morris Bardas observed the marketing strategies of American retailers such as Bergdorf Goodman and Bobbie Brooks who, specialising in affordable women's fashion, were promoting the idea of co-ordinates. The co-ordinates or *mix and match game* encouraged young women to think in terms of fashion rather than clothes as they built a wardrobe of interchangeable items including accessories that spoke of choice and individuality. Both pioneers of market research, Bergdorf Goodman and Bobbie Brooks used advertising and promotional campaigns to speak directly to their customers, educating them about the co-ordinates game while luring them into the imaginative world of shopping. What was clear from their success was that the use of the shop front, in-store display, advertising

and promotional campaigns to weave personality and identity into the clothes was the key to capturing the interest of the fashion consumer.



The original Sportscraft logo : Sportscraft Classics, Women's Weekly, c. 1956+, Image Source: Sportscraft Archives, Sussan Corporation, Melbourne.



Sportscraft Logo, Classicweave Fabric. Australian Fashion News, 1959. Image Source: Sportscraft Archives, Sussan Corporation, Melbourne.

An astute marketer, Morris Bardas set out to reposition Sportscraft as a fashion label with a distinctive set of products and style. Taking control of advertising and marketing, he built a new brand identity for Sportscraft, beginning with the establishment of a shop front with the Sportsgirl shops, the first of which was in Swanston Street, Melbourne (1952-55). He also had

the Sportscraft logo redesigned away from the amateurism of a tailor-manufacturer's label, into a stylish, modern typographic mark that spoke of machine efficiency and modern production. As a member of Melbourne's Museum of Modern Art circle and as an arts patron, Bardas understood the power of modernist design to signify the new, and used it to visually reposition Sportscraft and its tradition of tailored 'classics', as progressive and even young. When the 240 Collins Street Sportsgirl store was launched in April 1955 its modern fit-out was hailed as a shift away from the old department store mentality to the latest in modern retailing practices. In a similar manner Sportscraft's new modern factory in Camberwell (1957) and show rooms (1957) signalled the development of the new production and management infrastructures necessary for the shift into retailing. The image of Sportscraft as progressive and open to new ideas was further enhanced by a totally new staff profile in which young career women, such as Miss Betty Harrison and 23 year old, Pam Badyk, featured prominently heading up design, sales and promotion.



240 Collins Street Store, mid-late 1950s. Image Source: Sportscraft Archives, Sussan Corporation, Melbourne.

With the creation of a totally different shopping experience in mind Bardas turned to the new creative professionals, to fashion photographers, display artists, art directors and advertising agencies, to create Sportscraft's promotional campaigns. Beginning with the conservative but well designed Sportscraft Family campaign in 1956 he set out to dramatise Sportscraft as a personality that engaged in playful conversation with its consumers through the pages of national women's magazines including the *Women's Weekly*, *Woman's Day* and *Vogue Australia*. For his last and most innovative campaign, Fashion Vitality (1959), he commissioned Helmut Newton and Marisa Martelli to visualise Sportscraft's co-ordinate

fashion game, creating filmic scenarios in which women run, glide and jump for joy as they experience Sportscraft's 'new free-time clothes'. As the light hearted imagery and text relate, their skirts and blouses were colour and pattern co-ordinated and could be intermarried to create a range of looks. Better still, they would (like their wearers) stay 'young for a lifetime' because of Sportscraft's famous pleating process and use of new linen and terylene blend fabrics. Aesthetically and psychologically appealing, this image-intense campaign built brand awareness, while providing women with guidance on how to select and put together a co-ordinates wardrobe.



Sportscraft, 'Fashion Vitality', Woman's Day September 1959. Image Source: Sportscraft Archives, Sussan Corporation, Melbourne.

When Morris Bardas died prematurely in September 1959 his vision was continued by his son David Bardas who as marketing manager worked in close partnership with the general manager John Blood. Blood's strength was textiles, production and distribution, while David Bardas' was merchandising. Together they pushed the company further into market research and advertising to build brand recognition and a vast national consumer base. In 1961 in an unusual move for a clothing manufacturer, Sportscraft commissioned an analysis of the market from the Roy Morgan Research Centre, which established among other things that Australian women were not brand conscious, buying instead according to cut, fit and fabric. These findings led to the development of a long-term set of promotional brand strategies by the advertising agency Thompson Ansell Blunden which by the end of the 1960s secured Sportscraft market leadership.



Sportscraft Collectors: The Look of Sportscraft 1964, Retailers Manual. Image Source: Sportscraft Archives, Sussan Corporation, Melbourne.

Beginning in 1962, the key strategy of the promotional campaign was to build an instantly recognisable visual identity by combining the Sportscraft logo with the slogan, 'The Look of Sportscraft', to form a framed box device in which different co-ordinated looks were played out. Consistently repeated with every advertisement and in-store display, this typographic frame spoke of Sportscraft's classic quality, style and reliability. Fashion's delicious thrill of the new emanated from the ever changing story lines and the dynamic layouts that had models energetically pushing out from the frame to share their enthusiasm with the reader. The Looks were endless as each season's range introduced a new theme, be it 'Classic', 'Collector,' the 'Look of S-t-r-e-t-c-h Slacks', 'Country Weekend', 'Travellers', 'Bistro Collection', 'Worldly Australian', the 'Welcome Wool Go-Together Game' or the 'Highland Go-together Game' to name a few. Visualised as dress up games, these Look campaigns encouraged women to think of shopping as a process of collecting and building an individual look for each season assisted, of course, by Sportscraft's latest set of specially dyed, colour co-ordinated fabrics, patterns and styles. With each new Look there was also more to choose from as skirt and necklines went up and down and the range expanded to include more products including knits, jackets, coats, suits and dresses - the list is endless.



The Look of Sportscraft; 'Collectors', Retailers Manual, 1964. Image Source: Sportscraft Archives, Sussan Corporation, Melbourne.

The Looks were pitched to have wide appeal with Miss Sportscraft's (1962-68) offering specific colour and style ranges (bikini shorts, Bermuda's and capri pants, play tops, cropped tops, popovers and shoe string tops, gingham checks and fruit slice prints) that responded to the teen generation's demand for its own distinctive fashion. The growth of the youth market in the 1960s demanded different marketing strategies and saw the conversion of the Collins Street, Sportsgirl store into a boutique department store for young women. Within Sportsgirl stores, Miss Sportscraft was just one label in a bigger game of mix and match involving a wide range of young designer labels, with the only difference being it had its own department. As a strategy to reach the youth market, Miss Sportscraft, like her offshoot Miss Sportscraft Junior (1965), enabled the company to broaden its market base while building a reputation for being market responsive.



Miss Sportscraft, 1966. Image Source: Press Cutting Book. Sportscraft Archives, Sussan Corporation, Melbourne.

A fashion conscious raising exercise, the Look campaign was given national saturation press coverage throughout the 1960s. With its aim being to visually demonstrate the logic of co-ordinates it featured in the coloured spreads of women magazines and the fashion press, thus speaking regularly to women all over Australia about fashion know-how while building brand loyalty. The daily newspapers were used, but more to capture the attention of retailers and their staff than the attention of the shopper. The Look campaigns were also promoted in-store by sales staff who were trained in the logic of each new look and how to promote it to the shopper. Illustrated brochures with fabric and colour swatches were sent out to retailers, offering instructions for display and selling strategies. Free print stereos ensured that the retailer's advertisements in the local press used the Sportscraft Look's signature box and imagery ensuring that its distinctive visual identity became recognised Australia wide.



The Look of Sportscraft: How to present the Go Together Game: A Handbook for Selling Sportscraft's 1965 Co-ordinated Winter Collection. Image Source Sportscraft Archives, Sussan Corporation, Melbourne.

During the 1960s window displays and in-store activities such as fashion parades promoted spectacle and entertainment as part of the shopping experience. As David Bardas tells, theatre became part of merchandising and it was with this in mind that he invited the fashion consultant Peter Glen, from 'the leading fashion house Glen of Michigan, USA' to Australia in 1963. Glen, Bardas told the industry, 'sells co-ordinates like no one ever has before. Instead of selling one garment he sells three.' Various descriptions of Glen include 'a keen young man with a volatile personality', 'a stylist', 'retail actor' and 'motivational speaker'. Glen was overwhelmingly successful during the two years he spent touring and promoting *The Look of Sportscraft* in stores, on TV and radio, and in the press. Introducing fashion parades and window displays 'with a difference', he dramatised the art of co-ordinates, in the process promoting Sportscraft as a fashion and merchandising authority. His sales clinics which trained store staff to creatively encourage buyers to indulge in multiple purchases increased sales dramatically and persuaded department stores, including Myer and David Jones, to rethink their merchandising strategies and establish in-store specialist Sportscraft shops. By 1964 Sportscraft had an in-store shop in every State, having turned around the situation whereby it was now the manufacturer and not the department store who directed the promotion and sales of their products.

Fashion, with its quest for the new and the latest, is a barometer of social and cultural trends. For Sportscraft this involved constantly refiguring the logic of co-ordinates to develop new variations in response to social and cultural shifts which in the 1960s meant youth, Pop, liberation politics and changing roles for women. The role of its children, Sportsgirl, Miss Sportscraft, and Miss Sportscraft Junior, accordingly, was to speak to the youth market while

the multiple themes of each seasonal Look played up the latest set of popular culture trends, especially those of freedom and choice. When launched in 1967, accompanied by extensive hype about 'fresh young looks', the Highland Go Together Game, for example, offered twenty new looks with swinging Pop titles such as Bonnie Prince Velvets, The Mac Brights, Whisky A-Go-Go, Edinburgh Rock and Highland Swingers, as well as eight groups for Junior Miss. The Irresistible Go-Together Game also got into the spirit of Pop as its witty, sexy and eye catching text teased the Sportscraft buyer, 'Game? What game? Sportscraft call it the 'Go Together Game'.... I call it agony. I can't stop playing. ... Watch it! This is a girl trap.'

The 'young and fresh' theme helped foster the impression that while classic and traditional Sportscraft's co-ordinates were nevertheless trend setters and this was given extra edge as each season's Look featured new products such as knits and textile innovations including the world's first stretch woollen slacks (1964), printed wool, Koraton permanent press (1966) and Siroset pleating (1965). Textile and manufacturing innovation was central to Sportscraft's success as it continually upgraded its production facilities and sought new product opportunities by moving into knitwear, buying Awyon and Crestknit and building associations with the yarn and fibre manufacturers Fibremakers, Du Pont and Courtauld. Having worked with CSIRO since the 1950s Sportscraft won the first license to use the Australian Wool Board's 'Pure New Wool' mark in 1965. This saw a nationalistic theme enter the game beginning with The Highland Go Together Game that invited women to now play 'the game in pure new wool'. As it consistently won Australian Wool Fashion Awards with evocatively titled collections such as Naturally Australian and Welcome Wool in the Go-Together Game, Worldly Australian (1968), Sportscraft wove itself into the national consciousness as an innovator of woollen products and consolidated its claim to being the Great Australian Classic.



The Look of Sportscraft: Naturally Australian, Australian Women's Weekly, 6 March 1963. Image Source: Press Cutting Book, Sportscraft Archives, Sussan Corporation, Melbourne.

By the 1970s the long-term investment in the Look of Sportscraft campaign had paid off. Not only was Sportscraft recognised nationally as a leading fashion brand, it was also expanding its enterprise to include a wide range of complimentary labels and retail activities, including the huge Sportsgirl empire. No longer a small manufacturer its vastly improved and efficient production and distribution systems facilitated quick response to market changes and the production of clothes specifically for regional and niche market needs. Controlling its own advertising and merchandising Sportscraft had established itself as a brand personality that spoke directly to its consumers and in turn responded to what they had to say by producing new Looks to meet their needs. With its consistent promotion of the co-ordinates fashion game it established the staple of modern fashion and set off a long love affair with Australia women. With the women's market firmly under control Sportscraft was now moving into men's wear, purchasing companies such as Crestknit and John Brown. Not only had the small rag trade manufacturer become an industry leader changing the relationship between the manufacturer, the retailer and the consumer, it was also forcing a major change in retailing practices and store design. But most importantly its vast array of co-ordinates styles and labels was enabling it to effectively capture the lucrative centre of the female and male market which would form its vast and loyal consumer base well into the 1990s. In 1975 when tariff reductions were impacting on the ragtrade, the *National Times* isolated Sportscraft as the great survivor which had converted itself into an exemplary model of a diversified and market responsive manufacturer and fashion leader. The David Bardas and John Blood partnership and the Look of Sportscraft was transforming Sportscraft not only into an industry leader but it was also fostering deep loyalty amongst Australian women to this Great Australian Classic.

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The study draws on the author's interviews with David Bardas (2004), the Sportscraft Archive, then held at FBTRC and Susan Ryan's extensive preparatory work for an unpublished book, also held at the FBTRC. Juliette Peers was the Research Assistant.

When this research was conducted the Sportscraft Archives were held at FBTRC. They are now held by the Sussan Corporation.