



2017 RSP AWARDS

WE FOUND CANADA'S BEST
RETAIL FURNITURE SALES PEOPLE

INTRO BY MICHAEL J. KNELL • WINNER PROFILES BY ASHLEY NEWPORT



The 2017 RSPA winners: Sylvie Viel of Ameublement BrandSource Rice in Edmonston, New Brunswick – Atlantic Canada; Ruth Parkinson of Executive Furniture Rentals in North York – Ontario; Amanda Bell of Marshall's Home Living in Kelowna – British Columbia; and, Matthew Fecho of Mattress Mattress in Airdrie, Alberta – Western Canada.

EARLIER THIS YEAR AND IN COLLABORATION with Zucora Inc., *Home Goods Online* launched a new awards program whose goal was to seek out this country's best retail sales people and sales managers working in Canadian furniture, mattress and major appliance stores. The quality of the response we received from retailers across the country was staggering and truly encouraging. The amount of raw talent at work on retail floors from Victoria and to St. John's has to be seen to be believed.

When we published our invitation for retailers to nominate the best members of their team for this award, Brad Geddes, president and chief executive officer of Zucora, the London-based added value resource and Presenting Sponsor of the *Retail Sales Professional Awards (RSPA)*, pointed out they really do control the industry's fate.

"These men and woman are our industry's first point of contact with the customer. They literally control what the customer buys and why – yet we don't, as an industry, recognise and celebrate their contributions," he said, adding, "The RSPA will celebrate the outstanding achievement of sales professionals throughout Canada's home furnishings industry. In addition to sales success, the RSPAs are driven by peer-recognised achievement for delivering customer excellence by going 'above and beyond'."

Nominees had to meet the following requirements, at minimum:

- He or she must be actively employed as a sales associate or manager in the retail of home furnishing products (furniture; appliances; electronics; bedding and related products) in Canada;
- He or she must have a minimum of three years of direct sales experience with consumers;
- He or she must consistently meet or exceed performance goals as confirmed by the candidate's employer;
- He or she must demonstrate a customer-focused approach with supported documentation;
- He or she must have a record of mentoring and assisting other sales professionals as recognised by their peers; and,
- He or she must be aware of the nomination and be willing to be considered for nomination, and if selected, be available to attend the Canadian Home Furnishings Awards gala event to be held in Toronto just prior to the Canadian Furniture Show (transportation and accommodation to be provided).

In all, the judging panel selected one winner from five regions across the country: British Columbia; Western Canada (including Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, The Yukon, Northwest Territories and Nunavut); Ontario; Quebec and Atlantic Canada (including Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island and Newfoundland & Labrador).

From these, one national award recipient was chosen. The 2017 RSPA winners will be introduced more fully on

the pages that follow, but congratulations are warranted once again to: Sylvie Viel of Ameublement BrandSource Rice in Edmonston, New Brunswick – Atlantic Canada; Ruth Parkinson of Executive Furniture Rentals in North York – Ontario; Amanda Bell of Marshall's Home Living in Kelowna – British Columbia; and, Matthew Fecho of Mattress Mattress in Airdrie, Alberta – Western Canada.

Matthew Fecho was also named Canada's Retail Sales Professional of the Year for 2017.

Unfortunately, there was no winner found to represent furniture, mattress and major appliance retailers in Quebec.

Each is also profiled by HGO contributing editor Ashley Newport on the pages that follow.

This year's judging panel included: Mark Geddes, Zucora's director of corporate sales training; Corrie-Ann Knell, HGO's director of sales and marketing; and, Pat Kelly, assistant vice president of home furnishings for Cantrex Nationwide.

The recipients of the first RSPAs received an all-expense paid trip (including airfare, accommodation and meals) to Toronto where they were presented to the industry during this year's Canadian Home Furnishings Awards gala. They were also invited to attend the Canadian Furniture Show.

Pat Kelly was unequivocal in his praise for this year's RSPA recipients.

"When reviewing the candidates for these great awards one common thread ran through each – a passion for their work. Each contributed on many levels including the success of the business; the right products, excellence in service but most of all a passion and care for their customer; to ensure that each customer had the best experience and a result that exceeded their customer's expectations," he observed.

"You have to admire that and recognise the importance of the influence their behaviour has on others and the business. Recognition of their excellence is so important and not just as examples of the changing environment and competitive pressures; but proof it is still the human factor that makes all the difference," he added.

The RSPA program was also supported by the Canadian Home Furnishings Alliance (CHFA) and the Canadian Furniture Show (CFS).

The call for entries for the 2018 Retail Sales Professional Awards will be made next January.

Home Goods Online extends its congratulations to the winning class of 2017. Our industry's future is indeed safe in their hands.

A LETTER FROM THE PRESENTING SPONSOR

SALUTING OUR BRIDGE TO THE CUSTOMER

*"She doesn't care how much you know;
until she knows how much you care ..."*



This is an old but familiar sales refrain. It seems that sales professionals who truly understand the importance of guiding and assisting customers recall this phrase automatically.

What we sometimes forget is that nothing happens until somebody sells something!

Professional sales associates are the real heroes of the home furnishings retail industry. Without them, nothing happens.

Every day, we are fortunate to be able to interact with sales professionals and sales managers throughout Canada who are driven to succeed. Their success (and personal income) is largely dependent on their ability to listen, understand and assist their customers in helping to make the right purchase decision.

Sales associates serve as the bridge between a customer and the product or service offered for sale.

Sales associates determine a retailer's financial success. Sales associates are both the first and last impression made with customers.

The *Retail Sales Professional Awards* is an industry-wide opportunity to recognise the significant value that these key individuals provide for all of us in the home furnishings industry. Together with the support of two leading industry organisations – the Canadian Home Furnishings Association and the Canadian Furniture Show – as well as *Home Goods Online*, the RSPAs provide the occasion to highlight and celebrate those people that make it happen.

As the program's Presenting Sponsor, Zucora is proud to have played a small role in recognising these industry professionals who inspire us. Their ability to serve, satisfy and care for customers on a daily basis provides us all with the business success that we're able to enjoy.

Bradford 'Brad' Geddes
President and Chief Executive Officer
Zucora Inc.



BRITISH COLUMBIA:

AMANDA BELL HATES STAGNATION, LOVES BIG PROJECTS

WHEN AMANDA BELL STARTS TALKING ABOUT her job, you know there was no doubt she was a shoe-in for the newly established *Retail Sales Professional Awards* (RSPA). Her energy truly is electric, and her passion for her profession is palpable.

A sales associate working on the floor at Marshall's Home Living in Kelowna, British Columbia, Bell was one of first four recipients of the 2017 edition of the RSPA, of which added value goods and service provider Zucora is the primary sponsor. Three other industry insiders also actively support the program, including Home Goods Online; the Canadian Home Furnishings Alliance (CHFA), the Toronto-based furniture trade group; and, the Canadian Furniture Show (CFS), this country's only national furniture trade event.

Since the award isn't an easy one to win – salespeople across Canada are nominated for the honour by their managers or peers – locking one down is impressive.

"I was very honoured, it was a surprise," Bell says. "The owner of my store didn't tell me he had [nominated me], so when I received a call, I was excited. I had no idea it was coming, I didn't even know what the award was."

Bell and the three other winners were honoured at the recent Canadian Home Furnishings Awards gala. She was recognised by the industry and honoured by her manager James Marshall because she is "in tune with what is going on in the industry and a self-starter who is always eager to learn about new products and services."

Bell's job is unique because she isn't just walking clients through a sale; she's lending them her vision and helping them craft and create their living space. In Marshall's words, Bell's clientele list is broad and always satisfied with how she transforms their homes—whether those homes are a brand new builds or a full blown renovations.

Bell, a nine year veteran of Marshall's Home Living, says the recognition felt incredible.

"I felt really happy and excited when I won," she says. "I was so looking forward to the whole event and getting to experience all that. It was so nice. When you work hard, it just feels good to get some special recognition like that."

Although she's always worked in sales, her role in the company has morphed to better encompass her experience (and talent) as a bona fide interior designer. Her long-term

tenure with the store (she's been with Marshalls almost since its inception) has also allowed her to give back by passing knowledge and experience onto colleagues.

"I'm very proud to say I've, for the last several years, surpassed the million dollar mark in sales. Last year was \$1.4 million," she says. "I think I have some qualities that have allowed me to excel at sales. I'm a people person, I'm outgoing, I try to be very engaging and very real and genuine."

Bell is also knowledgeable about products and that knowledge, she says, puts people at ease.

"I'm trying to do my best for my clients and that really resonates with people. I'm enthusiastic and excited for them."

As far as career highlights go, Bell says winning a bid on and decorating high-end units in an upscale Kelowna development was an incredible opportunity.

"Last year, I bid on and got 18 multi-million dollar units that I furnished from top to bottom," she says. "I set up 18 units with my crew. It was incredible and fun.

The development, called Lakeshore Living at Manteo, functions as both a residential and resort property and Bell and her team even got to work directly with one purchaser to design their unit to their liking.

For Bell, homes and decor have always been fascinating and her early beginnings in real estate allowed her to segue into a sales position.

"I actually started my career as youngest licensed realtor in Regina, Saskatchewan. I was 21," she says. "I made the leap to Kelowna. My son was young, so I didn't want to put all the [real estate] time in, and I always loved houses and design and furniture. I got the opportunity to work in a sales capacity and then it grew and built from there."

Outside of work, Bell likes to keep active and spend time with her family, including her now 22-year-old son.

"I'm a big family person. I love to go biking and boating. I love to do things with my rottweiler fur baby and travel!"

When it comes to work, Bell says she's happy to be working in a store where no two days are the same.

"We are unique, we are individually owned and operated and there is only one of us. We've turned into a really unique, trend-setting store that people come to. I want to keep growing and working on big projects, I don't like to be stagnant."



ATLANTIC CANADA:

SYLVIE VIEL WINS RSPA FOR WORK IN NEW BRUNSWICK STORE

WHEN SYLVIE VIEL, A VETERAN SALES ASSOCIATE at Ameublement BrandSource Rice traveled to Toronto to receive the *Retail Sales Professional Award* (RSPA) for Atlantic Canada, she was the only exclusively Francophone recipient.

But that didn't stop her from mingling and sharing a moment with fellow winner Ruth Parkinson – of Executive Furniture Rentals and the award winner for Ontario – over a shared taste in footwear.

Viel was one of four regional recipients saluted by the first annual RSPA, which is sponsored by Zucora – the London-based added value service provider – and three other industry insiders, including *Home Goods Online* (HGO), the Canadian Home Furnishings Alliance (CHFA) and the Canadian Furniture Show (CFS). The award recognises the outstanding achievements and accomplishments of experienced sales professionals working on the floors of furniture, mattress and major appliance retailers across the country and seen as leaders when it comes to delivering exceptional customer sales and service.

Since the award isn't an easy one to win – salespeople from across the country were nominated for the honour by their managers or peers – locking down for one designated for Atlantic Canada is impressive and very worthy of celebration.

"I was so proud, excited and privileged," Viel told HGO through an interpreter (she speaks French exclusively), to discover she had been nominated and, eventually, selected. She was even more thrilled to have been recognised for her hard work.

"I was honored, it felt like recognition of all my hard work for the last 28 years in customer service," she says.

Viel accepted the honour at the CHFA annual gala, which was held just prior to the opening of the 2017 Canadian Furniture Show – an event that attracted winners from as close as North York and as far as Kelowna, British Columbia.

As for what compelled her employer and manager, Jim Rice – the owner of Ameublement BrandSource Rice, which is located in Edmundston, New Brunswick – to nominate her, he says it has a lot to do with her drive to go over and above.

"Sylvie consistently strives to achieve more than is asked of her," he wrote on her nomination form. "She was one of

the top sales associates with a competing retailer for 10 years until she switched over to our team in March 2016."

He also noted that Viel is incredibly dedicated to improving the store and increasing its performance and has gotten tangible results. "In 11 months, our overall performance has improved by over 50%," he wrote.

Asides from being a strong salesperson, she has the personal touch that works to engage not only customers, but co-workers as well. Viel is known for her strong coaching skills as well as her eagerness and willingness to help other associates perform better. She also works to achieve her ends by setting monthly, weekly and even daily goals – something that works to embolden and encourage the other members of her team.

Interestingly enough, Viel is something of a new face at BrandSource Rice, having only joined the company 15 months ago. The last year has been a big one for the customer service veteran (she's been working with clients for close to 30 years) who considers transitioning out of the textile industry into the sales segment a bona fide career highlight.

As for what she loves most about her job, she says the interactions with clients are the most rewarding.

"There are a lot of small things, but the two most important things are my client's loyalty towards me by asking to be served by me and always coming back when they need to make a purchase for their home," she says. "There's also the recognition of their satisfaction regarding the products I recommended to them to fulfill their needs and desires."

Viel says one of the reasons she enjoys working at BrandSource Rice is everyone's desire to make the store the best it can be is attractive. "[I like] the ambiance and the drive," she relates. "The people are always working on improving not only as individuals, but as a team."

In her free time, Viel likes to spend time gardening and keeping active. "Outside of work, my biggest passion is mostly gardening, but I also keep busy by doing yoga, taking long walks, reading and even playing golf."

Viel has every intention of staying in the furniture industry and hopes to pass her wisdom down to others going forward. "I would love to pass on my passion to those who are willing to learn," she says.



FURNITURE EXPERT TO THE STARS TAKES HOME RSPA FOR ONTARIO

WHEN RUTH PARKINSON, A SALES ASSOCIATE with the North York, Ont.-based Executive Furniture Rentals store, learned that she would be receiving an important honour for her work as an accomplished salesperson, she had two thoughts: she was honoured and worried about having to dress up.

"It was really exciting," Parkinson said. "At first I thought, 'do I have to dress up?' But it was absolutely stunning. It was just great."

Parkinson was one of four recipients of the furniture industry's first annual 2017 Retail Sales Professional Awards for Ontario, an award sponsored by Zucora and a host of other industry insiders, including Home Goods Online, the Canadian Home Furnishings Alliance and the Canadian Furniture Show. The award recognizes the outstanding achievements and accomplishments of experienced sales professionals who are seen as leaders when it comes to delivering exceptional customer sales and service.

Since the award isn't an easy one to win, locking one down is impressive and very worthy of celebration.

"I knew nothing about it," Parkinson says. "My boss came to me and he said someone wanted to talk to me. I was with a client, but he said to pick up the phone for some good news. They told me I'd been nominated and won. When you've been at your job for so many years, it's good to be recognized."

Parkinson's job is decidedly unique, as she rents furniture to people and companies who need it for everything from temporary homes to special events. The company even provides furniture for the popular HGTV TV show, *Property Brothers*. While few people think about rented furniture--a necessity for traveling athletes, celebrities and companies looking for furniture for summer staff--it's a thriving niche business.

"I've been at Executive Furniture Rentals for exactly 25 years (and the company has been around for a whopping 66 years) and I've been in the industry for 35," says Parkinson.

Interestingly enough, she was working for a family company when Mark Miller, the owner of Executive, said she would work for him one day.

"When the recession hit, Mark approached me," she says. "And now I'm still here."

As for why Miller chose to nominate Parkinson, the decision was an easy one. Parkinson has over 20 years experience servicing clients and creating complete home packages on a temporary basis. On average, her home packages are created within 48

hours and promptly delivered--an astounding turnaround time.

"Ruth has gained many compliments from expats relocating temporarily because she has the acute skill to listen to their needs and create instant solutions that meet their lifestyle," her nomination form reads. "This ranges from presidents and CEOs of major corporations as well as professional athletes to newly arrived Canadian immigrants. All are treated with utmost respect and in fact, Ruth has often become their first Canadian friend."



Since Parkinson is helping people feel at home when home is far away, her friendly approach is invaluable.

"I look after people relocating to Toronto," she says. "I think the most exciting client I had was Kirstie Alley. She was a designer before she was an actor, so it was exciting to meet her and furnish her home for six months."

Parkinson doesn't just furnish temporary homes, she truly goes out of her way to befriend and take care of her clients.

"I get to know them and their families. There's a big design element, so you

have to know the person. Do they want comfortable furniture? Do they have children? You're getting to know the families."

Over the course of her impressive career, Parkinson has received some recognition for her work. Recently, Parkinson received the U.S.-based Cort Furniture Rentals' annual Superior Customer Service Award.

"It was pretty exciting to get two awards in one year," she says.

As for what she does outside of work, Parkinson said her hobbies do not involve visiting furniture stores on weekends. That said, she never gets tired of housing.

"Real estate is an interest for sure, we deal with a lot of agents, so that's a big part of our business."

In terms of what's most rewarding, Parkinson says getting to know people sets the job apart.

"I really feel that some of these families don't know anyone, they're coming with their spouse for work and the first person they meet might be me. I keep in contact and it's hard to say goodbye. I had to say goodbye to someone who was here with Nike for three years."

The company also makes work fun.

"My boss is amazing, he's good to me and always has been. He's very fair and honest and we're very fortunate. After 35 years, it's great to be recognized by your peers. It's been an excellent experience."

WESTERN CANADA: YOUTHFUL NATIONAL WINNER LOOKING TO GROW WITH HIS COMPANY

IT'S HARD OUT THERE FOR A SALESPERSON – especially one in the complex, challenging and ever-changing furniture industry.

For that reason, it's exciting when a young salesperson – one who is just 28-years-old – walks away with both a 2017 *Retail Sales Professional Award (RSP)* for Western Canada and special recognition as Canada's *National Retail Sales Professional* for 2017.

Matthew Fecho, a sales manager with Forty Winks Inc. (part of the Mattress Mattress brand), was one of four recipients of the furniture industry's first annual 2017 RSP, an award sponsored by Zucora, *Home Goods Online*, the Canadian Home Furnishings Alliance and the Canadian Furniture Show. The award recognizes the outstanding achievements and accomplishments of experienced sales professional who are seen as leaders when it comes to delivering exceptional customer sales and service.

Winning the award is impressive, especially when a nominee goes from being shy and somewhat introverted to an enthusiastic and engaging people person.

"It was humbling to know there was that chance, and to be recognized by the company. It was definitely kind of exciting to know they wanted to recognize me," says Matthew Fecho, who was happily surprised by the win. "My first phone call was to my mom and dad and my wife. They were all really excited, my wife especially."

The recipients were rewarded during the recent Canadian Home Furnishings Gala, which was held on May 25 in Vaughan, a suburb of Toronto.

Like many people in the furniture industry, Fecho works with family and was actually nominated by his mother, Lori Fecho – but don't let that fool you.

Fecho is an accomplished salesman, having achieved his personal sales targets for the past 39 consecutive months. He was also a top hourly performer for the entire group of 15 Mattress Mattress stores in 2016. Fecho also opened the Airdrie, Alta. location three years ago and has been mentoring a four person team ever since. Now, his store has been holding the title of the #2 (out of 15 stores) for the past two years.

"We looked at hourly rate of sales for employees. [Mat-

thew] was the most consistent and highest selling employee. He pulls his weight and more," says Lori Fecho. "If anyone should win, we thought 'he's probably the one to do it.' We get surveys back from customers and he's gotten so many back where customers love him. They say that if they could have him on their team, they'd hire him in a second.

While the award is an important milestone, it doesn't just show Fecho's sales savvy, but also his personal journey from a quiet introvert to an outgoing company representative.

"I never saw myself in sales, let alone selling mattresses," he says. "I've been in industry since March of 2008 and about five or six of those years were part-time while I was studying accounting at the University of Mount Royal [in Calgary]."

He says working for Mattress Mattress taught him that he's actually a great people person.

"I love talking to people and not sitting in front of a computer screen alone in an office. I find it thrilling and exciting and every day is different."

As far as working for family goes, he says it has its challenges and rewards.

"I see and talk to my mom almost every day. My uncle (Mattress Mattress owner Eric Buchfink) and I are quite a bit closer now. You're not scared to put forth ideas or say what you think is right."

Fecho's success stems, in many ways, from the passion he developed for the industry once he became more immersed in it.

"This is a health and wellness product and being healthy and active is important to me," he says.

Fecho is also active and says he and his wife spend a great deal of time walking their dog and biking, sometimes traveling five to 10 kilometres in a day.

Going forward, Fecho hopes to grow with the company.

"I only have intentions of growing with the company. The goals I have are all within Mattress Mattress. I don't intend to leave ever."

That said, he does hope Mattress Mattress gets even bigger.

"Growth needs to happen so people are more aware of us." **HGO**

