



2008 CGTA
RETAILER OF THE YEAR

WINNER

SMALL TOWN ROOTS

ACHESON'S GIFTS & DECORATIVE ACCENTS

BY BRIDGET FABI, PHOTOGRAPHY BY STEVE FROST

From humble beginnings in a small-town pharmacy, Acheson's Gifts & Decorative Accents proves that you don't have to be big to be mighty

After more than 30 years in business, and with two CGTA Retailer of the Year Awards under her belt, Dianne Acheson knows a thing or two about retailing. Carved from a 300-square-foot space in her husband's Harriston, Ont., pharmacy, Acheson's Gifts & Decorative Accents is a leading lifestyle retailer in Ontario. From day one, Dianne's eclectic and trend-driven assortment of giftware and décor, along with her flair for dramatic displays, has attracted the crowds, including the city folk driving through Harriston on their way to cottage country. Dianne further cemented her

stature by hosting a series of ridiculously-fun celeb-hosted luncheons, which brought women from all over to the small town in droves.

In 2002, Dianne's success necessitated an expansion and her gift store grew to encompass 1000 square feet of the pharmacy. The next year the business further expanded its reach with a second location in Erin. That store instantly gained notoriety for a classic and on-trend assortment of home décor and giftware.

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That same year, her Harriston store was named the best decorative accessories and home décor store in the CGTA's Retailer of the Year Awards competition. Dianne was riding high. Then in 2006, she was dealt a blow. The Erin space was sold and she had to move. But, there were no available retail spaces in town.

Dianne spent six months researching outlying cities and towns and decided to relocate to Orangeville. "I was watching this location for months, just waiting for space to become available," says Dianne. "One day I was driving by just as the agent was placing the 'For Rent' sign in the window. It was definitely meant to be."

At over 2500 square feet, the Orangeville store (*shown here*) is large and luxurious with awe-inspiring displays at every turn. It boasts a broader selection of products and price points than the Harriston store, with items priced anywhere from .99 cents to \$5000. "We carry gorgeous \$500 Sarah Pacini sweaters alongside stylish \$59 accents," says Dianne.

"This move was definitely for the best. Traffic and sales are so much better in Orangeville, and I'm selling items that I never could in Erin."



Case in point: fashion. Women's clothing is such an important part of that store, Acheson's adopted the tag line, "Fashion for the Home, Fashion for Her."

Although times are tough and retail is exhausting, Dianne loves the business. "I believe there is room in every town and city for independent retailers," she says. "A few years back when the big-box stores were moving in everywhere I thought we wouldn't last more than three years, but in the last few weeks our sales have been better than ever. None of those big corporations can offer what we do: quality and service, and customers are willing to pay a little extra to ensure they get it."

The guidance of retail makeover specialist Barbara Crowhurst has helped Dianne hone her retail skills. "When I was planning the Orangeville store Barbara provided me with a lot of valuable statistics and information which helped me make an educated decision. Then she helped me with product selection, store layout and design. She was an advocate of dividing the store into nine sections and placing my bestselling category – clothing – in the back to draw customers through the entire store. These layout techniques and the nine divisions have made a huge

difference and also help me with display, which I do by theme and colour. For example, the front of the store is all a lodge look."

With over 250 suppliers, it's actually quite hard to tell which companies Dianne buys from. She artfully blends lines into unique, mesmerizing themed displays. Countless crystal chandeliers, a baby grand piano and faux zebra rugs are just a few of the items that catch the eye. And, window displays change every three weeks to encourage shoppers to come back for more.

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Dianne vets new products based on perceived value and quality. “And then I ask myself whether it will fit in the store. Regardless of how beautiful it is, it has to blend.

“Our goal is to support our customers and create a harmonious atmosphere in their lives and homes. We ensure that every person that walks through our door leaves feeling special and inspired. I love to please my customers and there’s no better feeling than when they walk in the store and say, ‘That item you picked out for me to give as a gift was a hit.’ It’s so gratifying to know we’re making people happy.” ■

Learn more online at www.achesons.ca



DIANNE'S FAVE PRODUCTS

- City Gypsy Jewellery
- Maxwell & Williams stainless steel salad servers
- Not Your Daughter's Jeans
- Vera Wang crystal
- Repositionable sayings from Wall Talk

