

GRANT'S IS PROUD TO PRESENT
THIS SERIES ABOUT PEOPLE WHO
ARE MAKING A DIFFERENCE
IN THE COMMUNITY

Sujay Shah heads a group of companies that was once again awarded the prestigious Canada's Best Managed Companies designation – for the 10th year.

Shah Canada Group of Companies is among the best-in-class of Canadian owned and managed companies with revenues over \$50 million demonstrating leadership in the areas of strategy, capabilities and innovation, culture and commitment, and financials to achieve sustainable growth.

Maintaining Platinum Club member status along with other strong Canadian companies can come with its own pressure, the President and CEO agrees with a laugh.

“Fun pressure! We have to constantly upkeep the designation and it's a very rigorous program. They take a deep look at your business and what propels you into the big league. The exciting part is that it keeps the team and management motivated.”

In the early days, Shah was involved at all levels, talking to the team about the multiple areas of focus. On automation, for instance, and ensuring that their business platform could stand the test of time. On whether it could withstand recession – or a pandemic – could it get through not only today but when times are bad. Now he focuses more on the strategic vision for the group of companies, the day-to-day running in the capable hands of a senior management team of 15.

Launched in 2005, the company's portfolio of companies – which includes Shashi Foods and Smile Natural Foods – has over 220 com-



“Awards keep us motivated”

mitted employees and uses a complex trading strategy that sources raw materials from more than 40 countries around the world.

Shashi Foods is North America's leading manufacturer for globally procured and locally curated spices, herbs, and seasonings. Its products are used by some of the most recognizable brands in retail, packaged food, and food service industries in North America and beyond.

Smile Natural Foods is a private-label producer of organic and gluten-free muesli, granola and nutrient-dense breakfast cereals for major supermarket chains across Canada and the US.

The Shah Canada portfolio also includes Clarius, which invests in privately held companies in and beyond the food industry, and Jay Capital, a real estate portfolio com-

pany with industrial and commercial holdings.

There was also Kii Naturals, with 120 employees and a strong presence in 25 countries which they

Grant's Desi Achiever

SUJAY SHAH,
PRESIDENT AND CEO,
SHAH CANADA GROUP
OF COMPANIES

sold to a private equity firm in the US in 2017.

Shah and his brother Rajay, who is Vice President, inherited the business gene.

In 1974, their father Shashi Shah began planning a new business venture in Canada. Having run successful clothing and textile operations in East Africa with his brother Amu, Shashi's initial notion involved textiles. However, market research soon revealed that fashion

trends in Canada were vastly different to those back home. He couldn't help but notice that ethnic foods available in Canada tended to be overpriced and lacking in quality and freshness. With immigrants arriving from all over the world providing a ready market, he and his brother Praful seized the opportunity and established Shah Trading Co. Ltd.

Over the next 30 years, Shashi and brothers Praful, Tony and Baba built what would become the largest and most successful ethnic food company in Canada.

In 2005, Sujay Shah and his brothers realized there was a gap in the market in the areas of seasonings, spices, herbs and blends and launched Shah Canada Group of Companies with the idea of building a strong manufacturing-oriented company. One that is informed by lineage and Jainism.

Shah talks about the Jain philosophy of live and let live, of doing no harm.

“In North America, one is taught to focus on the customer. Jain philosophy and our family philosophy taught us to focus on the whole system. Suppliers, employers, associates... To offer fair price for the best quality. To nurture the business ecosystem.”

The pandemic was a tough period for everyone around the world, for consumers, and small and large businesses. However, where so many organizations were constrained with supply chain issues, their companies navigated the challenges well through business practices put in place well before the pandemic.

“Everyone got hit at different levels. We got lucky that there were no outbreaks at our facilities, but lead times became longer in the supply chain, costs went up. The overall effect on us was mitigated because our business is conservative in nature – we can sustain through ups and downs.”

While they built their organization on an established model, a tried and tested one, they were moving into natural and organic foods at a time when those were fairly new.

However, gaining acceptance and shelf space for their range of products was not as difficult as one might imagine, says Shah.

"In this part of the world, what drives acceptance among retailers and consumers is innovation. They are looking for a new, unique experience. Products that only offer a lower price are not going to succeed in the long run. It's not easy, but innovation gets you the eyes and ears of people. We have created success by incorporating food science and technology into our business model.

He cites the example of learning how to lock in and maintain flavour in spices from the coffee-milling world. They met producers in the US and Europe and used their knowledge to offer fresher, more flavourful cinnamon, cloves and peppers through Shashi Foods.

One might be forgiven for thinking his is a captive market — people are always going to want spices and specialty ingredients, but Shah also talks about continuously adapting to a rapidly changing environment.

"I think about this a little differently," he explains. "Back in Africa where my parents came from and before that in India, where they are originally from, the family ran general trading stores. They bought and sold everything. My dad and uncle then specialized in ethnic foods in Canada. So basically, whatever the market wanted. By the time my generation came in, we realized we needed to specialize further to remain competitive. So we took a piece of a business and applied more specialization, created a niche within a niche, if you will. Like organic muesli within breakfast cereals, for one.

"The secret to our success lies in coupling old-world knowledge with modern education to grow the business with value-added products."

Born in Montreal and raised in Toronto, Shah grew up in a traditional Gujarati family. And within a traditional Gujarati family business.

The same set up that provided opportunities for cultivating and honing his entrepreneurship pre-



"You are who you are because of the people around you. Include everyone in your success."

Sujay and Rajay Shah

sented a few challenges while he was growing up.

While all the kids at school took sandwiches for lunch, his box contained rice and dal.

"I was made fun of, other kids laughed at me. Not their fault, my food was unfamiliar to most. As I grew older and gained confidence, I used to respond with 'Try it!'. Those that did, liked it."

But the big difference he remembers is being told by his parents that they could not be like the kids hanging out at the corner store, of having to learn the ropes of the family business during summer.

"We developed our knowledge and skills and are reaping the benefits today, but back then, I so wanted to be able to just ride a bike or roller blade with my friends!"

His wife Gina is a marketing and advertising professional who now focuses on raising their three children.

Jayen, 16, and twins Dylon and Aryah, 14, have their own favourites among their family's vast product range. Their friends, too, are familiar with the products their dad produces.

Shah's philanthropic involvement is heavily

centred in East Africa, where he and his family continue to support numerous causes including wildlife, water, natural resources, health, welfare and children's education.

They are the lead donors of the Jain Society of Toronto Temple and donate to local Canadian food banks and hospitals.

The family supported the creation of the dining hall in their children's school that combines the intimacy and warmth of family dinners with the formality and sophisticated conversation of a highly academic, multilingual international school.

The interesting thing is that when his children open their lunch boxes with the rice and dal that Gina packs on some days in this dining hall, their friends know what that is, too. Things have come full circle.

The family enjoys practising karate together. Shah, who is a fourth-degree black belt, also makes the time to be a master instructor of the martial art. They are the lead donor of the Guyana Karate Col-

lege, an initiative Shah supports to help break the cycle of crime and violence among youth.

He also mentors young adults around the globe that aspire to succeed in business and life. He tells them that a business takes time to build. The world is moving very fast, he says, and everyone is looking for a quick fix. But a business takes time and patience. He reminds them of his belief in innovation — that "something cheaper than the next guy's" is not the path to success.

Surrounding oneself with a strong network of family, friends and mentors is vital.

And the most important aspect of long-lasting success? Learning to give back.

"You are who you are because of the people around you, of where you were raised. Include everyone in your success. That's the way I balance my life. By focusing on family, business, health and well being, and spirituality."

— SHAGORIKA EASWAR

**TWO BARRELS
MAKE IT
GOOD THE THIRD
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Triple Wood for a Smoother Taste.