

No Canadian Distributor Reaches Summit in Both Life and Business Excuses

by Drew Vass



Peter Yates is the owner of Window Film Systems, a London, Ontario, Canada-based distribution company.

For those of you who have decided to fold your hands and accept the demise of the

current economy—“You’ve got mail.” It’s from Peter Yates and it reads something like this:

Stop whining.

Yates, the owner of Window Film Systems in London, Ontario, Canada, doesn’t believe in excuses.

“I went into a staff meeting and I wrote onto our giant eight-foot white board: ‘Crisis creates opportunity,’” he says. It wasn’t that Yates’ staff had begun to whine; he just felt the need to

ensure that everyone was on the same page. “If that’s the concept that I have in my head, then I better ensure that my staff and all of my customers have the same approach.”

So the economy is tough. But before you think about showing your “bum hand,” be warned—this man doesn’t believe in giving up.

“You can either circle the drain and go through it, or you can do your best to climb out,” he says. “And if you create a positive attitude about a negative issue, that will help you deal with it.”

Case in point—at the age of 50, Yates decided it was time to fulfill a lifelong goal by climbing Mt. Kilimanjaro in Africa. The 60 to 70 mile journey would take days, reaching a total elevation of 19,331 feet at the summit—not something you would expect the typical 50-year-old to do. But Yates is far from average. He is an avid adventurer—



All photos courtesy of Peter Yates.

Yates says that in the final days of his climb, Kilimanjaro’s summit remained in sight, producing a euphoric feeling long before he reached this destination.

Located in Tanzania, Mt. Kilimanjaro rises a total of 15,100 feet from its base reaching a total elevation of 19,331 feet. It is comprised of three volcanic cones: Kibo, Mawenzi and Shira, though no eruptions have occurred in recorded history. The glaciers atop the mountain have receded in recent years and some scientists predict that global warming will claim the icy caps completely by 2020.



Yates made the climb with a Madico banner in his backpack. A photo at the summit commemorates the event and his dedication to the window film manufacturer.



In an effort to give back to Kenya, the country of his origin, Yates started the Canadian arm of Committee Assist, an African organization that is building an orphanage for kids who have lost their parents to AIDS. Pictured here, the kids are wearing shirts provided by Committee Assist, standing on one of the walls of their new orphanage in the foothills of Kilimanjaro.

a skier who insists on climbing to the highest points in order to drop into untouched territory. When that isn't enough, he has also been known to helicopter into even more remote locations.

Yates was born in Nairobi, Kenya. And though he moved to Canada at the age of 12, he remembers sitting on his grandfather's back porch, staring at the snow covered peaks of Kilimanjaro.

"I used to sit on his knee and he would tell me that if I listened close enough, I would hear Father Christmas coming over the mountain," he explains. "So Kilimanjaro has always had a very special place in my heart. As I grew older, the

desire to go back and touch African soil, and the possibility of doing a climb, has always been a thing of mine. So, turning 50, I said to myself 'Enough is enough.'"

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Drawing on his experience as a class A automotive mechanic and machinist, Yates set out to solve a problem with the typical installation process for impact-resistant films. He developed a dry laminating line that affixes impact-resistant film to glass prior to installation, so performance specifications are met immediately without the need for a curing period or attachment system.

For those who aren't yet buying into the message Yates wrote on his whiteboard, there's more. In the days leading up to this difficult journey, Yates suffered a second-degree tear to one of his calf muscles while playing squash. For most, this would mean cancelling or postponing the climb. Not for Yates.

No Excuses

"I got on the Internet and did a search for [physically disabled] people who have reached the summit of Kilimanjaro," Yates says. "I found an 18-year-old boy who had

done it on one leg. I decided if he could do it on one leg, I had no excuse."

And so he made the climb.

"That's just how I am," Yates explains. "If I had to do it on crutches, then I would have done it on crutches."

You might be asking: What's the correlation? Does climbing a nearly 20,000 foot tall mountain give a man the right to dish out business advice? Not necessarily. But Yates has been in the window film industry since 1978. In 1990 he committed to the product segment by purchasing an established distribution

company, and the rest of his career reads a bit like the story surrounding his Mt. Kilimanjaro adventure.

Yates got his start in the automotive business through import car sales and repairs at the age of twenty-three. Soon thereafter, he took notice of one of his customers, who had recently begun to distribute window film products out of the basement of his home. In 1990, he sold his repair shop and acquired the adolescent business, making the leap to window film. Yates says it was a lack of opportunity that caused him to switch courses.

"Stagnation isn't something that I'm comfortable with," he says. "Stagnation is the end. It's when you die. There can be no plateau for me. And in my previous business, there was a plateau; which is why I said to myself 'I've got to get out.'"

Yates isn't one to take the path of least resistance either. When he made the decision to climb Kilimanjaro, he decided to take the "Lemosho" route. While this path offers the greatest views and adventure, it also involves the steepest and most difficult climb, especially for someone with a torn calf muscle.

"I'm not a rock climber, and there is one section where you have to clamor up this steep rock wall," Yates explains. "I didn't like that."

Slow But Steady

On Mt. Kilimanjaro, with a torn calf muscle and facing one of the greatest physical challenges of his life, Yates knew that the Lemosho climb had to be accomplished one laborious step at a time.

"The first day was only about four hours of climbing, but I had to do it on my tip toes, because it was all uphill," he explains. "Whenever you put your heel down, you over-extend your calf muscle. I had to do it on my tip toes to try and get through it." And every step

brought its share of pain. "It was so flippin' painful," he says. "I managed to get to the first camp and I was just trying to show that I was okay, because our guides were constantly monitoring us."

The following night would prove as much of a psychological challenge as the day was physical. But Yates says he was determined to not turn back.

"It's all a mindset," he says. "Anything like that is more of a mindset than a physical challenge. My mind wasn't in a good place and I didn't have a very good feeling about it."

Thus Yates' whiteboard message.

"That night in camp was kind of a meditation type of process," Yates says. "I just kept telling myself that I was not going to go down and call it quits."

In business, the torn calf muscle was a relatively small Canadian window film market and a base of automotive dealers that weren't up to the task of architectural sales. Yates points out that Canada is not only a cool climate, but has a smaller population than the state of California.

"Compared to the U.S., it is a very small market," he says. "From that perspective alone, that is why we have had to look for additional opportunities."

In 1990, Yates faced an excruciating step for his company. He was determined to shift 80 percent of his business towards the architectural market; but reaching this summit would require a controversial and difficult climb. He would need to cut ties with approximately 50 percent of his dealer base. But first, he would need to discuss the idea with Madico, his primary film provider at the time. Just as he had no problem convincing his climbing guides that he would make it up Kilimanjaro with a torn calf muscle, Madico officials knew Yates would summit the architectural segment one way or another.



Though he got his start in the automotive sector, Yates' company, Window Film Systems in London, Ontario, Canada, primarily serves the architectural segment these days.

"I told them I wanted to fire half of my customers and that I was going to take a big hit in sales," Yates says. "If I had gone to any other manufacturer and said, 'By the way, this distributor is only going to buy half the product that I did the year before,' they would have said, 'Well, I guess we're going to have to find ourselves a new distributor.' Instead, they said, 'Wow. What a great idea.'"

And so he did. Years later, when he made that arduous climb to the top of Mt. Kilimanjaro, he did it with a Madico banner in his backpack. At the summit, Yates would show his appreciation for the company by snapping photos of the event—a symbol of their successful business journey together.

Yates' plan to penetrate the flat glass market panned out. In time, he began adding new dealers to his customer base that were qualified to serve the architectural market, slowly removing his company from sales. But remember—there can be no plateau; so he

immediately began searching for his next summit.

On to the Next Summit

"The typical way we go about things is—we ask ourselves, 'Everyone else is doing [this], so what can we do that will create some uniqueness?'" Yates explains. "To date, we've probably done nearly 50 projects in the name of research and development, to see if there's an opportunity there. Sometimes they've failed and sometimes they haven't. But we're constantly in search of something new."

It was Yates' experience as a class A automotive mechanic and machinist that led him to his next quest. He says he noticed a problem with the typical installation process for impact-resistant films. A wet-application doesn't begin to perform at the specified and maximum capacity until a curing process has completed. He also

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noticed that glass manufacturers and contractors were missing a golden opportunity by not offering an impact-resistant replacement product designed to fit the thickness of standard openings. For Yates, the answer was a dry lamination process. By dry laminating impact-resistant film to glass, prior to installation, the film would cover edge to edge, eliminating the need for an attachment system. It would also perform to its full specifications without a curing period.

“We can laminate glass today and it can be put in the opening tomorrow without having to be concerned about performance,” Yates says. “If you wet apply it, it could be months in some cases before the product is 100 percent ready to perform at 100 percent of its potential.”

Though Yates had the technical know-how to develop a machine and process for his big idea, the effort would also require an immense amount of capital—something he didn’t have at the time.

“Just like anything else, once I put my mind to it, I just do whatever it takes to get it done,” he says. So he did a little research and discovered that the Canadian National Research Council often subsidizes new business ventures. Armed with resume, idea and a solid business plan, he approached the council with his idea, requesting assistance for the cost of research and development. It saw fit to fund Yates’ effort, and soon thereafter he began developing what would prove to be a profitable avenue for his business.

Sweet Success

“We’ve been dry laminating for ten to 15 years now,” Yates explains. “I would say 90 percent of what we do is for glass manufacturers. It is done in a clean room, so the resulting application of film is impeccable. The quality is ideal and we’re able to do 1,100

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—Peter Yates, owner, Window Film Systems in London, Ontario, Canada.

linear feet in an hour.”

In Yates newly-designed, 40-foot dry laminating line, lites of glass pass through a transport system and into a glass washer. From there, they are passed into an inspection station and later to a dry laminating area where pressure sensitive films are applied in a vertical fashion.

“There are other companies out there that dry laminate,” Yates says. “But almost anyone who has done dry laminating has done it on a horizontal machine. And, in the film business as we all know, trying to apply film to a piece of glass lying flat on a table top means huge amounts of contamination. So the machine that we developed here is a vertical machine.”

The entire facility spans 7,000 square feet. The laminator Yates converted and uses is approximately 40-years old and once was owned and operated by a film manufacturer. End products are used in overhead glazing, safety and security, and anti-graffiti applications.

Today, Yates’ company services approximately 75 to 80 dealers and features around an 80/20 split between flat glass and automotive—this time with the larger portion representing flat glass. And he already has plans for future climbing adventures.

“It would be nice to summit the [world’s highest] seven,” he says.

With his current staff, Yates says he can pack up and head out at anytime.

“Because my staff [people] are absolutely the best of the best, I can walk away from this place at

any time,” he says. “When I was in Africa, I was out of touch with the office for three weeks and I had no fear whatsoever about what was going on. I came back to find that I didn’t really need to be here,” he adds, laughing.

Daphne Buono is Yates’ right hand woman and general manager. She has been with him for ten years now. “She runs the show,” he says. “She’s the general manager, but she literally runs this place.”

To support his company’s dealer base, Yates recruited the help of two brothers. “I also have the ‘Sunderland Group,’” he calls them. “I have two brothers who are both in sales. B.J. [Sunderland] is my dealer development person and Josh [Sunderland] is my commercial sales representative. Their goal is to take my seat [some day], so they’re an integral part of the company. But everyone is really—everyone from our installation guys to the top raft.”

A key difference in Yates’ business adventures and his journey to the top of Mt. Kilimanjaro is that one has a distinct summit. He says the sight of Kilimanjaro’s highest peak inspired a euphoric feeling long before he trudged the final few miles up to it. By the last portion of the climb, his torn calf muscle was a distant memory, drowned out by one of the world’s greatest accomplishments and views—a view he’s willing to share with anyone who follows the message he once wrote on an eight- by eight-foot whiteboard:

“Crisis creates opportunity.” **WF**