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## The Land of Giants

**W**hat childhood images came to mind as soon as you read “The Land of Giants”? Did you conjure up a single character, such as the Jolly Green Giant or King Kong, or was it an image of a battle, a triumph or a challenge, such as Jack and the Beanstalk, or David and Goliath? We were probably equally divided between the two visions, or perhaps a combination of both.

Well, it can be said this industry is made up of the same two groups: The Giants, in terms of the number of stores and geography served; and The Mortals, the small, independent companies that serve a much more defined region by a much smaller number of stores.

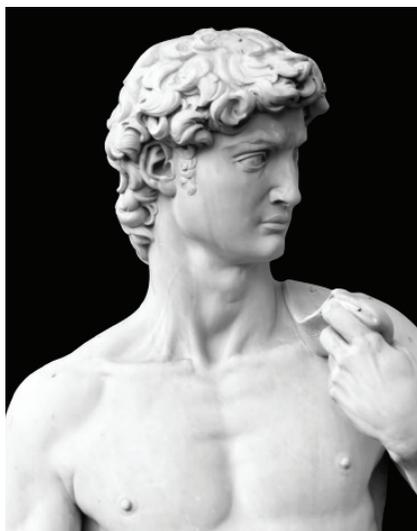
As we entered 2010 last month, it brought with it a new decade. For me, it represents the beginning of more than 35 years of serving this industry and reflecting on the many changes during that period, on an industry that has moved from infancy through childhood into adolescence and now rests in maturity. It is maturity that brings the greatest period of challenges: staying fresh, remaining relevant, ensuring resilience, and so on.

### The Soul of The Mortal

As in our childhood stories, many wonder now if The Mortals can compete against The Giants in a land of maturity and homogenization. The answer to this is a resounding yes.

Do not misunderstand: There is still

much “weeding out” that must occur among outdated, poorly operated retail facilities that are ill-serving the markets within which each is located. Once this action finally happens, what will be left are The Mortals, which have a strong position within each market served. It is The Mortals that live and breathe local



and not just view it as a new mantra of the moment, e.g., “grow local, buy local, shop local”; we heard many of those words of wonder in 2009 and into 2010. Being local is the very soul of The Mortal.

We have all read quotes from the pundits who stated that only a “handful” of national companies will own the vast majority of stores in the future. Let’s assume that handful is five and the vast majority is 80,000 stores. This means (on average) each of the “handful” will operate 16,000 stores on a daily basis, ensuring at the same time that

the mantra of local is being achieved via each diverse corporate division/zone/whatever. I am in corporate local on nearly a weekly basis; I can realistically state that operations of these units remain universal and not local.

### Answering the Customer

There is most definitely a dominant place for The Mortals in the future of this industry within The Land of Giants. It is The Mortals who view each store as finite, and not infinite, in how it serves a trade area. It is The Mortals who acknowledge they will not be “anything/something to most people”; they want to be part of the people, serving them as they go about their daily lives, knowing that they cannot speak for their customers—they can only answer them.

Quick, nimble and responsive are some of the words that govern the retail philosophy lived by The Mortals. They do not have to develop “test stores” within “test markets” to determine the acceptance of a new product or service; they operate within and serve the “test market” every day. Multiple layers of management do not determine direction taken; having “boots on the ground” every day determines how to best serve the one thing they know best: that “one and only store,” no matter if there are 40 of those “one and only stores” or only one.

Yes, indeed, there will be a place for The Mortals within this Land of the Giants for generations to come. That is why generations are coming. ■