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Sears

The call and distribution facility together employs 2,500 people.

The local call centre operates seven days a week from 6 a.m. to 3 a.m. Associates handle about 60,000 calls a day and even more in the weeks leading up to Christmas.

"Our catalogue business is very healthy and that means our telephone sales associates are constantly on the phone filling orders for customers from all across Canada," Scott said.

Sears is the only retailer in Canada that produces a full-line and full-service catalogue. "We have an infrastructure of 2,100 locations across Canada for pickup and return of catalogue orders. No one else has that ability or infrastructure in Canada, or the United States for that matter," he noted.

The Belleville operation, said Scott, is responsible for sending out products to 1,500 of the 2,100 locations in the country. Each location represents a community of at least 1,000 households.

The company prides itself on the fact that most catalogue orders are available for customer pickup within 72 hours of the order being placed.

Sears fills customers' orders so well that it wants to do the job for other organizations.

"We run an extremely efficient call and distribution centre and with our expertise and capacity to do more, we are now looking to

offer these services to other potential businesses," said Scott.

The giant distribution centre opened on College Street in the fall of 1991 and now employs around 2,500 people. The workforce, in fact, has grown by more than 500 people as a result of the call centre expansion last fall.

The catalogue call centre part of the local Sears operation didn't even exist until 1997. An "overflow" call centre was introduced with 50 full-time equivalent positions.

The call centre grew to 174 workstations and, last fall, doubled to 350 workstations employing 800 sales associates (for every workstation, the company needs 2.5 people to cover the shifts every day, seven days a week).

Last September the entire call centre was moved into the second floor of a \$6 million, two-storey, 85,000 square-foot office complex connected to the distribution centre

The main floor sits empty while Sears officials pursue new business opportunities for the space.

The new call centre also houses 105 workstations for a national catalogue customer service department and its Internet service oper-

ation.

Scott said Belleville added 30 workstations to its national catalogue customer service department from the Regina and Montreal operations, and it is now the only site in Canada that handles all customer inquiries.

"All customer inquiries reside in one location now and that allows us to respond and resolve customers' issues much more quickly," he said.

Scott said the Sears call centre is unique in that callers "talk to a human being right away, not a machine.

"We want to answer the phone in less than three rings. We consider that world-class service. We want to be a leader in this field."

The number of customers' catalogue orders leaving the distribution centre has been increasing every year.

In 1996, the centre handled 11 million orders involving 23 million pieces of merchandise.

Last year, workers processed 16 million orders for 38 million individual items — about the same as in 2000.

The "state-of-the-art" distribution centre houses more than \$100 million worth of merchandise.

"Despite recent world events and the economic slowdown, we basically sustained the same volume of orders and items in 2001 from the previous year. Business is tough out there and to maintain the growth that we have enjoyed over the past four years without slipping in market share is something we are very pleased with and it speaks well for the products and services we are offering to our customers."

Scott said the company is looking at expanding its call centre and distribution centre in the future.

"We still have about 40,000 square feet of empty space on the main floor of our call centre for expansion purposes," he said. "And our distribution centre, based on renovations in 2000, is positioned to handle up to 50 per cent more volume than we currently process today.

"Basically, what we have done is position ourselves in Belleville for future growth."

Scott said the company is ready to take full advantage when the economy gets back on track later this year.

"And we're also looking to leverage our capacity, both in the distribution centre and call centre, with other potential business partners."