



Cotton On chief executive officer
Peter Johnson. Photo: Supplied

A growing trend

From a local market to a multinational company, Geelong-based global retail giant Cotton On has become one of Australia's most successful brands

STORY: MIRANDA LUBY | PHOTOGRAPHY: LEANNE KELLY, ALISON WYND, KAREN DODD AND SUPPLIED

It all started with acid wash denim. It's an unusual way to begin the tale of one of Australia's biggest business success stories but for the Geelong-based global retail giant Cotton On, from humble beginnings have come great things.

It was at Geelong's Beckley Market that company founder Nigel Austin sold his first item of clothing – a quintessentially '80s acid wash denim jacket – out of the boot of his car.

In the first week he only made \$30 – hardly enough for food and petrol for the university student. Undeterred, he went back to his

supplier and father, the late clothing wholesaler Grant Austin, and bargained for a better deal.

The next week he made \$200.

In 1991, Nigel opened his first Cotton On shop in Geelong and now, 24 years later, the retail genius has taken his fast-fashion value brand from Geelong to the rest of the world.

The 44-year-old father of five, along with more than 19,000 employees, now sells clothing, underwear, sleepwear, shoes, stationery and homewares from more than 1300 stores across eight brands in 19 countries.

Out of the company's impressive North

Geelong headquarters comes Cotton On, Cotton On Kids, Cotton on Body, Supre, Typo, Factorie, Rubi and T-bar.

The Cotton On Group, owned by Nigel and his cousin Ashley Hardwick, is usually quite private about the business's success, preferring to keep exact figures and financial details quiet. But recently the pair, along with chief executive officer Peter Johnson, has spoken out about the global retailer's incredible success.

The Cotton On Group, it has been revealed, is now bigger than Solomon Lew's Premier Investments, which owns Just Jeans, Dotti,

Portmans and Jay Jays, Country Road, Witchery, and Mimco, and is one of only a handful of Australian retailers that has successfully ventured overseas.

For Peter, who joined the Cotton On Group in 2004 after working for Jeans West, Sussan and Country Road, being able to celebrate the company's success publicly has a hugely positive influence.

"We often think there's far too much negativity in the press surrounding business, especially in Geelong, and if you're a young adult moving into a professional career and all