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## Lambertson Truex Aiming High

By **Sophia Chabbott**

Never mind accessible luxury — Lambertson Truex is aiming for the somewhat inaccessible.

The U.S. luxury accessories firm, which Samsonite acquired in July, is rolling out its first freestanding stores. The target customer is clearly defined with handbag prices averaging at \$3,000 to \$5,000 and exotic skin pieces that can climb upwards of \$16,000.

"There's always aspiration," said David Lamer, who came on board as Lambertson's president of sales, merchandising and marketing, a new role, in October after a stint at Kate Spade. "There is always going to be the customer who is going to want something that is out of their reach. We want to be the one everyone wants to aspire to. Our specific target is that affluent woman. She's not driven by trend. She knows exactly what she wants."

The nine-year-old firm, founded by designers Richard Lambertson and John Truex, is opening two stores soon. The first, in April, is a 2,200-square-foot shop at 8457 Melrose Place in Los Angeles, with valet parking and custom Tibetan carpets to open. The second will debut early this summer at 692 Madison Avenue in New York. The 1,800-square-foot store is spread over two floors, and like the Los Angeles unit will carry all of the brand's categories, including women's and men's shoes, bags, belts, gloves and other accessories.

The opening of Lambertson's shops marks a trend in the retail world for luxury accessories stores. On Saturday, the Tod's SpA-owned French accessories firm Roger Vivier will launch its first U.S. unit on Madison Avenue, with select handbags climbing into the tens of thousands of dollars. Coach announced an initiative to open two Coach Legacy shops in New York and Los Angeles touting handbags that are 45 percent higher in price than the \$2.4 billion firm's core product. British leather goods house Mulberry is also in the midst of a U.S. retail expansion, launching two stores in Manhattan, one in Los Angeles and two in other locations.

Each store, designed by Truex and Lambertson, along with Tsao & McKown Architects, will house an area in which customers can custom order men's or women's accessories to suit their tastes with options of skins in any color, hardware in precious metal, lining alternatives and monogramming. Bespoke prices range from about \$3,000 to \$25,000, but as is the nature of bespoke, the sky is the limit.

"We have customers in Chicago and Boston, and some of these areas who alone will purchase \$200,000 worth of our product in a year," Lamer said. "It's quite a following. I like to call it the Bentley of handbags."

The company intends to open six to eight stores in North America within five years. Locations include Las Vegas, San Francisco, Boston, Chicago and another four to five cities, which were not named by Samsonite president Marcello Bottoli.

"The one message from the beginning when we signed the deal: You control your own destiny when you have a store," Bottoli said. "When you have a store it also helps show the brand to your wholesale distribution. The brand is still too partial and fragmented to the consumer."

Lambertson and Truex began designing the stores long before the acquisition and long before it was feasible to complete them. In keeping with the brand's luxe and austere aesthetic, the stores have dark-wood floors, and chrome and wood cabinetry and displays that are moveable for parties and other functions. There are also custom designed chandeliers and linear beige couches where customers can sip Champagne or lattés as they are served by a knowledgeable sales staff.

"We're layering in warm, personal touches," Lambertson said. "You'll see the subtle differences from city to city."

Cathy Leonhardt, managing director at Peter J. Solomon Co., said opening a boutique can strengthen a fledgling brand, but it also has some drawbacks when it comes to existing wholesale accounts.

"You can control your own destiny when you own it, so you can better showcase the brand and give the consumer a true perspective on the brand, rather than how a department store chooses to show it," she said. "The end game is you build a brand and if you sell more, it makes the brand. But there's always the risk that it siphons traffic for the brand out of the [specialty or department] store. Not every retailer is always going to have a deluxe rotunda for its product."

Ed Burstell, Bergdorf Goodman's senior vice president and general merchandise manager of beauty, jewelry and accessories, said, "We have a very important Lambertson Truex business. There's a nice synergy sometimes between a retail outlet and a flagship."

Bottoli said the first factor in the Lambertson strategy past the signature stores is to create excitement about the brand in the U.S. by further penetrating its wholesale distribution with existing accounts in Neiman Marcus, Saks Fifth Avenue, Bloomingdale's and Bergdorf's, which launched the brand. Next is to establish new categories to create a lifestyle image. Eyewear, jewelry, timepieces and fragrance are said to be in the works and would have plenty of attention in the firm's stores. The company's first advertising campaign also is being developed.

Bottoli and Lamer, however, are both adamant about keeping the brand ultraexclusive. The firm is looking to open more in-store shops within the existing specialty accounts, as well. As of now, they are not looking to add more specialty or independent retailer accounts.

There also are plans to grow the brand internationally. Next month, Lamer is taking a whirlwind, three-week trip to Asia, Russia, the Middle East and Europe to seek locations and get a feel for the retail climate. The company already is sold in select international doors, including Isetan in Tokyo and David's in Toronto. It also is sold in Russia, Switzerland and Germany.

Until the Samsonite acquisition, Truex and Lambertson, former co-chief executive officers, were occupied with the company's operations and less so on design. In recent months, Lamer has used a team to work with the now co-creative directors. Carrie Hess was hired as an account executive, Karen Fechter was named director of merchandising and Jason Lyn was named senior designer.

And the ideas are flying. The corporate restructuring is evident in the firm's fall collection. Bags done in black and white zebra-striped pony hair with smooth black leather trim, ankle boots on crocodile and other leathers look modern. There are satchels that inventively incorporate no less than three exotic skins: crocodile, ostrich and lizard. There is also a branding effort noted in larger logos embossed onto the fronts of bags and small nickel logo-laden snaps that are prevalent throughout the line.

"The fall collection is luxury in its complete form," Truex said. "We wanted to go in with this whole new breath of newness."

However, there aren't plans to move into ready-to-wear. "We have to focus on what we do best," he said. "It's not in the immediate plan."

Lamer said the brand has legs to grow internationally based on its simple, but uncommon, all-American look.

"America has its own sense of style," he said. "A lot of Asians and Europeans gravitate to an American sensibility. What is key about Lambertson Truex is that the products are very clean, modern, chic and sophisticated. We make sure the interiors are very functional. They have everything a woman can need. That comes from an American design sense."