

Glasses Menagerie



**After 60 years
LBI is still out
in front of the
frame game**



A pioneering spirit has guided eyeglass-frame manufacturer LBI Group for going on 60 years.

That spirit showed itself when founder Sheldon "Shelly" Lehrer was among the first in the optical industry to import frames from Europe and then Asia.

In the 1990's the Chatsworth-based company became the only U.S. firm to own a frame manufacturing facility in China.

Later, LBI struck licensing deals for lines of children's frames branded with animated characters Paddington the Bear and Garfield the Cat. Next month, the company debuts at a trade show a line based on the characters from the mega-popular "Shrek" movies.

Not stopping there, the company looks for other licensing opportunities in which it can design eyewear in special and unique ways through style, quality and value.

"If you can create a compelling story based upon those elements then we get excited about the opportunity," said Shelly's son Keith Lehrer, who is now chief executive. "It's easy to convey that enthusiasm to the potential partner."

That entrepreneurial passion applies to the three areas LBI specializes in - the manufacture and distribution of eyeglass frames, and the distribution of lenses and eyeglass cases.

Take for instance the frames, an item that combines the medical purpose of correcting bad vision with the component of style. That's why it is not strange to see pages taken from fashion magazines tacked up at LBI headquarters to get ideas.

The bi-colored plastic frames worn by the girlfriend of Beatle progeny Dhani Harrison can be replicated by LBI; as can the split-colored sunglass lenses worn by the Olsen Twins. (And, yes, LBI can copy the rimless titanium frames popularized by Republican vice presidential candidate Sarah Palin.)

Input on industry trends also comes from the retailers selling their products.

The company isn't afraid to have its executives visit the stores in the Eyeglass Factory chain to get input that helps them stay ahead of the market, said owner Rick Feldman, a customer of LBI since 1982.

"They see trends and go out on a limb to create something that is attractive to the consumer," Feldman said.

The smaller European countries are of particular interest to Keith Lehrer as sources for future eyeglass frame trends. On the flip side is the ability to recognize what styles lack a uni-

versal appeal and should not be seized upon for wider distribution.

It all comes down to instinct, said the younger Lehrer.

"Knowing the difference is part of the savvy from a design standpoint," Keith Lehrer said.

Staying Ahead of the Curve

As the son tells the story, when his father entered the optical business, all of the major makers of eyeglass frames were based on the East Coast: Bausch and Lomb, Pearle, and American Optical. Shelly Lehrer bought in large quantities from these firms and made sales to independent optometrists.

After serving in the U.S. military during the Korean Conflict, Shelly Lehrer returned to his company and it was in this period that he noticed starlets and other celebrity types wore eyeglasses with a lot of ornamentation: rhinestones, filigreed decor and such.

These frames were made in France, so Shelly Lehrer went to the factory and ordered 100 frames of 10 different models. The order took a year to fill but Lehrer and LBI had taken an important step in the company's growth. That the frames were made of plastic represented an industry shift away from metal frames.

The scenario repeated itself in the early 1970s.

At that time Shelly Lehrer was on sales trips to Asia and saw frames made in Japan, Hong Kong and South Korea for those domestic markets. Just as he had done with the French company, Lehrer began importing those glasses for distribution in the U.S. market.

By that time, practically all eyeglass frame manufacturing went overseas. The American suppliers either folded or got out of that business, such as Bausch and Lomb when it turned to contact lenses over prescription frames. Europe remains an



importer of higher-end frames more likely than not assembled from pieces made in Asia.

Designing new frames is influenced by styles from the past combined with emerging new materials that make the frames stronger and lighter.

A current style is the vintage look; thick plastic frames evoking a time of 40 or 50 years ago that Keith Lehrer called the Cary Grant look.

"When we do an interpretation of vintage it always has a twist or element that grounds it in something contemporary," Keith Lehrer said.

Branding and Licensing

For its branded lines, identifying logos are placed on the frames and specially-designed novelty cases. The Shrek line uses the Shrek name, the "S" logo and the green ogre's ear.

To avoid the tensions that can emerge between a licensee and licensor, LBI approaches its relations with DreamWorks Animation SKG Inc. as one of a partnership.

From the studio's side, the eyewear line fits in with a strategy of taking its film franchises and turning them into fashion and lifestyle brands. The LBI proposal perfectly matched the company's objectives.

Children's eyewear is not simply a scaled down version of adult-sized glasses, so LBI worked with a leading designer to assure fit and comfort in the frames.

"This is a global brand for us so the fact they match up in all of our top territories and can do this on an almost worldwide basis was important to us," said Kerry Phelan, head of worldwide consumer products for the Glendale-based animation company.

Also of importance was that LBI owns a factory to make the eyewear.

That ownership and having first-hand quality control gives assurance and reliability when translating a recognized character into a consumer good, Phelan said.

The decision to locate a plant in China came at a time when the country was opening its doors to foreign companies and a growth in optical frame manufacturing in Asia. LBI already had a Hong Kong-based distribution center.

The company went through a lengthy process to select a site in Shenzhen, an area undergoing rapid industrialization outside of Hong Kong, to make government connection and line up suppliers.

"There is no such thing as a sure bet but it became a good bet as a window of opportunity opened," Keith Lehrer said.