

Strength in Numbers

The recent marriage of BATA and DLS provides B&T merchants with price incentives, rebates, market insights and minimums. Here, we speak to the inspired team that makes it happen.



Krystal Nicolò, Fred Derring, Lée Leonard and Virginia Sandquist-Wenzel

members are also alerted to any new vendors or new items from existing vendors. Special pricing is available not just at the shows, but also by e-mail campaigns or listed on the website bigandtall.biz.

For the vendors, the combined orders from member stores early in the season allows them to reach minimums and ship in a timely fashion. This translates to bigger orders and creates a better selection for B&T customers.

What are key challenges and opportunities for B&T retailers in 2014?

Derring: The main opportunities for the special size customer store will be the ability to grow because the customer base is increasing. The challenge for B&T retailers, as it is for all retailers, is the economy. Sadly, if you are not catering to the top 3 percent of earners in this country who seem unaffected by the events of world economies, apparel business is a tough game.

Leonard: Bringing B&T customers into the store is still the number one challenge! Another challenge is finding key vendors with good in-stock items to count and fill, or drop-ship directly to the customer. Others are building lifestyle presentations,

building private label brands with product exclusive to those B&T stores. (The challenge here is to get the vendors to lower their minimums.)

What's your advice to vendors on how to best maximize the opportunities of this business?

Derring: Vendors should challenge themselves to bring more fashion to the table for the buyer. Look at how many athletes are entering the apparel business: I think they will be the influence.

Leonard: Replenishment basics and fashion with a lot of margin. Also, more deliveries during the course of the season, not six months at a time. And how about pop-up shops in key doors?

Your projections for fall 2014?

Leonard: My feeling is that business will remain flat to last year, which isn't a bad thing, as long as the inventory is controlled. It will be a good year if inventory is kept down and merchants can scramble for in-season merchandise at advantageous prices. Lean on the vendors that stock goods so you can fill in and build your margins.

Again it's that time to try new ideas, build your web presence, add to social media. The business is not going to come to you, you have to be aggressive and go out and get it. Plus, business can also come from outside sales and wardrobe consulting: clean out your customer's closet and restock it with new apparel.

What's needed to make business better for this segment?

Derring: The key to better business on a local level is marketing. Let big guys know that you are their headquarters. We could also use a coordinated vendor program for national marketing, (e.g. the "Got Milk" campaign) How about "Got Big?," with full-page advertising in national magazines and on ESPN? ■

Give us a little background on BATA and DLS. Why was this a good marriage?

Lee Leonard: Big and Tall Associates (BATA) has been the premier buying organization for Big & Tall menswear since it was founded in 1972. Today, it is made up of B&T specialty retailers throughout the USA and internationally in Canada, England, France, Dubai and Australia.

DLS was established in 1980 and has evolved to become the number one buying office for better specialty stores, serving 175 independents across the USA. DLS started with one simple idea: grouping specialty stores together to compete with the majors. We continue to cultivate a cooperative of information about buying and merchandising, marketing and advertising in all classifications.

What are the advantages to retailers and vendors in the group?

Fred Derring: In addition to price incentives, the main advantage for retailers is the ability to share pertinent information about product, special sizing needs, fashion direction and other issues unique to their niche in the marketplace. BATA gives the vendors' volume and direction to help them produce the right sizing, product and price points.

Leonard: Among our key initiatives: semi-annual trade shows of B&T vendors at the Chicago Collective. During these two events, vendors offer show specials and target buys that are specially priced to afford extra margin for the retailers. By being part of BATA, retailers can improve their purchasing power. Additionally, there's a rebate program to help offset some of the store's expenses on orders written at the shows.

Last but not least, stores benefit from the interchange of ideas with other B&T retailers, sharing advice about vendors, items, marketing and advertising, operating expenses, store renovations, and even exchanging merchandise between stores. As BATA accepts only one store per trading area, there is no conflict of interest between B&T stores. Retail

"The mentality behind the two groups is the same: how to compete with the majors, discounters and box stores in a specialty store way." —Lee Leonard