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The Canadian look: a best-selling eyewear aesthetic

A hybrid of fashion-forward European and conservative American style has focused sales for Montreal's Westgroupe

As president of Montreal-based Westgroupe, a family-run manufacturer and wholesaler of eyewear that last year celebrated 50 years in business, Michael Suliteanu has own eyes fixed on future development.



Michael Suliteanu, Westgroupe president

At the helm since 2009 after first joining the company in 1990 as a sales representative, for the past six years he has been focusing on expanding Westgroupe internationally. Currently the company designs, produces and sells its own fashion eyewear brands (Fysh UK, Kliik denmark, Evatik) as well as distributing eyewear collections for international companies wanting to sell their brands in Canada.

Worldwide sales are growing, thanks largely to Wescan Optical, a division of Westgroupe, creating Canadian-designed glasses made according to international fashion trends. "In an industry dominated by licensed fashion brands," Suliteanu says, "our biggest challenge was getting distributors to buy into a brand they, and more importantly, their customers, had never heard of. Making them on trend was an obvious solution."

Why did you first start expanding outside Canada?

We first started to look outside Canada for business opportunities in 2004. The optical retail market was going through some changes at that time. The largest international eyewear manufacturer and wholesaler was acquiring retail chains in Canada, leading to fewer customers for us to sell to. Although our business was very strong in Canada, we realized that we needed to look outside of our borders in order to make up the business we would be losing.

What is your market?

Our channel of distribution is primarily eye-care professionals in 45 countries worldwide, including optometrists and opticians.

What are the challenges around expanding into new markets?

One of the key challenges was learning how each market operated and which was the best road to enter into the market. Do we go direct to the eye-care professional or sell through distributors? Eventually, we determined that the best route was for us to use distributors in each market. But then the challenge became finding the right company to partner with. Then the dilemma became do we approach the most established player with many brands, or partner with a smaller, less established company where we would be a more important partner to them? We ended up going with the latter.

How do you choose your partners?

In most markets, we have chosen to partner with smaller, newer companies trying to aggressively establish their own businesses. In some European countries we had to switch distributors a few times, but not so much in the U.S.

How do you handle inventory management?

That is its own challenge. With standard factory lead times at 120 days, the need to forecast demand was critical as most of the distributors want just-in-time delivery. We needed to ensure we had enough inventory to fill our Canadian orders as well as try and guesstimate international sales, as most of our foreign distributors were reluctant to forecast their sales. In an industry dominated by licensed fashion brands our biggest challenge was getting distributors to buy into a brand they, and more importantly, their customers, had never heard of.

Are there disadvantages to being a Canadian when it comes to the global eyewear industry?

Actually, being Canadian appears to be an advantage. The Canadian eyewear aesthetic is a bit of a hybrid between European fashion-forward design and American conservative design. For that reason, I think our designs have worked very well across most markets. A best seller in Canada seems to be a best seller globally.

How did you further distinguish yourselves?

With the introduction of each collection both in Canada and abroad we developed a comprehensive brand story relevant to the appropriate audience, which also included extensive marketing support for retailers to both understand and promote the brand to its customers.

Do you have to travel much and if so where and how often?

I travel quite a bit throughout the year. We exhibit at the five international eyewear trade shows [New York, Las Vegas, Paris, Milan and Hong Kong] and many of our distributors exhibit at their local trade shows. I try and visit as many as our distributors as possible in order to better understand their business and to meet with some of their key accounts. In addition, I frequently travel to Asia to visit our factories.

What has surprised you most about expanding the business beyond our borders?

I think the biggest surprise, by far, was the universality of our designs. We did not expect them to be as popular as they are. With the exception of some fitting challenges in Asia due to facial differences, our designs have been successful across all markets.

Was there a single ta-dah moment?

Successfully breaking into the U.S. market was really a watershed moment for me. When we started in 2007, our two U.S. distributors each had four sales agents. Four years later, they have a total of 60 agents selling our products and continue to enjoy double-digit growth, even during the recession. The growth has been phenomenally strong. It's been a steady and strong growth.

What would you tell others in your shoes to do?

To research the market, have a clear strategy on how you want to enter into the market and to stay disciplined on achieving this strategy.

This interview has been edited and condensed

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