

Ben Hsu of Pleaser USA



Few are the names in the world of sexy footwear as prominent as that of Pleaser USA. With roots dating back to 1993, when they were solely an importer and distributor of urban fashion footwear, to today, with six distinct lines serving the needs of alternative lifestyles, the brand has grown into a bona fide footwear powerhouse. Today, Pleaser USA posts serious numbers: available in over 60 countries worldwide, and with a staggering 5,000 styles in their catalog, they are relentless in their growth.

The last time we spoke with the folks at Pleaser was in the June 2006 issue of our former incarnation, *Teeze Magazine*. Since then, things have only continued on the upward spiral for the brand that is so fervently dedicated to brick-and-mortar retailers. Helmed by founder and CEO Ben Hsu—who, today, after 20 years as the go-to guy, is just now starting to hand some of the reins over—the company, based in Fullerton, California, has only continued its thoughtful expansion.

We spoke to Hsu to hear what's new with his company, and what we can expect in the future from one of the premiere brands in the business of sexy footwear.

STOREROTICA: Tell us the Pleaser story; how did the company evolve from an importer and distributor to a designing powerhouse? How did you handle the transition?

HSU: In 1993, we started out as an importer and distributor of fashion footwear. In the fashion shoe business, people follow trends originating in Europe, especially Italy, and all the resulting designs revolve around those trends. If you are too far ahead of the trend, then you are likely to end up with plenty of untouched merchandise sitting in the warehouse, because people may consider the designs to be too avant-garde. If you miss the trend, it is even worse,

because you will suffer a big loss from all the unwanted merchandise.

The fortunate thing for us is we decided to make the move from being an importer of fashion shoes to concentrating solely on sexy and alternative footwear. This is a niche market and, therefore, it is a totally different scene. It is less affected by fashion trends and has more to do with having the right designs catered towards the right individuals of a particular lifestyle. Since alternative footwear is usually more edgy, we need to constantly be modifying our styles to stay original, fresh and out of the mainstream box. The key is devoting time to researching this particular market which is non-mainstream, non-conforming and, therefore, of a defining crowd.

To a certain extent, this transition was difficult because each individual lifestyle has its own preferences. For instance, if you ask a person who is not into the alternative lifestyle, "What does 'burlesque,' or 'steam punk' or 'cyber' mean?" then they are likely to be totally lost. However, there tends to be less of a fashion trend among alternative crowds, as they usually stay within their own preferences and do not change their likings overnight. Once we know and understand these preferences, the process becomes easier, as we are able to position our products to target their needs and come up with styles that cater to their respective tastes.

STOREROTICA: The last time we featured an article on you was when you were on the cover in June of '06, when we were still *Teeze Magazine*. What are some of the more significant changes in the company since then?

HSU: We have significantly increased our product offering. In addition to more than doubling the styles in our



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Pleaser and Demonia collections, we have since introduced the Funtasma and Bordello brands, which cater to Halloween and burlesque dancers, respectively.

We've improved our logistics; placing a wholesale order with us is easier than ever. Our 24/7 online ordering system at PleaserUSA.com lets our customers conveniently place orders online, check product pricing and availability, and keep track of their order status, at any time and from anywhere. We are also currently in the process of implementing a barcode scanning system for all merchandise to be shipped, which will assist greatly with cutting down errors while increasing efficiency. Having our own manufacturing plant will also allow us to maintain a much more consistent quality of our products, fast delivery and a much higher order fulfillment rate than what may exist in this industry.

We have significantly increased our presence in foreign markets. Currently, we are selling in over 60 countries, compared to about 20 in 1996. In addition, we have hired sales representatives in all major international foreign markets. By using sales representatives, rather than distributors, we are able to sell to retail stores worldwide at our current wholesale price instead of the marked-up price that is common from distributors. This is a crucial factor, because we are able to sell our products at prices that allow us to remain competitive in the market place while simultaneously allowing our customers a much healthier profit margin. We have hired foreign-born, native speakers to be in-house international account executives, which helps avoid language barriers, and, at the same time, provides customers with a better buying experience.

We have also increased our tradeshow presence. In addition to the traditional trade shows, we have broadly expanded our attendance to trade shows in Dubai, Japan, Italy, Brazil, Hong Kong, United Kingdom, Germany and Australia. Granted, the upfront costs to attend multiple trade shows annually, especially overseas, can be very expensive. However, we feel that this investment is necessary and extremely rewarding because we are able to establish a more personal relationship with our customers when we meet and show them our products directly.

STOREROTICA: You have six principle lines; can we expect another one in the near future?

HSU: Yes, in addition to our six principle lines (Pleaser, Demonia, Devious, Bordello, Funtasma and Lucious), we are in the pipeline with a new Pin Up Couture brand that will cater to the retro/pin-up scene and encompass over 100 exciting styles. This collection has more of a mass market appeal, but at the same time, it is so very distinctive and fresh that people cannot find it easily in the marketplace. The reason why we aren't rushing to create new lines is that we prefer to concentrate on maintaining the quality and appeal of our existing brands. It's important that we are consistently coming up with fresh ideas for our existing brands because we would never want to sacrifice or lose sight of the defining qualities that makes them so special.

STOREROTICA: What is the most popular style, either from a particular line, or across the entire inventory of shoes? Are there any styles that were surprising in their popularity?

HSU: One popular collection from our recent offerings is undoubtedly the Teeze Collection from the Bordello line. This collection, which features a hidden platform and five-inch heel, has been a surprise hit and the sale figures have completely surpassed our wildest expectations.

STOREROTICA: You had previously innovated two shoe ideas; the Tip Jar and the Treasure Chest. Is there anything especially creative or unique that you're proud of the Pleaser design team for having created?

HSU: "Always innovating and never compromising" is our design philosophy and motto, so it is essential that we are always coming up with new and exciting products. The Tip Jar and Treasure Chest Collections are ones that we continue to be very proud of. These styles are totally fresh and forward-thinking, and the idea came completely from within the company. The design is simple, yet extremely innovative. The minute you see it, you think someone would have thought of it a long time ago but nobody ever did, and we are very proud to be the exclusive innovator of those styles.

Another exciting collection that dancers have been raving about is the Spring-O-lator Collection. The Spring-O-lator Collection consists of sexy platform mules that feature a "Magic Cling" elastic band in the middle of the leather



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insole which creates tension between the shoe and the bottom of the foot. The extraordinary "sticking power" afforded by this feature allows the wearer to keep the shoes comfortably and securely on the foot.

I am confident that some other collections which we will soon be launching will be met with great enthusiasm by customers, including the Lightning collection. The styles in this unique and innovative collection feature a battery-operated, strobe light mechanism built directly into each platform for an electrifying lightning effect.

While I don't want to release anymore details at the moment of other upcoming collections, I can promise that our customers have a lot to look forward to.

STOREROTICA: You've stated previously that Pleaser was extremely dedicated to the brick-and-mortar retailer. Does this still hold true? Are there new programs you've put in place for them?

HSU: Yes, we have a fierce loyalty to the brick-and-mortar retailers because, despite the growth in Internet business, they remain our primary customers. First of all, we offer tier discounts for all customers and we almost always give special consideration to brick-and-mortar retailers. Additionally, from time to time, we will offer closeout specials exclusively for retail stores only. While many wholesalers will open online retail stores under a disguise, we have steered clear of this practice because we do not want to compete directly with our own customers. As a courtesy to our retail store customers, we have elected to cease opening new accounts for online stores in order to help them cut down on direct competition.

We have also completely upgraded our shoe boxes with the brick-and-mortar stores in mind. The shoe boxes are of much better quality in terms of being sturdier and more compact, which enables retail shops to stack the shoes without damaging them, and also allows more stock because of the savings in shoe box space. Aesthetically, we have differentiated the shoe box design for each brand as well as color-coded them for easy recognition and pulling of orders in the store.

STOREROTICA: The last time we spoke, you were working to dispel the notion among retailers that a minimal shoe selection was all that they needed. Have you seen

much progress in changing retailers' minds? Or is this something that still needs to be communicated?

HSU: As evidenced by what retail stores are buying, they have definitely expanded from only carrying basic styles to carrying more unique, innovative items that are fresh, original, eye-catching and attention-grabbing. Most retailers have found success selling those items, and the question "What is new?" is always on the lips of every retailer that approaches us at the tradeshows. This speaks volumes about the fact that new and fresh is always welcomed. The fact that we have a vast collection of styles in stock all year round for immediate delivery allows retail stores to stock a lot more items than they used to carry. This broadens our hospitality to customers as we are able to deliver immediately to retailers or drop ship to their customers.

STOREROTICA: What is your daily role with Pleaser like? What are you personally proud of having overseen or orchestrated?

HSU: My role has certainly evolved over the years. When Pleaser was first created, it was a one-man show and I was in charge of every aspect from sourcing to product design, customer service, sales, tradeshow coordination, and any other role that you can possibly think of. I took complete charge of the company for almost 20 years, but at this stage in time, I'd like to gradually take a more laid back role in the operational side of the business. I'm looking forward to reducing my personal workload and am always looking for the right candidate to help out with key management positions in the company. The growth of the company has enabled us to continuously hire staff for specific roles, and this allows me to concentrate on the more important aspects of product development and marketing. Aside from overseeing those two departments, I'm also currently directing our international expansion efforts. **E**

For more information on Pleaser USA, please call (714) 771-1888, email info@pleaserusa.com or visit www.PleaserUSA.com.