

Distinctly Scandinavian Design

An Interview with Larry H. Barkley, Sr.,
President, Georg Jensen USA, Inc., New York

EDITORS' NOTE In his current post since January 2006, Larry Barkley was formerly the National Retail Director at Bulgari, where he managed the company's two flagship stores and 10 retail boutiques. Prior to working for Bulgari, he held positions with Saks Fifth Avenue and several other leading national retailers.



COMPANY BRIEF Founded in Denmark in 1904 and famous for its elegant, Scandinavian designs, Georg Jensen (www.georgjensen.com) has over 100 stores in 12 countries. Originally a silversmith, creating exclusive silver hollowware and jewelry, Georg Jensen now offers a wide range of gold and silver jewelry, watches, cutlery, and hollowware, as well as items for the home.

How will you increase the North American market's awareness of the Georg Jensen brand?

Georg Jensen has been known as a leader in cutlery and hollowware for some time, but about 10 to 15 years ago, the company began marketing jewelry and watches. That transformation was not communicated to the U.S. market as well as it should have been. So our challenge is to raise that level of brand awareness and communicate the brand's distinctive difference – our Scandinavian designs. I'm probably the first true retailer with a jewelry, watch, and luxury background to run the U.S. operation, and I can see all sorts of things that need to be done. But we have to start small and work our way up.

How do the brand's Scandinavian origins differentiate it from your competitors in the luxury market?

I don't think you'll find another Scandinavian jewelry design house around. Our heritage really gives us a niche and something to talk about when I'm out representing our brand. It also gives our sales professionals another great selling point for the final customer, who needs to understand the difference between French, Italian, and Scandinavian design.

Do watches comprise a growing segment of Georg Jensen's business?

Absolutely. Our watches are manufactured in Switzerland. So the design is developed in Scandinavia, but the actual movements and watches are manufactured in Switzerland, because we realize that luxury watches have to be Swiss-made to compete. They have to have that tag on them.

We are really pushing the watch business to another level. We've been in watch business since the '60s, but we haven't communicated that message loud and clear. This June, we launched new watches in Copenhagen, and next year, we'll have a presence in Basel, where every luxury player has a presence.

It would seem that Georg Jensen's target market is rather exclusive. Is that the case, or do you hope to reach a broader group of consumers?

Absolutely. Although each of our products is handcrafted by highly skilled craftsmen, there are affordable items. For instance, we have a \$50, stainless-steel bowl, but its design is definitely Scandinavian. And so is the design of our Nordic Splendor necklace, which is set in platinum with pavé diamonds and retails for \$380,000. So everything we do is stamped with that same quality and luxury feel. Both the bowl and the necklace have that same luxury presence and feel.

Are your watch and jewelry customers predominantly female?

Yes. We tend to focus about 80 percent of our attention on the female market. However, we do have a fast growing men's line of jewelry, including many cufflinks and watches. In the next 10 years, the ladies' luxury watch business will be dominant because, as women become more and more independent, they can buy their own products. They're not dependent upon someone to buy it for them, and as such, we'll be looking at a whole new dynamic as far as our watch business is concerned.

Is it important to maintain the

heritage of some of Georg Jensen's more traditional product lines while you attempt to expand the watch and jewelry business?

It's important to keep the heritage, because that's what made us what we are today. But we're very focused on growing the jewelry and watch portion of our business. We're revamping our stores, advertising campaigns, and our other faces to the market so that our dominant image is about jewelry and watches. We will look for other outlets, such as our wholesale network, to help our heritage pieces – the hollowware, cutlery, and home goods – thrive.

Is it important for Georg Jensen to have standalone boutiques?

I think, if you're able, you should first have your own retail networks, because then you get to decide who you are. The customer is not confused; they understand the power of the brand and the message is communicated very clearly. Distribution has to be layered to complement your retail network and not compete with it, because that's a very tough thing to be able to do. It can get out of hand very quickly. So you have to be very strategic in the way you layer your wholesale distribution. And we're taking the time to do that. While we'd love the volume tomorrow, however I think it is very important that we do it right.

Will you eventually bring new kinds of products into the mix?

Absolutely. Our expertise is silver, gold, and diamonds give us very few boundaries, in terms of the products we can bring to the market. We haven't set any parameters. We work with several artists who design lines for us, and each is completely different from the next. So I think there are no limits to what we can do as a luxury brand.

Which Georg Jensen watch do you wear the most?

I gravitate to a watch line that is extremely simplistic – the Henning Koppel line. It has clean lines – not a lot of bells and whistles. I don't wear flashy watches. I like to keep it simple. ●

Koppel steel watch, Fusion bracelets