



Tom Via

EDITORS' NOTE Tom Via assumed his current post in 2014. Via spent the past 12 years at Toys“R”Us, most recently as its Senior Vice President for Babies“R”Us in the U.S., and served on the Global Commercial Committee. From 2010 to 2013 he was Managing Director (President) of Toys“R”Us, Australia. Previously, he served as Senior Vice President, Toys“R”Us, Canada. Prior to joining Toys“R”Us, Via held merchandising positions at Wal-Mart (Canada), Payless ShoeSource, Kmart, and Hills Department Stores.

COMPANY BRIEF Brookstone, Inc. (brookstone.com) is an innovative product development and specialty lifestyle retail company that operates approximately 240 Brookstone branded stores nationwide and in Puerto Rico. Typically located in high-traffic regional shopping malls and airports, the stores feature unique and innovative consumer products. The company also operates a Direct Marketing business that includes the Brookstone catalog and an e-commerce website.

What has made Brookstone work so well?

The secret has been Brookstone’s focus on product over the years, not only seeking out unique and innovative items but also identifying items that are useful in one way or another, or items one would be proud to give as a gift.

We really focus on the practical aspect and that is a hallmark of what the company has been over the years.

As the company has grown, how have you avoided losing that innovative culture?

We have reinvented ourselves in that regard. In 2015, I established an innovation department and appointed a Chief Innovation Officer. Despite the fact that we have prided ourselves on innovative products, that was work previously handled by our traditional buying and merchandising team. But the world has changed. Through the Internet and connectivity, any buyer, for any retailer today can easily conduct research and find trends and ideas. We felt that, to a large degree, we had been neutralized, so we needed to take a different approach.

Would you talk about your Brookstone Launch program initiative?

Practical, Innovative Products

An Interview with Tom Via,
President and Chief Executive Officer,
Brookstone

One of the mandates of the innovation department is the Launch program. First, we established a URL: brookstonelaunch.com. While, over the years, we have always worked with inventors and makers, we had never given ourselves credit for that or made it easy for them to have access to us.

Any maker can now go onto our site and enter their product information, which gives them access to our merchandising and product development team. Within short order, they will get a response from us if there is interest from Brookstone. If there is, we will take that maker through a journey of discovery, and perhaps product development and distribution.

Last year, we also pursued partnerships with product accelerators and incubators, as well as crowd-funding. This was a new place for us to source new ideas and to meet makers, and we’ve been quite public with our partnership with crowd-funder Indiegogo. Through that partnership and a host of other new business relationships we have formed, we’re making direct contact with more product innovators and idea makers than ever before, which is allowing Brookstone to have earlier access to these ideas.

Is product growth primarily about enhancing existing product lines or is it about bringing entirely new categories into Brookstone?

We’re always looking for a new idea or product. In 2015, the hottest product we had was the Brookstone Cat Ear Headphones. That product came from two inventors we met through Indiegogo whose target audience was the anime crowd and gamers, and these founders had raised \$3.2-million through Indiegogo and were looking for a partner to do the final design, manufacturing, and distribution. Brookstone was able to put a contract together with them and bring this product to market.

Is brick-and-mortar still your main focus?

Experience shows it is crucially important for our employees to demonstrate many of our products. Customers come in because they find our store and products interesting, and try them for themselves.

At the same time, there is channel shift happening at all levels of retail, so we are also highly committed to growing our e-commerce business. We recently re-platformed our website and we’re going to marry what customers experience in-store with what they find online. Our online presentations will have more videos and graphics, and be more interactive like our stores.

What made the timing right to enter a market like China?



A Brookstone storefront

We chose China because, in 2014, we were acquired by Sanpower, which is based in Nanjing. The vision at the time of acquisition was to not only strengthen the Brookstone brand in the U.S. but expand it in China and elsewhere.

We’ve opened four locations in China. We believe that, based on early results and proof of concept, we’ll have rapid expansion in the Chinese market given the size of the population.

At the same time, we’re looking at other international market opportunities on a retail and wholesale basis. We’re discovering that there is a great interest from retailers in the U.S. and outside in carrying the Brookstone brand.

Do store locations in China have a similar feel to those in the U.S.?

Somewhat. The logo is the same. We have one freestanding store, and the other three locations are shops within a store. About half the product is Brookstone merchandise that comes directly from the Brookstone experience in the U.S. and the other half of the product, which is also branded Brookstone, was selected by a local buying team and customized to the local tastes.

How critical is it to build careers for your salespeople and retain your workforce?

It’s extremely important for a retailer given the nature of how we try to do business through brick-and-mortar. We pride ourselves on hiring and retaining associates who not only engage customers but intelligently talk about our product or demonstrate it. So it’s a significant focus for both our stores team and our human resources teams to develop engagement programs with our employees to retain them.

We’ve been very successful at retaining management-level people. It’s more challenging at the hourly level, but part of our mission is developing the young people who join our business. They generally have a love for the brand and our customers, and it’s incumbent upon us to create opportunities to develop their skills and, if they’re so inclined, to help them evolve into management.

How important is it to have community involvement?

Like every retailer, we tend to be very localized in our approach, partly because our stores are clustered in the major population areas.

One area that I’m really interested in is being more supportive of the inventor and maker community. It’s a very important initiative for the economy in the U.S to support makers and inventors because that truly is one of the places where the retail economy gets started. ●