

# True American Luxury Brands

An Interview with Mary Gleason,  
President, Schottenstein Luxury Group,  
and Brand President, Judith Leiber, Steuben Glass, and Shiro



Mary Gleason

**EDITORS' NOTE** Prior to joining Schottenstein Stores, Mary Gleason served as President and CEO of Group 3 Design as well as President of the Exeter Brands Group, a Nike subsidiary dedicated to building brands in the value retail channel. She has worked in fashion apparel and brand management for retailers including Macy's Corporate, Allied Department Stores, and Belk Inc. In 2003, Gleason was ranked 78th in the Daily News Record's 101 Most Powerful People in Menswear, moving up from 85th in 2002.

**COMPANY BRIEF** Formed in July 2008, Schottenstein Luxury Group (SLG) is the luxury division of Schottenstein Stores Corporation. The SLG portfolio includes iconic brands Judith Leiber and Steuben Glass as well as the Italian luxury leather goods company Shiro. SLG is an American luxury company whose mission is to introduce prestige brands to the global market and support them by providing experienced management and strong organizational infrastructure. It offers its niche lifestyle brands the opportunity to meet their potential and plans to continue acquiring world-class companies with a rich heritage, retail presence, and global appeal.

## What is your outlook for the brand's growth?

Schottenstein Luxury Group is poised for global retail expansion. We are working to expand product offerings for our luxury consumer, and we would like to expand our existing customer

base to include a younger, style-seeking consumer. For Judith Leiber, we plan to open a free-standing store on Rodeo Drive in June 2009. Our plans for Steuben include brand repositioning, international retail expansion, and increasing distribution at specialty stores around the world.

## What is your target market, and how will you differentiate from your competitors?

Our target market is the affluent, discerning customer looking for superior quality, excellent service, and exclusive product offerings. A sophisticated, educated, international consumer, who travels, entertains, follows trends, collects fine art, and appreciates design and craftsmanship. The way to differentiate yourself is to make your brand the most wanted object by ensuring your products are of the highest quality, truly unique, and carried by style influencers. It is all about personalized attention and service throughout all aspects of the shopping experience.

## The word luxury is often overused. How do you define true luxury today?

True luxury is a very personal thing and can mean something very different for each person. It can mean traveling on your private jet, buying a fabulous handbag, or investing in art. True luxury is whatever brings you pleasure. It is our responsibility to reflect this message in every aspect of our brands from our stores to our advertising to our personal service.

## What kind of impact has technology had on the business?

Technology has advanced our business on every level. From a design perspective, we can create fabrics, materials, and products in a groundbreaking way. Technology helps strengthen our infrastructure by tracking sales, monitoring product offerings, and helping us to respond quickly to consumers and reach a wider global audience.

## In an industry with high turnover, how do you find and retain the talent?

Since heading my own branding firm, I have been able to quickly develop a strong team across all categories, from sales and design to production and operations. In terms of retaining talent, teamwork, strategic partnerships, and a balanced work environment, are all important.

## How do you define your role as Brand President?

As Brand President, my role is to maintain the integrity of our luxury brands, target investment opportunities, build strategic partnerships with licensees, and oversee all operations including brand development, marketing, and sales.

## How would those you've worked with describe what it's like to work with Mary Gleason?

I'm probably the most optimistic person. I see light in every doom and gloom situation. That is probably the number one thing that drives me every day. The second piece is my standards. My expectations are pretty high, and because I believe, I expect everybody else to believe. I don't like to listen to negative feedback. You can't solve a problem if you come in from a negative point of view – you just can't.

## How challenging is it to balance work and life?

I never get away from the business, because when I'm not at work, I'll bring a notebook with me and jot ideas down. But I do balance out everything. If I can't make it two hours without taking a phone call, something is wrong. I've never been on a vacation where I didn't have access to something, but I'm not one of those people who looks at her BlackBerry all the time.

## How critical is a common vision with the ownership to the success of the group?

I left a very secure job as President of Licensing for Perry Ellis International to take the position of Brand President at Schottenstein Luxury Group. Jay [Schottenstein, Chairman and CEO] told me he had purchased a brand and invited me to come back and work for him.

With our established relationship and successful track record, we trust each other implicitly. I knew I could run the business as if it were my own company, and that I could have the autonomy to make decisions. In keeping with this, I knew that I could come to him with a plan that he would champion. Our plans for SLG continue to evolve based on our shared vision and confidence in one another. Jay and I have the same values of doing the right thing for the Schottenstein Luxury Group and its brands – growing our business while maintaining the heritage and legacy of these important American companies.

## Looking a year or two ahead, what are your key priorities for the brand?

Our key priority is to keep the integrity and quality of the brand while broadening the appeal through innovative technology, resources, and design. We own true American luxury brands, and our priority is to bring these brands to an international audience, and ultimately, heighten awareness, expand customer base, and increase sales, all while maintaining our luxury point of view. ●