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Claesen's India: “We don't consider anyone a competition” (/news/fashion/claesen-s-india-we-don-t-consider-anyone-a-competition/2016031813299)

Simone Preuss | Friday, 18 March 2016

INTERVIEW Premium Dutch innerwear brand Claesen's has been going strong in India for the last three years, showing exceptional growth and eyeing a 10 percent market share (in the kids innerwear market) in the next two years. Achieving this success has not been easy. FashionUnited spoke with Nayanika Pawar, head of the Indian operations, to find out how much planning and strategy was necessary to launch Claesen's in India.

Nayanika, please tell us a bit about your background - you learned about retail from your mom who worked for Lee/Wrangler, Arrow & Enamor for many years. How did your career unfold from there?

Well, from my mom and dad both. I grew up on a diet of retail and sales and my mom regularly took me to the shop floor. My summer internships after school and college were also spent at the store. I then pursued a degree in engineering, in printing and media technology, because I knew I wanted to handle a business of my own at some point.

I then worked for some start-up brands; I did sales and distribution and worked on a variety of products - dairy products, pharmaceuticals and Cafe Coffee Day [a large coffee outlet chain in India]. In those four years, I learned how to build a brand. And in India, it's not just about marketing but also distribution if you want to make your brand a success here.

After that, I did an MBA in Holland [at the TIAS College of Business], after which I applied to Claesen's. I met co-founder Gerard Den Boer and mentioned to him that I was interested in launching the brand in India. At the time, he was also looking for a local partner to understand the local flavour.

That was good timing then. How difficult was it to bring Claesen's to India?

There was already a strong presence of Dutch brands in India – like Heineken, Amstel, KLM and others – yet Holland is a small country and while Amsterdam may ring a bell, Holland not so much; it's not like Germany. But most importantly, people understood that there was a huge gap in fashionable quality innerwear for kids. Plus, our pricing and products are so sharp and competitive that people said 'why not'. Also, we focus on explaining concept and strategy and the placement as an affordable luxury brand, which is close to how it is positioned in Europe as well.

At the same time, there was no premium luxury innerwear brand in India – there is Zara of course, H&M and other international clothing brands but there was a huge gap in kidswear. I was lucky that I had complete freedom to launch the brand and to decide whom to approach, where I wanted to be and what kind of pricing to offer. At the same time, I was on my own and it took me a good amount of time to get to where we are now with 250 outlets.

That's the keyword - there are currently 1000 points of sales for Claesens worldwide, mainly in Europe, Australia, North America and India. So the Indian market is taking up one fourth of that - is that an indicator of its importance?

Absolutely, we are extremely focused on India as it is the fastest emerging market, even compared to the BRICS countries. We managed to open 250 outlets in less than two years, which is a tremendous growth. Gerard comes about two to three times a year to India and this is what we focus on.



What about the competition in India? As it is mainly an unorganised sector, there is little branded underwear.

In kidswear, I don't consider anyone a competition; there are local brands but no foreign ones. In menswear there is Jockey; they are huge. And yes, the innerwear market for kids is 90 percent unbranded. For the men's line, the market is not

underserved but our pricing and quality is better, so that we can fight off the competition that way. Plus, there is a European flavour to all our designs and detailing. Operationally, we are very aggressive and we understand the geography of the country and we have a good team in place. It also helps to have famous clients - Angelina Jolie's and Heidi Klum's kids wear our products.

How hard was it to find distributors?

We focused on the main chains like Hypercity and Lifestyle, kept affordable prices and stayed approachable, which is our secret apart from a solid distribution model. We are also available through Amazon in India and other e-tailers. Understanding a distributor's requirements and what the brand can do is also important.



How has the online market helped?

That's how we entered the market. We gained a lot of insights of how the brand would work. We put our brand online and then would do very thorough follow-up, go through the database and find out who is buying what. That's how we found out that people were accepting our products. We have been very service- and product-oriented from the start and don't tire to explain the concept of affordable luxury innerwear.

Our new line of swimwear for kids for example has developed from customer demand; we listened to what our customers want. So now we not only have streetwear or leisure wear for children but also swimwear. In mens, the same happened with lounge wear; these products have arisen out of a demand by our customers.

Last but not least, a question about production. You have your own factory in Tirupur where all the manufacturing is done. How do you assure that the standards are good and that the workers are happy?

The director of the plant is very knowledgeable and very dedicated. He started the factory with Gerard 15-18 years ago and it is one of the best in India. We have the best machines and we invest in craftsmanship; our director trained under the best people in Italy. There, he gained insights as to how a great quality-product needs to be made. In addition, regular audits are done to guarantee we comply with the requirements of our international clients.

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