

PREMIERE ISSUE

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FATHERS OF FUSION

Killick Datta

ALTHOUGH ITS DIESEL BRAND HELPED LEAD THE way on the sport fusion trend almost eight years ago, the company didn't set out to break new ground. "We were just trying to figure out a way to differentiate our brand," says Killick Datta, chairman and CEO of GBMI, the footwear licensee for Diesel footwear. "We had no idea it would be so successful."

Around 1997, Datta saw a crowded casual footwear market dominated by the athletic brands, Timberland, Caterpillar and to a lesser extent Doc Martens. "Puma and Merrell hadn't exploded yet, so there was no hybrid product out there. We set out to design product that would work with jeans, so we created product that has sneaker bottoms with leather uppers."

In its quest for survival, Diesel hit upon the right idea at a good time. Barney's gave the brand a test order, so "we ran around telling everyone we were in Barney's," Datta recalls. Fred Siegal followed and so did Nordstrom's and Diesel was rolling.

"At that point, we knew we were on to something and smelled blood," Datta says. Diesel's Evelyn model sold three million pairs. Puma got hot with the Mostro in 2001 and sport fusion was on the map. "Originally, we called it hybrid product," Datta says, "but hybrid is not a sexy name."

The category is now established at retail and Datta thinks the fusion trend has staying power. "The shoes

"At that point, we knew we were on to something and smelled blood!"



are comfortable and look great. Consumers are not going to head backwards in terms of style or comfort."

Datta also believes the fusion trend could encourage retailers to be more open-minded toward new looks and new brands. "When we started, a footwear company had never been successful with an apparel brand and we broke that rule," he says. "And we did it with a different kind of product. Consumers can only buy what they're shown and this proves that if they're shown new exciting product, they will respond."

Jay Piccola

MANY FOOTWEAR EXECUTIVES TALK ABOUT "fusion" in terms of product, but not Puma GM Jay Piccola. This is ironic because Puma has created styles like the Mostro and Speed Cat, which essentially helped establish fusion as a viable category.

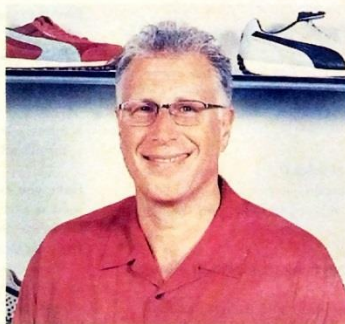
"We were into fusion long before anyone, but we see this category as the fusion of different influences: sport, lifestyle and fashion," he says. "And our sports heritage gives us credibility and a perspective that a lot of other brands playing in this space don't have."

For Puma, fusion took hold about eight years ago with a tennis style that Piccola admits didn't see much time on the court. "We saw sales of this shoe start to take off and realized it was because this particular style had key characteristics of fashion and sport influence," he says.

So Puma began to aggressively develop product that combined those elements in combinations that had never been seen before. Puma turned up the heat even further by introducing high fashion into the product with the help of designers like Jill Sander, Neil Barrett and most recently Alexander McQueen.

These designer collaborations combined elements of high fashion with sports like motocross and began to open retailers' eyes to a completely new twist on the athletic and fashion footwear categories. "Fusion is not a trend," Piccola says. "It's a legitimate category

"Our sports heritage gives us credibility and a perspective that a lot of other brands playing in this space don't have."



and a driving force that's here to stay. When we introduced the Mostro and Speed Cat, no one dreamed those design profiles and the closures we used would be incorporated into mainstream product, but that's exactly what's happened."

Puma will continue to create product true to its sports heritage, while continuing to break new ground with color, design and materials. "Some of what will introduce early next year will be pretty radical, but that's what the consumer expects from us now."