



KALAMAZOO GAZETTE

Hush Puppies' popularity spans generations

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ROCKFORD -- Fifty years ago, a small shoe company gave birth to a casual shoe that soon was to make a name for itself.

With their soft suede and rubber soles, Hush Puppies padded into middle America to offer an alternative to the wing tips and Converse sneakers that lined closet floors.

Before long, Rockford-made Hush Puppies were on the feet of everyone from the Rat Pack in Las Vegas to the Beatles in London. Within a few years, the shoemaker said one out of every 10 adults in this country claimed to own a pair.

"When the brand started in 1958, the world was Ward and June Cleaver. It was very formal about rules of what to wear," said Jenni Hamilton, Hush Puppies' global-marketing director.

"I think this brand says 'Relax, just kick back.' It just resonated."

This year, Wolverine World Wide Inc. is celebrating Hush Puppies' golden anniversary.

The brand -- synonymous with its down-to-earth mascot, a stoic basset hound -- still represents a casual, laid-back look to a wide audience.

In 2006, nearly 19 million pairs were sold worldwide, accounting for one-third of the footwear sold by the \$1.2 billion parent company, Wolverine.

Although the shoes still are worn by '60s hipsters who now carry AARP cards, they enjoyed a trendy resurgence among generation Xers in the mid-1990s after designers John Bartlett and Anna Sui paired the shoes with their fashions.

"It's the world's shoe. It's not an age or a demographic; it's an attitude," Hamilton said.

International markets

It turns out the casual lifestyle is a global trend: Three-quarters of the brand is sold outside the U.S.

Because the brand has been in some countries for decades, it is seen as a homegrown product there, said Mark Neal, Hush Puppies' global brand president.

Of Wolverine's nine brands, Hush Puppies is the best-selling globally, and Neal is amazed at its brand recognition.

“They’ll see the dog and say, ‘Hush Puppies,’ and I’ll think they speak English, but they don’t,” Neal said.

Iconic brand

To celebrate its anniversary, the brand is offering some unexpected looks with its Guest Designer Series.

For the launch of what will become an annual tradition, celebrity stylists Phillip Bloch and Rachel Fanconi were tapped to design a line of shoes.

The United Kingdom-based Fanconi created a women's line that ranges from a Victorian-shaped boot to a modern Mary Jane that is “very sassy and fun,” Hamilton said.

Bloch -- a Hollywood fashion guru who has dressed John Travolta, Sandra Bullock, Faye Dunaway, Salma Hayek and Jada Pinkett -- gave his line an urban-chic feel.

“I wanted to design three types of shoes a guy could use to travel: boots, dress shoe and the sneaker,” Bloch said.

Although his line of Hush Puppies won't be in stores until fall, he has been sending out samples to clients who are fans, including Forest Whitaker and Jim Carrey.

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