

Elaine Turner making retail her style

From wholesale roots, accessories chain goes national

By David Kaplan

Elaine Turner has gone from nervously cold-calling retailers around Houston in hope they would take her designed handbags on consignment to having seven eponymous stores of her own, including one on New York's Madison Avenue.

Now, she and her CEO/husband are embarking on an ambitious expansion plan that will increase the size of the Elaine Turner women's accessories chain to 10 stores in October, and then add three to six more annually for at least the next four or five years.

One of the new stores will be in Houston at BLVD Place near the Galleria, and two will be in the Dallas area.

The BLVD Place store will be the fourth in the Houston area, joining locations in Rice Village, CityCentre and Market Street in The Woodlands.

The couple feel confident expanding based on what they've seen from their stores after operating solely as a wholesaler previously, Jim Turner said.

Once they opened their first store in Rice Village five years ago, "we saw what a direct-to-consumer approach could do," he said. Elaine Turner has a "clear, strong brand message," and being in retail as opposed to wholesale, they have greater control over it,



Elaine Turner of the Elaine Turner women's accessories chain is expanding her business, which she owns with her husband, Jim Turner, to 10 boutique stores this fall. Items include footwear, jewelry, handbags and apparel.

he said.

The timing for growth may be right for a chain focused on shoes, handbags and jewelry.

Women's accessories is among the strongest categories in retail, said Howard Davidowitz, president of Davidowitz & Associates, a national retail consulting and investment banking firm in New York City.

And like Elaine Turner, some of the biggest retailers in the sector - Michael Kors, Tory Burch, Kate Spade and Coach - started out as wholesalers, he said.

When the Turners opened their first store in 2009, the national economy was not great. But, Jim Turner said, "the Houston economy was holding its own, and we had built a strong brand presence here and believed we

could navigate through the unpredictable economic environment."

Elaine Turner's differentiating retail strategy includes offering "glamorous, accessible products" and friendly service in a "fun environment," he said.

His wife added that the chain aims to bring more meaning to retail "by immersing ourselves in community causes and organizations" so customers will feel "beautiful inside and out."

Elaine Turner is president and creative director.

The company's online growth has also been encouraging, Jim Turner said.

And executive vice president Heather McLeskey said Elaine Turner will introduce its own apparel line next spring.

The retailer has reduced its whole-

sale accounts to 40 nationally, she said. In Houston, they still sell to Tootsies.

The company is working on several fronts to fund the expansion, Jim Turner said. They have invested some of their savings and brought in partners who are friends and family and individual investors. Turner said they have also received bank financing and he is in talks with private equity firms.

“We are also launching a capital raise on Circle Up, a firm that matches thousands of high-net-worth individuals with growing consumer brands,” he said.

He declined to share details about the company’s financial status.

Each store has at its center a coffee table with two big pink couches on either side. Wall shelves display shoes and handbags, most of which range from \$195 to \$395, McLeskey said.

Southgate resident Deborah Domning said the Elaine Turner in Rice Village is “a fun place to browse and the price points are very good.” Domning, a retiree, also shops at Elaine Turner’s online site.

Kate Spade, Tory Burch and Michael Kors are Elaine Turner’s most direct competitors, Jim Turner said.

Domning said she also shops at Kate Spade and Tory Burch and finds the style, quality and price points of those stores and Elaine Turner’s to be similar.

Her muse is her mother

Elaine Turner, 44, grew up in a Sugar Land home where fashion was a form of self-expression, she said. She calls her mother, Marlaine White, her muse.

“She is a quintessential Texas, lady-like glamorous woman,” she said.

Turner would skip school for “hooky Neiman’s day” and go shopping with her mother, sister and grandmother.

At Sakowitz, she and her mother “spent hours in the dressing room,”



The Elaine Turner Ruth Cloudy Bay Gray Leather Tote goes for \$578. Most of the Houston-based chain’s handbags range in price from \$195 to \$395.

Turner said. “I remember a gold satin trench coat she bought there. She wore it all the time. If you have the confidence, you can pull it off.”

She graduated from the University of Texas and took a fashion design job in Dallas before moving to New York City to design for another apparel company.

She met Jim Turner in 1994 through her father, Ken White, who at the time owned an oil services company and was meeting with a financial investment firm in New York where Jim Turner worked.

He asked his daughter to “swing by” the investment office to meet somebody.

It was an awkward beginning, Elaine Tuner said, but she and Jim hit it off.

Soon after they began dating, she told him of her dream to have her own company.

They married in 1997 and settled in Houston about two years later. They launched Elaine Turner as a wholesale handbag business in 2000. Jim Turner did double-duty as an investment banker before joining the company full-time seven years ago.

Their first order was from Tootsies,

and store owner Mickey Rosmarin became a mentor and later helped Elaine Turner launch her shoe line, she said. She began selling to Neiman Marcus a year later.

At one of her first trunk shows at Tootsies, she said, a customer gave her advice: “Your handbags are very sleek and sophisticated, but try to make some that you can get your hands into.”

“I was completely mortified,” Turner said, “but I remember thinking, ‘She has a good point.’ My bags were ... really hard to get into. It was mya-ha! moment that fashion must be functional, not just look pretty.”

Her most popular handbag in the early days was one covered in raffia grass cloth and designed as an homage to the style of Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis. She called it the “Jackie.”

Elaine Turner’s corporate office is in the Decorative Center Houston, and the products are manufactured near Hong Kong, McLeskey said. Materials are imported from Italy and Brazil.

Community-minded events

Each store hosts four to six community-minded events a month, McLeskey said. Sometimes it is a fundraiser



Elaine Turner and her husband Jim Turner are the owners of the lifestyle brand Elaine Turner. The 15-years-old business provides women with accessible feminine glamour through the handbags, clothing, footwear and jewelry available at their seven boutiques in Texas.

with 20 percent of the revenue raised going to a charity, and an event can last anywhere from a few hours to an entire weekend, she said. Pink champagne is served. Other store events include talks on subjects ranging from financial management to yoga.

The company also donates products

for private fund-raising parties, and proceeds from certain items sold benefit Cancer Support Community.

Turner has made the color pink a theme in her stores and at the company as a show of support for her mother, who has undergone breast cancer treatment.