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FLIGHT 001: READY FOR TAKEOFF

BY TOM VANDERBILT

Outside the flight 001 boutique on New York's leafy Greenwich Avenue sits a mountain of lost luggage. The boxes, stacked six high, contain dozens of flight 001-designed bags that were en route from Shantao, China, to the company's new warehouse in Ontario, Calif. At the Long Beach port, however, they took a wrong turn, and ended up at the Manhattan travel-goods store instead, turning the sidewalk into spontaneous storage.

John Sencion, the smoothly personable co-founder of flight 001 (pronounced "flight one"), is quick to find an upside in even this logistical quagmire. "I was so happy the first time I saw 'flight 001' on a box," he says, pointing to the shipment outside. It was a sign that his company had arrived. Now it wasn't just selling other people's products, it was producing its own line of travel accessories.

If you haven't been in a flight 001 outlet, imagine a department store "travel section" as Barneys might do it, fused with the ultimate First Class amenity kit. Products range from bags and "wheelies" in bold colors from emerging designers to a wall filled with travel geegaws you didn't know existed, like tubes of Charmin toilet paper. One wall looks like it belongs in an apothecary, with jet-lag nostrums and other goods neatly presented in shiny silver packages.

MADE BY DESIGN

From its small inaugural boutique in New York City, flight 001 has grown to include stores in Los Angeles and San Francisco. More are on the way this year—the company just signed a lease for a space on Chicago's Gold Coast and shortly will open a "shop-in-shop," or "Shuttle," in flight 001 parlance, in the Harvey Nichols department store in Dubai.

Annual sales are approaching \$10 million. In short, flight 001 is one of those small, intensely "curated" shops, like Jonathan Adler or Design within Reach, that's morphing from boutique to brand.

David Schimmel, president of design consultancy And Partners, says that flight 001's design-intensive retail approach has allowed it, in essence, to punch above its weight. "Their use of design to court the consumer, their attention to detail and environmental design, was novel at the time," says Schimmel, who's working on a book of case studies of companies—including flight 001—whose success has been "made by design."

Sencion and his partner Brad John hatched their business plan on a plane trip six years ago. "We used to travel a lot, to Europe or to Asia," says Sencion. "I was always running around to buy things for the trip, going to Duane Reade for one thing, to a bookstore for a map. We thought: Why not just put it all under one roof?"

TERMINAL DEPARTURE

And so, in a small space in New York's West Village, the pair opened their quirky one-stop shop for cool travel clocks and messenger bags. But 001's success should be attributed to more than simple convenience.

The boutique was an experiential, design-driven place—all curvy and white—that evoked the glamorous dawning of the jet age. (The company's name refers to Pan Am's legendary globe-trotting flight, initiated in 1942, that circled the world in 48 hours.)

The store was designed by Dario Antonioni, a former aspiring aerospace engineer who now heads his own Los Angeles studio, Orange 22. In a small space—and with a small budget—Antonioni was able to produce a metaphorically suggestive environment, as much a story as a store.

CRUCIAL ROLE

He took various aspects of travel and abstracted them. So the flight 001 “cash-wrap zone,” or counter, looks like an airline ticket counter, a “baggage claim” area in back holds the latest luggage, and the curved walls and storage bays suggest an airplane interior.

The choice of materials, ranging from walnut paneling to brushed aluminum to Pirelli rubber floors, hearkens to the idea of air travel as the quintessence of what was modern and luxurious.

Antonioni’s evocative interior played a crucial role in setting consumer expectations. Flight 001 wasn’t exactly a luggage store. It wasn’t a map store. “The idea of a travel store wasn’t in the consciousness yet,” says Sencion. “Now even J. Crew sells passport holders. We feel like we’re creating the market as we speak.”

CHECK-READY

Part of creating the market meant introducing flight 001’s own travel accessories. One of its most successful products has been the “Spacepak” line, a collection of item-specific “packing bags” partly inspired by the rise in airport security checks after 9/11.

“We don’t think the rolling suitcase should be the compartment that houses each individual item,” says Sencion. “With bags getting opened all the time, you don’t want your underwear falling out. Our idea was to organize it and create more space, because [the Spacepak] compresses your clothing before you put it in the suitcase.” In a nod to its functionality and crisp graphic appeal, the American Institute of Graphic Arts recently gave Spacepak an award in its packaging category.

Flight 001 has not always enjoyed a smooth ride -- the post 9/11 travel slump had a definite impact. Among the challenges the company currently faces is “national-itis.” “Landlords want national [chains],” says Sencion, referring to stores like Puma or Anthropologie that will be their new neighbors in Chicago. “Bang & Olufsen took our space on Lincoln Road in Miami, and we can’t compete with their deep pockets.”

EXPECTED ARRIVAL

Despite it all, flight 001 is growing. In addition to the Chicago and Dubai stores, Miami and San Diego loom on the horizon, and the company has signed for a space in the mall of the forthcoming Terrazo hotel/casino in Las Vegas. There’s also a growing e-commerce component, and fledgling partnerships with Apple Computer (AAPL) and several airlines to produce in-flight entertainment.

And Partners’ Schimmel cautions against rapid expansion, saying: “Far too often, things grow, and then the charm dissipates. Right now, what’s so great is that not enough people in the world know about it.”

But Sencion is bullish. “Very quickly,” he says, “we’re going to come out of nowhere.”