

# From Idea to Show:

## How an accessory evolves from drawing board to debut

**By Kathy Witt**

A pharmacist and self-professed shoe fanatic envisioned a sole dressed for success. A frequent flyer tapped into his inner MacGyver. For two other astute travelers, lost luggage and bags that just couldn't go the distance became the inspiration for new companies.

At The 2008 Travel Goods Show in San Diego, these entrepreneurs and others showed off the new products that resulted from brainstorming, "light bulb moments" and chance remarks, the serendipitous occasions when need intersected with the realization that there was a niche in the market to be filled.



# Stepping outside the box

A few years ago, Dominique Barteet was a pharmacist and shoe fanatic who maintained a busy travel schedule, an overachiever who expected nothing less from her footwear. The inventor of Onesole® was the proud owner of shoes in every color imaginable.

Onesole® had its genesis in Barteet's desire to have shoes for every occasion, coupled with her need to pack light.

"I got some machinery, bought a scuba suit because it was stretchy and started cutting things up," says Barteet. "Things evolved from there."

Barteet had a mouse pad with her dog's image on it. Bingo! She could put designs on the shoe she was creating. "Everything was accidental and thinking outside the box," she says.

With a shoe factory set up in her pharmacy in Palm Beach, FL, Barteet began perfecting her concept for an interchangeable shoe. Today, after just two years, Onesole® by Quick Change Artist is a line of more than 600 designer shoe tops that fit on a single sole, made with Soft-Step Insoles and based on the principles of comfort, versatility and style.

Barteet funded her invention with her pharmacy earnings. And although she took baby steps, the entrepreneur was still several steps ahead of the airlines' ever-tightening checked luggage and carry-on restrictions.



**Left: Dominique Barteet, inventor of Onesole®**  
**Below: A Onesole® promotional piece**

PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF QUICK CHANGE ARTIST

"Now you can have just one bag when you travel, but you can still be fashionable and can even customize your look," she says.

With hundreds of designs already on the market, Barteet's challenge has become a constant quest for innovation. There are shoe tops for dressy and casual, closed tops, clog tops, collegiate tops, tops studded with crystals and jewels, others silk-screened with images and a slew of embellishments. As if that weren't challenge enough, Barteet must also stay several strides ahead of copycats.

"This was my idea, and dealing with people trying to copy the design is definitely a challenge for me right now," she says.

On a brighter note, Barteet has stepped into a fashion-related business that isn't tied to any particular fashion season, and can fill a need for every personality, type of traveler, occasion, color and style.

Her goal is for Onesole® to become a household name around the world. "I won't stop until I do that," she pledges.

## The 'MacGyver' touch

After countless trips around the world, John Mittelstadt put his finger on a problem that flyers have been facing since the Wright Brothers first sent passengers into the clouds a century ago — trying to get some shuteye in a seat not designed for rest.

"What I wanted was to lean into a pillow and have it support my body," says Mittelstadt. "Being a bit of a 'MacGyver,' I tied an airline pillow to my seat back using my shoelaces. Eureka! TravelRest was born."

Today, John and wife Teri Mittelstadt's patented HiGear TravelRest pillow, with its ergonomic shape and tethered design, allows travelers to make the best of a cramped flight or a long drive and enjoy more restful sleep. Built to nestle against head and neck, the TravelRest can attach



**The TravelRest travel pillow by HiGear Design in action**

PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF HIGEAR DESIGN



to any seat back, even offering comfort when flyers are caught for long stretches in the airport. And it was created by two people who had not a whit of experience in the travel goods industry prior to producing the pillow.

"TravelRest launched us into the business," says Teri.

The Mittelstadts created their own prototype and test marketed it themselves. The couple also funded their own research and development and product construction and then filed a patent application — all before they breathed a word of it, much less showed it, to anyone.

What did the inventors learn about themselves in the process of bringing TravelRest to market? Says John, "We learned we needed to bring in talent to fill the void in the areas where we fell short."

## The good, the bad and the ugly meet smart, clean and pretty

**S**easoned travelers Cindy Hofen and Karla Perea were in the process of designing another product when their journey took a detour with a chance remark.

"We had asked a friend to try out our product. During our discussion she mentioned that, with four kids, she was always concerned about the cleanliness of airplane tray tables,"



PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF LOVE TO TRAVEL PRODUCTS™

**Keeping germs at bay:  
The TRAYblecloth™ from  
Cindy Hofen and Karla  
Perea's Love to Travel  
Products™**

recalls Hofen. "Right there, our product was born!"

The TraybleCloth™ is the inventors' answer to what they call "the good, the bad and the ugly of flying," namely, the exposure to an ever-expanding variety of germs, the increasingly no-frills service of most airlines and cramped seating space.

"Soaring fuel costs mean airlines have to try and cut expenses, and this means seat backs and tray tables are not being cleaned as often as they should be. The seat back tray table is one of the most frequently touched pieces of equipment on an airplane," says Hofen.

The TRAYblecloth™ helps reduce contact with germs by providing a clean barrier between the airplane tray table and the traveler. TRAYblecloth™ products may be washed and line dried as often as needed.

Another issue confronting travelers is limited seating space. Accessing carry-on luggage to retrieve pens, books, glasses and other paraphernalia may require the flexibility of a contortionist. The TRAYblecloth™ stays on for the duration of a flight and makes it easy to keep needed items organized and within reach. Front pockets store small items like pens, iPods and glasses, while a large mesh pocket in back holds books and papers.

Once the idea for TRAYblecloth™ was born, the women got out their sewing machines and made the first of many prototypes. "The first one looked like a shower cap," recalls Hofen with a laugh.

The TRAYblecloth™ is the first product in the Love to Travel Products™ line (formerly Hope and Marie) and the one that catapulted Hofen and Perea into the travel goods industry. It is also the result of their dedication and willingness to make financial sacrifices to pursue their dream.

"All our funding has come from our savings," says Hofen, "and so we have to be very 'expense-conscious,' as do most small business start-ups."

The entrepreneurs are learning the business of being creative as they navigate through the travel goods industry. From the patenting process to market research, adapting the original TRAYblecloth™ for everyone from kids (with erasable clear vinyl pocket and interchangeable activities and games) to business executives, the two have worked through each challenge. In the process, they have learned why so many people want to start their own businesses, but so few do.

"Many times we've just had to be patient, especially when things weren't moving as fast as we thought they should," says Hofen. "We found that our vendors do not always feel the same sense of urgency we do about our business, and we have to do endless follow-up. We've learned that persistence is the key to making things happen."

"Most importantly, we've learned that there are a lot of great people in this industry who are willing to help and give advice."

*Continued on page 58*



Continued from page 56

## Flush with ideas

**M**issing restroom items were the impetus for Keith and Gerri Holmes of Atlanta, GA, to come up with a convenient resource every bit as valuable to public bathroom users as first aid kits are to the injured.

"We got tired of going to public restrooms at outdoor events or when we traveled only to find there were missing items: tissue, liquid soap or any type of soap to clean your hands, even toilet seat covers," says Gerri. "We would find ourselves going from one restroom to another until we found one that had everything you needed to feel safe. And not only were we encountering these problems, but plenty of others were, too."

The Holmeses wasted no time in brainstorming solutions. The result was the TT Pack™, a complete package for potty stops that includes toilet seat cover, toilet seat wipe, hand wipe, tissue, paper towel and disposable glove.

Once they got the product name trademarked, the couple embarked on making the prototype. Funding came from their own pockets, but Keith and Gerri were committed to a product that would help others confronting the vagaries of the public restroom scene.

Although both had other full-time jobs (and still do), they eagerly jumped into the travel goods industry and now work full-time for their business, Eye2Eye Ideas. Gerri admits that the couple's combined work week can feel overwhelming at times, but adds that both she and Keith feel a responsibility to help protect themselves and others from germ exposure.

"With the bird flu, West Nile virus and other epidemic [outbreaks], we feel that our product helps people protect themselves and their families and friends," says Gerri.

As small business owners, their main challenges are building relationships in the travel goods industry and working as cost-effectively as possible. Giving up was never an option for either inventor.

"If you want something in life, you must work hard to make it happen," says Gerri. "No matter what obstacles cross our path, we remain steadfast believers in our product."

**The TT Pack™ by Eye2Eye Ideas eliminates having to "hold it" in messy public restrooms.**



PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF EYE2EYE IDEAS

## Meet my Mom, 'Necessity'

**F**or Jeffrey Thomas, the creator of LUGbuddy, necessity was definitely the mother of invention.

"When traveling on business, I almost always found myself carrying one or two items in addition to my wheeled suitcase — usually a briefcase/shoulder bag and/or a coat. I didn't like using an add-a-bag strap because the second bag would usually fall to one side and, if the strap wasn't adjusted just right, both bags would topple over. More importantly, the add-a-bag strap didn't work for a coat or any other item that didn't have a handle.

"Wheele straps suffer from this same limitation," he adds. "They don't work for anything other than a bag that happens to have a wheelee strap."

Consequently, Thomas would wind up carrying his additional items on top of his wheeled suitcase. Like his fellow travelers, he would be subjected to items falling off the wheeled suitcase, especially when he stood it upright, feeling his frustration mount. But, unlike other travelers, Thomas decided to develop a product that would fix the problem.

Meet the LUGbuddy from Blue Sky Products. Thomas is quick to list LUGbuddy's benefits. "It easily secures items of all sizes to a wheeled suitcase. It protects laptops and other fragile items by eliminating toppling. It secures coats, purses and other non-luggage items. It releases quickly for easy access and is easy to pack and store."

After building several prototypes that culminated in LUGbuddy's patent-pending design, Thomas was launched into the travel goods industry. Keeping his "day job" and outsourcing much of the manufacturing process allowed him to begin operating without outside funding.

"This is a great lesson for aspiring entrepreneurs," he says. "You can outsource almost anything, which may allow you to forego seeking outside funding or at least delay doing so until you have validated your idea.

"I protected my idea by filing a domestic patent application as well as a document under an international

*Continued on page 60*



PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF BLUE SKY PRODUCTS

**Unlike "add-a-bag" straps, the LUGbuddy requires no strap adjustment, will not topple your luggage and secures any item to a wheeled suitcase — not just bags with handles.**

Continued from page 58

treaty that reserves my right to file for international patent protection for a specified time.”

Another challenge Thomas faced was garnering the attention of retail buyers. “This has taken a great deal of persistence,” he says.

Although occasionally frustrated with the process of convincing retailers that they should buy a product consumers already like, Thomas has never once considered giving up on his idea. And he has discovered just how much he enjoys creating something and taking it to market.

“Whether on a full- or part-time basis, I will definitely be an entrepreneur for the rest of my life,” he says.

## Techie accessory stops identify theft in its tracks

**R**eading about radio frequency chips led Geb Masterson of Kena Kai to invent DataSafe® Wallets. These “radio-frequency shielding travel accessories” are designed to protect against identity theft, credit card fraud and “tracking” associated with the new ePassports, “contactless credit cards” and next generation driver’s licenses, which all have wireless chips embedded.

“New technology and innovation fascinate me and I am always trying to learn as much as possible about random, unrelated advances and products, with an eye on combining different technologies in hopes of solving new problems,” says

PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF KENA KAI



**“Our concern is protecting the current items that would be placed in our travel accessories, such as contactless credit cards and ePassports,” says Geb Masterson. “A short time ago there were no products such as ours to shield these items.” Now there is the DataSafe® Wallet.**

Masterson. “What really drives me is finding an answer to the question, ‘How can I make this better utilizing all available technology?’”

DataSafe® Wallets, the second-place TGA 2008 Product Innovation Award winner, propelled Kena Kai into the travel goods industry. The inventor’s prior experience in the fashion, computer and sporting goods industries proved helpful in research and development and manufacturing.

Masterson was already familiar with the radio frequency (RF) blocking material that was used to protect space satellites from damaging radio frequencies that could fry their electronics. “I saw that this RF blocking material might be able to be incorporated into travel accessories,” he says.

To protect his idea, Masterson filed provisional and utility patents and then obtained several trademarks associated with the product line and possible brand extensions.

“We have also received government certification for the shielding benefit our DataSafe® Wallets offer, and we are listed on the government’s GSA schedule,” he says.

Masterson worked through many obstacles, including financial, legal and production issues and, perhaps most potentially unnerving to any inventor, self-doubt. Throughout the process of bringing DataSafe® Wallets to market, however, he always had the support of his wife, Nelleke, and he always believed in his instincts.

“I have a fairly simple reality test. I look at a product first to see if it appeals to me aesthetically and then I determine if I have a need for it. How is it going to help me and is it a necessity or a luxury? If all these answers are positive, then I figure there are enough people like me out there and I just need to market the product to them.”

In bringing his innovative product to market, Masterson says he learned a lot about perseverance and drive.

“If you stick with your goal and press on through the tough times, eventually you will be rewarded. And when I say ‘rewarded,’ I’m not talking only about the monetary reward. A far bigger reward for us has been the lifestyle that this business has afforded us due to its flexibility. At my past job, I often missed dinner with the family and I was often frustrated due to matters beyond my control.

“With Kena Kai I have been able to sit down and share dinner with my wife and two young children, and that is a blessing that I cherish,” says Masterson.

## Fashion + function = fabulous

**T**he equation was one of basic math: How do you combine keys, cell phone, cash, credit cards and other necessities in a single case that is both organized and stylish?

*Continued on page 62*



Continued from page 60

For the Chicago-based CellKeeper Co., the savvy solution was more than the sum of its parts. Founder Worth Brown had already developed a personal electronics accessory collection that lets on-the-go types tastefully carry their wearable technology. When he and business manager Sara Simmons began researching new markets and sub-markets of their core business, they hit upon a designer line that was an organic expansion of their current products.

"We wanted a fun way to simplify women's lives but not compromise their sense of fashion and looking good," says Simmons.

Sara Simmons for CellKeeper, a designer line of products with luxurious leathers and detailing, appeals to a more fashion-conscious woman while still following a minimalist philosophy. "In our case," says Simmons, "less is more."

Before rolling out the designer line, CellKeeper did its homework, studying what products were already available and looking at trends. Simmons also asked herself what she would want in such a product. Prototypes of the designer line were made and patents were in place, as was funding. All that was left was for the product to fill the void that the company knew already existed.

"Most cases in the market today are either for one type of phone or iPod or camera," explains Simmons. "[CellKeeper's] design allows us to reach more consumers in the marketplace. If you have a CellKeeper, you will be able to use it for your phone, whether you have a Blackberry or a flip phone."

A multifunctional little wonder, CellKeeper can also accommodate iPods (nano and regular size) and digital cameras. It attaches to a wallet and comes with an adjustable chain strap and wrist strap.

In bringing its CellKeeper designer line to market, Simmons says the company overcame a number of challenges, including understanding their buyer and working within budgetary and time constraints.

"This is a fun process and we have enjoyed every minute of it," she says. "If you truly believe in what you are doing, I don't think you can fail. You may have obstacles to overcome, but who doesn't? We just keep pushing forward."



PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF THE CELLKEEPER CO.

**Sara Simmons is the mastermind behind the luxe designer line, Sara Simmons for CellKeeper**

## Identifying a niche in a sea of 'same old, same old'

**P**eggy Thomas remembers exactly when the light bulb went off.

"I was in baggage claim at the airport trying to retrieve my brown luggage from a sea of black and brown luggage when I thought, 'There has to be a better way,'" says Thomas. "I was witness to lots of bad ribbon and saw that one desperate person had put a piece of tape on leather luggage! It was at that moment the wheels started turning and Identi-Ties was born, says Thomas.

Thomas spent countless hours researching luggage tags, but was unable to find a tag that combined being fashionable, easy to spot and adept at keeping one's identity secure. Voila! Identi-Ties had found its niche.

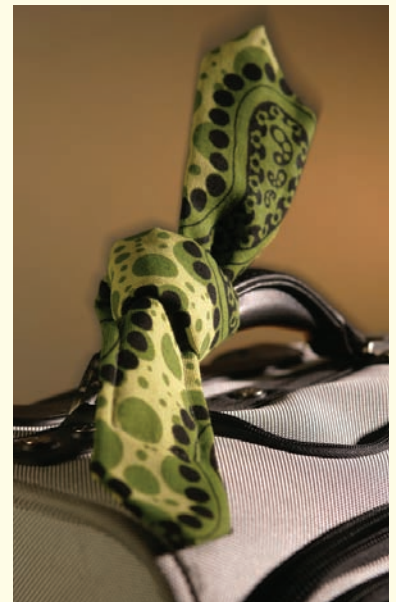
"Most luggage tags are limited to a few colors, styles and sayings," says Thomas. "They are mass-produced and made overseas. Identi-Ties patterns change as each pattern is sold out. I put a limit on the number of 'Ties' that will be produced in any given pattern to avoid duplication." She proudly reports that "Identi-Ties are made in the U.S.A. by a company that promotes the well-being of mentally challenged adults by guiding them in the workplace."

Before choosing a manufacturer, the first thing the creator of Identi-Ties did was workshop her idea among friends and family. "I started with a few rough prototypes and tweaked the pattern to the current form," she says. "Once I knew I had something special, I applied for a patent."

At that point, Thomas became very hush-hush about her product, insisting that any potential supplier who saw her product first sign a non-disclosure agreement. After all, it was an idea she conceived, nurtured and paid for with her own money.

Prior to coming up with Identi-Ties, Thomas had spent nine years collecting ideas for products that would make life easier

*Continued on page 64*



PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF IDENTITIES

**Identi-Ties was the culmination of Peggy Thomas' list of ideas to make life easier, and was inspired by a sea of look-alike luggage.**



Continued from page 62

— beginning at a time when she was facing the hardest challenge of her own life.

In 1998, one week after the birth of her son, Thomas was diagnosed with leiomyosarcoma, a rare and often fatal malignancy. Thomas spent that year undergoing treatment plus taking care of a newborn. The experience made the new mom, in her words, “very headstrong.”

“When faced with the possibility of death, I found determination that I never thought I had,” she says. “No’ was never an option as far as I was concerned. I had to learn to be tenacious, to push through bad days when I felt like crumbling to the ground.”

It was while tending to her health and her son that Thomas began writing down items she felt she needed but couldn’t find, compiling a wish list of invention possibilities. When the light bulb went on at the airport’s baggage carousel, this stay-at-home mom and cancer survivor was more than ready to flex her creative muscles in a big way.

In March, Thomas introduced her creation at The Show. It was her first foray into the travel goods industry and one she was glad she made, in spite of the challenges she faced in bringing a new concept to fruition.

“During my moments of frustration, I would simply walk away and come back when I felt refreshed. Having an active 10-year-old reminds me of my priorities. Just like every other woman, balance is something I am constantly striving for.”

On the road to good health and entrepreneurship, Thomas learned to appreciate herself.

“It’s very easy for stay-at-home moms to forget what they contribute to the overall well-being of their family,” she says. “Moms forget that they are smart, creative and resilient. Going through this process allowed me to reconnect to the person I was ‘pre-motherhood’ and to realize that there is another side of me that needs to be nurtured.”

## For cinda b, success is in the bag

PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF CINDA B

Unlike Peggy Thomas’ bag that was lost in a sea of look-alike luggage, Cinda Boomershine’s simply fell apart.

“I was traveling a ton for work and basically living out of a cotton-quilted, weekend travel bag,” the savvy Southerner recalls. “It eventually fell apart.”

When the former interior design consul-



**Designing her own line allowed Cinda Boomershine to incorporate special features she knew would make travel easier, like giving the duffels a wide-mouth opening and the garment bag an extension panel to accommodate long dresses.**

tant went shopping for a new bag, nothing caught her eye or looked fresh. Not only that, the designer could find nothing on the market that was both lightweight and more durable than cotton.

“So I set about designing my own bag and the cinda b line was born,” she says.

Boomershine delved into designing a line of luggage that incorporated the features the veteran traveler knew would make life on the road easier: fabric that is water and stain resistant, machine washable and super durable; duffel bags with cinda b’s trademark “big mouth” opening; and garment bags with an extension panel to accommodate long dresses.

“I could see the bags in my mind, so the first thing I did was to sit down at my sewing machine and sew prototypes. They weren’t pretty but the experience allowed me to fine-tune the bags to get everything right. It also made it easier to find a manufacturer because I had a physical product and could walk in and say, ‘Can you make this for me?’”

At the time, Cinda and her husband, Mark, already owned an adventure tour company but hadn’t produced a travel product until launching the cinda b line. To obtain the capital to create the line, the couple sold the tour company and set about customizing their product.

“From the very beginning, we put a huge emphasis on both branding and custom details. I design all the patterns and fabric designs, so we own them. We are also working hard to build the cinda b name and brand.”

Over the past several years, cinda b has amassed a large and loyal following that includes some high-profile celebrities: Angelina Jolie, Jennifer Aniston, super model Heidi Klum and style maven Sara Jessica Parker, among many others, are all fans of the product, says Boomershine.

“There is a large group of women out there who don’t want to carry the same bag as everyone else, who want a more modern look or who want a more durable bag. These ladies are our market.”

Boomershine’s greatest challenge has been acquiring the custom-printed fabric that is key to making the line unique. Another challenge has been finding a quality manufacturer. “We went through a few before finding the right one,” she says.

The designer admits there were many times when she simply wanted to give up; however, she persevered.

“I am much tougher than I ever thought I was,” she says, four years after creating her first travel goods line. “Persistence is key and you have to keep pushing. Good news is just around the bend!” ■



# Increasing accessories sales

By Kathy Witt

**A**s customer dissatisfaction with the airlines grows and accessories to make travelers more comfortable while flying seem to multiply exponentially, how can retailers market and sell these accessories most effectively to the consumer?

Paul Kiewiet, president and CEO of BrandKiwi, LLC, and the immediate past chairman of the Promotional Products Association International (PPAI), offers some insight on maximizing accessory sales for travel goods retailers.

“A lot of promotional products would make good gifts with purchases for the retailer,” says Kiewiet, who is also a master advertising specialist, the advertising industry’s most prestigious designation, achieved by less than 5% of industry professionals.

According to Kiewiet, such a B2C program could work for big box, independents or ecommerce retailers — even manufacturers featuring a consumer promotion and executing it through a retailer. He suggests offering an inflatable pillow or other accessory item with a luggage purchase or offering free accessory items with different purchases or as part of a loyalty program. These items, or premiums, would be co-branded or imprinted with the retailer’s name.

“A retailer might run a promotion such as ‘Free Noise Cancelling Headphones when you spend \$500 in the Featured Department,’” he says. “In the manufacturer scenario, a luggage manufacturer might offer a backpack filled with travel comfort accessories as a gift with purchase at a featured retailer.”

Different dollar plateaus would be geared to different items: the noise-canceling headphones at a higher dollar level; ear plugs, antibiotic wipes and personal hygiene products or a small travel kit with blanket at a lower level.

“The biggest opportunity for retailers is to offer promotional products for free, a gift with purchase or as part of a loyalty program where consumers collect and earn points or reach a plateau of purchases.”

Kiewiet notes that there are retailers who do create special markets departments to sell to corporate opportunities (B2B).

“A points program or plateau program would be an ideal offering for retailers to use to incentivize the corporate market. Retailers do have a large proportion of the incentive,

premium and promotional spend of corporations — some of it by accident, some by design.”

Mark Kotzer, principal and founder of Venture Drive Consulting, whose clients have included Expedia and Weyerhaeuser, specializes in helping companies develop new lines of business. He believes that retailers can most effectively market and sell travel accessories by being innovative in how they reach their ideal customer — the frequent traveler.

“Retailers can achieve much greater efficiency in their sales efforts by focusing on opportunities to reach large groups of travelers rather than the individual traveler which tends to be the norm,” says Kotzer.

“For example, retailers could reach out to travel agencies, trade show and conference organizers, and to corporate travel managers of companies in their local market or market niche. While manufacturers do sell direct to the largest companies, they don’t have the sales force or the knowledge of the local market to make significant inroads. This presents an opportunity for the retailer with strong networking and customer relationship building skills.”

He suggests these strategies:

- Approach corporate travel managers of companies with a large number of employees that travel frequently. Kotzer says these employees will appreciate travel accessories that improve their productivity and comfort during flights.
- Promote travel accessories to national conference organizers and trade show managers. “Event organizers are always looking for novel promotional items to attach their company’s name to and provide to clients and sales prospects,” says Kotzer. “Accessories that improve the travel experience will generate goodwill for the company that provides the product.”
- Offer local travel agencies and hotels the opportunity to provide their customers with travel accessories as a special perk or reward to clients for booking with them. It may even be possible to brand the accessory with the name and logo of the travel supplier or retailer for particularly large orders.

Each of these solutions provides the travel accessory retailer with the opportunity to achieve multiple bulk sales, a cost-efficient approach that can only complement its traditional retail business. ■

