





The Brand Liaison

Written by Alan Dorich



In less than two years since its formation, **The Brand Liaison** has established itself as a premier provider of boutique licensing, brand extension and brand management services. “In a very short period, we’ve started to cast a very big shadow by assembling a strong collection of clients and reputable brands,” says founder and President Steven W. Heller.

A veteran of licensing and brand development with 20 years of licensing experience, Heller started the New York – Miami-based company with several “liaisons” who also have extensive experience in licensing projects. He notes that the team’s collective experience includes work with leading apparel brands such as Van Heusen and Gloria Vanderbilt, as well as work with Disney, the NFL, Converse and many other brands.

“In a short amount of time, we’ve built a very strong client base and completed several significant licensing deals,” Heller says. “Our tag line is ‘Opening doors, closing deals.’ And that’s what we do. We create new opportunities and follow through with getting the deals done.”

PORTFOLIO PRIDE

The Brand Liaison’s portfolio of clients includes television personalities David Tutera (“My Fair Wedding”), and Antonio Ballatore (HGTV’s “The Antonio Treatment”), as well as several fashion, sports, art and children’s properties.

In the sports world, The Brand Liaison represents Roland Garros, The French Open tennis brand, and the ever-noticeable Loudmouth Brand.

Loudmouth is known for its golf apparel and board shorts and has now added footwear, swimwear and accessories. According to Heller, the Loudmouth brand obtained strong exposure from professional golfer John Daly wearing Loudmouth’s bright patterns on the PGA tour.

Now, Heller says, the company has several new products in development. “Over the past year, we have assisted Loudmouth in creating licensing for belts, umbrellas, luggage, swimwear and other products,” he explains.

In the world of fashion, an interesting property is the brand Litter, a vintage body jewelry brand backed by entrepreneurs Daymond John and Mark Cuban from ABC’s “Shark Tank” series.

Since its appearance on “Shark Tank,” The Brand Liaison has arranged distribution of Litter’s products at Frederick’s of Hollywood, a lingerie retailer. Currently, “We are working on licensing deals for Litter in jewelry, footwear and handbags,” Heller says.

The company also represents Debbie Brooks, the brand of the New York-based designer and artist of the same name. Brooks currently distributes handbags and accessories that are sold in upscale boutiques and better department stores such as Henri Bendel.

Heller has known Brooks for nearly 15 years. “We first licensed Debbie’s artwork back in the late 1990s and

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we have watched her mature as an artist, and as a brand. We have recently assisted her in obtaining NCAA licenses and extending her artwork and brand into several new channels,” he says.

Another client, Debra Valencia, specializes in bold pattern designs that have applications in stationery, gifts, craft products and home décor. “[They are] currently licensed on some 500 different products with 20 different licensees and retailers,” Heller says.

The Brand Liaison also represents the Kinsey Collection, which is owner Bernard Kinsey’s collection of African-American art and historical artifacts. The collection, which has items dating back to the 17th century, recently began a three-year exhibition at Walt Disney World Resort’s Epcot Center earlier this year.

Brand Liaison Partner Janon Costley said in a statement that he is proud to be working with the Kinsey Collection. “Yes, this one is very personal,” he stated. “And we are determined to bring on licensing partners that share the Kinsey’s sense of history and education.”

In the kids’ arena, The Brand Liaison has Happy Toon World, Zombie Zoo and RodKingz. “Happy Toon World and Zombie Zoo are both so relevant in [today’s] marketplace,” Heller says. Happy Toon World has more than 40 world-famous characters, ranging from Snow White to Santa Claus.

RodKingz is a multiplatform gaming experience built around hot-rod racecars. In the game, the children trade game cards and cars, Heller says. “There are a lot of properties out there competing for consumer attention, but the RodKingz property is so well developed,” he says. “This one really is a stand-out.”

COPING WITH COMPETITION

The Brand Liaison’s clients are experiencing increased competition. “The larger names are taking up more floor space at the big retailers,” Heller says. “The consolidation of the retail environment leaves less opportunities for up-and-coming brands and new products.”

To cope, The Brand Liaison looks for products that can find unique channels of distribution. For example, Heller notes the Litter Fredericks of Hollywood deal and the success of David Tutera craft line licensed under the brand of the renowned wedding expert.

“He is famous for his show ‘My Fair Wedding With David Tutera’ on WE tv,” Heller says. But he has been very successful in distributing crafts and fabrics through channels such as Jo-Ann Fabric and Craft Stores, Michaels and recently on HSN.

Another client, MyOwnersBox, a sports merchandise company, is seeking alternative distribution channels for its home furnishing products at home improvement channels such as The Home Depot, in addition to traditional department stores.

“[We specialize in] looking for alternative channels of distribution,” Heller says.

Another Brand Liaison strategy is to form unique relationships with its clients, where it is “hands-on” in all licensing activities, he says. “We work closely with our clients to ensure that our brand extension activities complement [their] strategic goals and objectives,” Heller says.

With new clients, “We start off each presentation with a ‘brand-storming’ session, in which we identify the highest-value product categories, licensing opportunities, and set realistic goals and timetables,” he says.

GETTING LINKED

Technology has impacted The Brand Liaison’s business, Heller says. “[It is] changing both the ways the brands interact with customers as well as how we as licensing agents interact with manufacturers,” he says.

For example, LinkedIn has been a strong source of new business for The Brand Liaison, Heller says. By using the social networking site, “We have connected with manufacturers and retailers across the country,” he says.

The Brand Liaison’s use of the site also has won Heller exposure. “I got an email from [LinkedIn] that I was in the top 5 percent of linked-in searches,” he reports.

ON THE FRONT LINES

Moving forward, The Brand Liaison plans to maintain its current status “as a boutique agency, where we are on the front lines with our clients,” Heller says. “There are other licensing agencies that have grown to a much bigger size very quickly. [But] we don’t believe that they’re able to work hand-in-hand with their clients the way that we can.”

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One current client worked with a much larger agency before hiring The Brand Liaison. “I promised we would change their opinion about how licensing agents work,” he says. “So far, they’re very pleased with what we’ve done.”