

# Fashion leads the way



MUSHTAQ PUNJABI

HAVING ESTABLISHED ITS CREDENTIALS IN ENGLAND, FASHION RETAILER **BUKHARA** HAS PLANS FOR BIGGER THINGS: DOMINATION OF KEY LOCATIONS THROUGHOUT THE UK, CONTINUED EXPANSION THROUGH ACQUISITION AND A MOVE INTO THE HIGHLY COMPETITIVE MARKETS OF INDIA AND DUBAI. RLI TALKS TO COMPANY FOUNDER, MUSHTAQ PUNJABI.

**B**ukhara Culture Imports Ltd is a fast-growing fashion retailer with outlets in prime high street locations throughout London, and in towns and cities throughout the UK. Stores can be found in Kensington, Oxford Street, Covent Garden, King's Road in Chelsea, Bayswater and Regents Street, and in Crawley, Maidenhead, Norwich, Kent, Cambridge, Oxford, Guildford, Brighton and Nottingham.

Bukhara is a supplier of ladies wear, cashmere shawls, ladies bags and other fashion accessories, with an impressive in-store selection. Its shops have light, colourful and airy interiors providing a pleasurable shopping environment, with friendly, knowledgeable staff providing excellent customer service.

The company was formed in the early 1990s by Mushtaq Punjabi, with the first outlets originating in Greenwich and Camden. By the end of end 2004, the business had expanded to 12 outlets in England and today it continues to grow and supply the very finest fashions.

"I would probably hold our Brompton Road store in Knightsbridge up as the brand's flagship," says Punjabi. "It is the best example of what Bukhara has to offer and, at 1,800sq ft, we are able to offer something from across our entire range of products."

The company's target customer is between 18-35 years of age, but despite having attracted a younger customer earlier on, it has successfully developed its offer to appeal to a broader age range.

Continuing its growth predominantly through acquisition, Bukhara targets properties of between 1,000-1,200sq ft, ensuring a minimum 80 per cent sales area wherever possible. In the UK, the company is currently seeking new opportunities, pursuing stores in Covent Garden and Oxford Street in London, and is also in discussions regarding a possible location within a shopping centre in Manchester.

"Longer term, our plans for expansion are very clear; ultimately we intend to be firmly placed and well established within each of the prime central London locations," explains Punjabi. "Once that

has been achieved, we plan to take Bukhara into a new phase of growth, with new openings in the international markets of Dubai and India."

What is it that attracted the brand to these particular markets, asks RLI? And is the company also looking at other international destinations right now?

"We have looked at Ireland," he says, "though we are not convinced that the market is right for us at this time. Of course, we never say never and continue to assess the Irish market."

"The Indian market is growing very nicely and is evolving into a very impressive retail destination. Of course, it helps enormously that operational costs are low compared to the UK. In addition, we have seen in our London stores that we attract a high proportion of Middle

East customers and that obviously inclines us towards Dubai, which is a very cosmopolitan destination."

Of course it is essential for any successful retailer that you maintain your competitive edge – it is a tough market after all. How does Bukhara achieve this?

"It is a tough market yes, but through careful acquisitions, we have benefitted greatly from the current market conditions," he says. "Of course, being situated predominantly in strong tourist locations, we have also benefitted from the weakening of the pound."

"It is very much a case of balancing the pluses and minuses: most of our central London locations are performing extremely well. For example, whilst at the same time a number of our town locations are not doing as well as we might have hoped – we have



to work around this to ensure that all our stores are given the opportunity to operate as best they possibly can.

"Overall, Bukhara is performing very well in the face of quite challenging conditions, we try to move with the market trends; we understand very well that the requirement today is to provide trendy fashions at value-for-money prices and we are addressing that need whilst being ready to change as the market demands."

Behind the scenes, Bukhara has worked on improving its buying over the years, tightening and optimising its supply chain. Manufacturing costs have reduced in that time, which has helped immensely of course, but ultimately it all boils down – as it so often does – to location: "Probably the largest driving factor behind our success to date," says Punjabi, "is simply being in the right place at the right time!"

"We provide cutting-edge fashion at a competitive price and we do not compromise on quality; we work very hard to keep our finger on the pulse of the fashion market to ensure that we are in a position to refresh our collections every 3-4 weeks," he says.

"The challenge for us over the next year or so is obviously the market itself, particularly here in England. It is important now that we reach out to towns in the UK and get ourselves established within them."

It seems a safe bet to assume that we will see a lot more from Bukhara very soon.

