

Eyes Forward

Peepers Grows With a Clear Focus

By Matt Ottinger

“If it’s good enough for Oprah, it’s good enough for me.”

Such a phrase has likely been said by many regarding books, fashion and one would assume – eyewear. The entertainment icon has targeted Michigan City’s Peepers by PeeperSpecs glasses as one of her “Favorite Things Under \$50 in 2016” on Oprah.com. Peepers was also featured in *O* magazine, among other national publications, and ABC’s hit show, “The View.”

But Peepers is hardly some fledgling start-up that hit it big. Far from it. CEO Alec Sammann reveals the fourth-generation family-owned business has deep roots in northern Indiana, beginning as a scissor and cutlery business in the early 1900s.

“In 1985, (the family) got into eyewear,” Sammann notes. “There was an opportunity to acquire a company in eyewear accessories, and my dad thought it was a good marriage since we had the distribution and it complemented what drug stores could sell to

consumers.”

In 2012, Sammann and his sister, Lindsay – now creative director – purchased the business from their parents after working there for several years.

“Since 2010, the company’s grown 568%,” he quantifies. “We’ve had to move our warehouse, which is now outside of Chicago. We moved into our old warehouse and built out about 10,000 square feet and have about 25 full-time team members, and we continue to grow.”

The company can be found on the 2016 Inc. 5000 list, pulling in \$10.3 million of revenue.

In fashion

Sammann reflects on when his parents first delved into the eyewear business and decided to focus more on style considerations.

“It wasn’t until my mom started using reading glasses and said, ‘These reading glasses are hideous,’” he relays. “My dad said, ‘OK, you can make your own samples.’

So she started working with the factories to come up with more colorful options and Peepers was born. That was 1993.

“We know we’re not a fashion house, but we like to incorporate a lot of what the fashion houses do in terms of trending and making sure we have a story to tell with our seasonal collections,” he adds. “We’re always reinventing ourselves and not being complacent.”

As for other celebrity customers, Sheryl Crow and Howie Mandel have also been identified as Peepers wearers. When asked if more famous pupils will be aided by Peepers’ specs, Sammann advises to stay tuned.

“There are none we can necessarily name at the moment, but we’re working on having a couple different celebrities be advocates of the brand. We’re excited about some of the opportunities coming up.”

Staying sharp

“There’s no shortage of competition,” Sammann admits of the industry. “We’re not the most expensive reader out there, but not the cheapest. So we’ve dedicated a lot of our resources to design.”

In fact, Peepers has four team members assigned to product development.

“We also use freelance and in-house designers that work with us to come up with unique patterns,” he shares.

The company cultivates 50 to 60 new styles each season and operates at about a 60/40 split in terms of its wholesale versus online business.

“We do feel like we’re running two different types of businesses,” Sammann says. “We have just north of 4,000 locations nationwide of retailers that carry our products. Eyewear is something people want to try on, so we try to make it easy to use the store locator and try them on at our partners’ locations.”

Blues blockers

An upbeat environment is a focus at Peepers. Sammann explains that transparency is also important and that he shares financial numbers with staff. He also aggressively requests employee feedback to help the business improve.

While the company helps its customers cultivate new looks, it has undergone its own recent aesthetic upgrades.



While Peepers’ employees have fun at work, they are serious about quality. The company, launching a blue-blocking anti-reflective lens this fall, remains steadfast in combating eye strain and causes of macular degeneration.



“We redesigned our offices and invested in a gym. We have a nice breakroom area, ping pong tables, kitchen, fruits and snacks, and will have an outdoor area,” he notes.

A healthy culture, however, transcends mere optics. A dedication to wellness also makes Peepers an ideal place to work. The company completed installation of its aforementioned on-site gym last year, complete with showers and bathrooms.

“We encourage people to go work out on breaks,” Sammann says. “Sometimes (in the past) if I got really stressed I’d go have a cigarette, which is terrible. But now I’ll go into the gym and work out, and haven’t had a cigarette in almost a year. The gym has been phenomenal. The company also hired a personal instructor and paid to have each team member get a personal session.”

While Michigan City may not be considered a fashion mecca or major metro area, Sammann contends the location is a benefit for recruitment.

“We have competitive benefits compared to what companies in Chicago are offering, so we can get people thinking about northwest Indiana who hadn’t before,” he points out. “You get out of the concrete jungle and you’ve got a beautiful area, yet you’re only about an hour from downtown Chicago. And



Eyewear fashion can be a “dog-gone” hoot when you earn national acclaim, as Alec Sammann and his staff can attest. He admits that stagnancy is unacceptable, however, as styles are always evolving.

the cost of living here is drastically less than Chicago. The community and the school system – Michigan City is really turning itself around.”

Pride in its community and dedication to its workforce are how Peepers maintains clarity in its long-term vision. Its leaders are also quite proud of the Best Places to Work

designation, especially considering it was the company’s first year applying.

“We’re super excited and it means a ton to us,” Sammann concludes. “It gives pride to our employees and our customers. When it was announced, my sister started crying. It was very cool.”

RESOURCE: Peepers by PeeperSpecs at www.peepers.com