Suiteblanco goes on retail offensive

By Olivier Guyot - 2 March 2015

In early 2014, Alhokair came to the assistance of Blanco, which was facing financial difficulties. The powerful Saudi group acquired the Spanish brand for an estimated 40 million euros. Barely a year later, the company is launching an international offensive. Alhokair has rapidly revised its roadmap.

"Blanco is a family brand that has developed over the past 30 years primarily in Spain. The brand has its own unique twist, allowing it to stand out. But it has missed out on international development," said Fatma Khalifa, head of franchise development. "It was only the crisis in Spain that hurt the brand. We’ve reviewed everything, while also maintaining the brand’s identity."

The name Suiteblanco was chosen for the brand’s identity both abroad and in Spain. In terms of products, its supply chain has been completely redesigned, with a portion in Asia and the rest in North Africa and Europe.

Its range, put together by a production manager who knows the French market particularly well, having worked at Carrefour as well as at Inditex, has become exclusively dedicated to womenswear with a large amount of work having been put into accessories.

Its first season, still in a transitional stage, arrived in stores last winter and the work of its new teams will truly be seen in spring.
"We've segmented our range with casual, casual chic and a more fashion-forward category. But the idea is that customers will be able to mix and match these pieces," said Khalifa. "For bags and accessories, we have had numerous reorders. And our aggressive price positioning makes it so that customers can leave the store with a terrific bag for a reasonable price."

To support product development, the brand has established a development and logistics platforms to be based in Dubai.

50 stores in France within two years
The company is also ambitious in terms of distribution. At the time that the brand was acquired by Alhokair, it had 245 stores in 23 countries, including some 120 in Spain. Under the leadership of Isaac Alfon, its new vice president of international development, who these past few decades has worked on the international development of Mango, Suiteblanco will rely on an aggressive strategy based on franchise store openings.

"We’ve made progress in the US, Chile, Peru, Honduras, as well as in Algeria, Ukraine, Romania, and Moldova. We have the means, and we have received a warm welcome, especially in France," said Khalifa, who is responsible for building relationships with franchisees in North Africa, the Middle East and Southern Europe. "In
responsible for building relationships with franchisees in North Africa, the Middle East and Southern Europe. "In France, we are planning on opening our first stores before spring in major cities with the help of an excellent partner. There is the potential to open fifty stores over the next two years."

Suiteblanco has reviewed its store concept and has closed the four mixed men’s and women’s stores opened in recent years by its previous management. It is now aiming to introduce 2,700-3,200 square foot stores in the center and principal shopping thoroughfares of major cities.

Depending on the response, Alhokair may also open stores dedicated solely to its accessories range—a model it already employs in the Middle East. Beyond Suiteblanco, this expansion in Western Europe demonstrates the Saudi group’s ambitions.

A giant among shopping centers in its home market, the group is already present in the Balkans and has a subsidiary in the United States. Its expertise, backed by its substantial resources, should serve it very well in Europe.

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