

Barnett on Business Travel: Luggage lord finds high quality and deep discounts bring out the stars

by Chris Barnett

Elliot Saks is a first-generation New Yorker, second-generation merchant prince in the luggage trade, purveyor of travel bags to A-list movie and TV stars - but he'd give up his fame and fortune in the baggage business in a heartbeat for a Mets uniform and a spot in the lineup as a starting pitcher.

"I tried out for the Mets three times and at 49 years old, I'm still trying," he says. Instead, he hangs out and sells luggage, at a deep discount, to Mets shortstop Jose Reyes, first baseman Carlos Delgado, Brandon Duckworth (who's now a pitcher for the Kansas City Royals) and Turk Wendell, a Met relief pitcher who was traded and retired.

"Baseball," claims Saks, "is more important than luggage."

But the luggage business pays for the light bills and the season tickets and has for some time. While Saks has been a Mets fan since age 6 and pitched Little League and college ball, he's followed in the footsteps of his father, Marty Saks, who was selling Samsonite and American Tourister hardsided suitcases without wheels at the family store, Steltsen Luggage on 59th Street in Manhattan.

Remembers Saks: "I grew up eating and breathing luggage. Going to work with my father six days a week, spending three or four hours a day in Long Island Expressway traffic, we'd talk luggage for hours. He's 76, been selling luggage for 58 years and still loves to talk about it more than anyone else I know. He's Cousin Marty to everyone, still works in the store, and he has this personal old-time charm that's not around in business today."

Today, Saks, the son, has built an empire on some of his dad's simple truths. Everyone wants a deal on a brand-name bag. Everyone. And travelers, particularly corporate road warriors, do not want any hassles if a bag or a handle breaks, the skin tears or a zipper jumps the track. That's why the cornerstone of the business, Lexington Luggage (www.lexingtonluggage.com) is a three-story temple to travelers at 793 Lexington Ave., a block north of Bloomingdale's. Two floors are devoted to selling travel goods and accessories, and the third floor is a repair center. He'll deliver free within two hours driving time of his store and he'll toss in monogramming on the house.

Saks is a peddler from the old school. He claims to have the biggest retail luggage store in New York City. He sells some 18 brands, including most all the major labels for what he insists are the flat-out lowest prices in the city. Find a cheaper price, he'll match it and give you another 10 percent off for your trouble. Plus, he has a 30-day money-back refund or exchange guarantee if you have buyer's remorse - just don't haul the bag around on a monthlong, 26-market business trip and bring it back thrashed for a new one.

Saks also hawks his wares with flair and high-tech efficiency. One venture, www.luggageisus.com, is a super discounter and you need a password to get on the site - sort of a suitcase speakeasy with prices that are a big whack off manufactured suggested retail.

But market-savvy Saks knows the big money is in manufacturing your own line of luggage, pitching it as hot and selling it through your own distribution pipelines and, hopefully, persuading other merchants to carry and promote it. Here, it appears - although I haven't examined the books to tally sales - that Saks has hit a home run. Two months ago, he unveiled a line called - no surprise - A. Saks On the Go Luggage. He bills it as "the lightest lightweight bags in the country."

Gushes Marty Saks, the old-school salesman: "It's the softest, lightest, most wanted luggage in the business. It's a house on fire."

The name was not cooked up by some pricey Madison Avenue branding consultancy.

"When I thought of this line of luggage, I had no idea what to name it, so I did the only safe thing," he recalls. "I choose the name Saks and put an A in front of it so my family won't be offended. My wife is Amy, my son is Adam, my daughter is Ashley. "

But featherweight features not catchy names move merchandise, and the merchant claims the A. Saks garment bag weighs only 3 1/2 pounds, folds like a pancake and is selling for \$150, not the \$250 suggested retail price. Saks discounts his own line.

The Saks bags are all expandable. The 21-inch wheeled duffel roll-on is \$80, not the \$135 quoted price. "My 26-inch bag expands more than any 30-inch competitive bag and it's only 100 bucks, not \$175," he says.

The full line is on his third Web site, www.asaks.com. It's also on ebags.com, at discount. The father-and-son Saks team want to move merchandise.

Elliot Saks is outspoken on just about everything, but his views on luggage - today's products, tomorrow's trends - are especially passionate.

The buzzword in baggage - carry-on and check-in alike - is lightweight and expandable, he insists (notice that his own line offers both). But he's no self-promoter. Saks actually uses some Delsey luggage when he

travels.

"It's lightweight and it really holds up," he enthuses. Pathfinder makes an "incredible suitcase for \$150 and uses excellent ballistic nylon." Pull a strap, he says, and it automatically expands. Pathfinder is the lower price-point sibling to Andiamo, a prestigious and extremely well-crafted (and pricier) luggage line.

Indeed, his lineup of heavy hitter luggage brands that deliver exceptional performance and customer satisfaction includes Delsey, Pathfinder, TravelPro, Briggs and Riley, and Eagle Creek for their extensive line of organizers and indispensable black mesh bag. He's not a Tumi fan.

Need a briefcase? Saks says Jack Georges makes high-quality leather briefs in various designs, and he discounts them 40 percent. A good Jack Georges briefcase normally fetches \$225, but he sells them at \$139.

That said, you just know the likable, schmoozing Elliot Saks pitches his own line to his good customers. Regis Philbin and Bryant Gumbel both own A. Saks On the Go luggage.

Other celebrity customers and their brands of choice: Brooke Shields buys Andiamo, Danny Glover and New York Knicks star Walt Fraser go for Briggs and Riley, and Philbin also owns a line of luggage called French.

Saks says he loves to sell luggage to Bruce Willis. "Look, today, everyone wants value. I don't care who they are. Bruce, who probably makes \$25 million a film, comes in says, 'Hey, Elliot, whaddya doin' for me on this bag?' He used to buy Tumi, now he owns Briggs (and Riley). I love it."

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