

Economy not stomping on Camuto Group success

By Michael C. Juliano

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Despite the troubled economy, people at his company are sleeping like babies, Robert Galvin said.

"We wake up every two hours and we cry," he said jokingly Friday at the monthly breakfast for the Connecticut chapter of the Association for Corporate Growth.

Galvin, the president of the Camuto Group, a Greenwich-based developer and distributor of women's footwear, spoke to about 175 association members at the Stamford Marriott Hotel & Spa about "Financing Strategies in Today's Credit Market."

A graduate of Fairfield University and New York University's Stern School of Business, Galvin was a chief operating officer of Sports Brands International, which owned Fila, ENYCE and other footwear brands.

The Camuto Group was founded in 2002 by women's footwear designer Vince Camuto. He saw an opportunity in the marketplace that was not being addressed, Galvin said.

Galvin, who has a 20-year working relationship with Camuto in the footwear industry, left Sports Brands to join the Camuto Group in 2007 at Camuto's request.

To succeed, the Camuto Group, which has 200 employees at its corporate office at 600 Putnam Ave., uses its working capital to grow partnerships with retailers such as Banana Republic and Macy's, Galvin said.

"It's a really tough environment," he said. "We're fortunate that women love shoes."

The key to the Camuto Group's success is meeting the needs of retailers and consumers with a great value, Galvin said.

"Success starts with product and people, something we have both of at Camuto Group," he said.

The Camuto Group is enjoying success as the master licensee with the Jessica Simpson footwear collection, with 14 licensing deals, Galvin said.

"She's seen as a fashion icon and a celebrity," he said. "She's been a phenomenal partner for us."

The Camuto Group also holds the footwear license for BCBGGirls, BCBG Max Azria and Nicole Miller and develops and manages the Antonio Melani and Gianni Bini brands, Galvin said.

The company, which owns of the Vince Camuto and Arturo Chiang brands, is also developing an e-commerce platform for its products to make them readily available to the consumer, Galvin said.

"We know in this retail environment, you've got to control your own destiny," he said.

Galvin said he expects sales for the upcoming holiday season to be "humble" and 2009 holiday sales to be good, but he does not expect consumer spending to increase until 2010.

Shoes from the Camuto Group, which are made primarily in Brazil and China, sell for \$69 to \$220, while boots range from \$189 to \$500, Galvin said.

"This is a marathon, not a sprint," said Galvin, who should know what he's talking about. He has run 30 marathons in the past eight years.

"You've got to pace yourself," he said.

Like Galvin, Dan Weiler, president of New Rochelle-based International Consulting and ACG member, said he expects the economy to continue on a slow pace through the end of 2008 and possibly through 2009.

The ACG chapter provides a good opportunity for networking, he said.

"Networking was crucial in good times, but more so today," he said.

Fellow ACG member David Weinstein, a principal with Lakeside Advisors, with offices in Stamford and Weston, said the economy is not directly affecting his business because he deals in the lower end of the middle market, but networking is still very important.

"Every little bit helps," he said.

Bankers, lenders and other dealmakers will have an opportunity to network at the ACG's fourth annual Private Equity Expo to be held Dec. 5 from 7:30 to 10 a.m. at the Stamford Marriott.

About 20 exhibitors and 275 investors attended last year's expo, said Karin McKittrick, a board member of ACG's Connecticut chapter.

"It's really important to meet people doing deals to expand your horizons," she said.

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