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INSIDE

Graceful return

Reviving Bonwit Teller —and an elegant age

PAGE 2



BONWIT TELLER'S RISE AND FALL

1895: Paul Bonwit and Edmund D. Teller open first store in New York.



The Duchess of Windsor on her wedding day.

1930s: Fifth Avenue flagship opens; Salvador Dali designs windows. It's the first U.S. retailer to knock off the Duchess of Windsor's famous blue wedding dress.

1950s and 1960s: Supplies Grace Kelly's wardrobe in Hitchcock films including "To Catch a Thief." Audrey Hepburn, Jacqueline Kennedy and Marilyn Monroe are reported to be regular customers. Andy Warhol designs Bonwit Teller's windows.

1970s: Bonwit Teller buyer discovers Calvin Klein, launches

designer's career. Store opens at John Hancock Center.

1980s: Donald Trump demolishes flagship Manhattan store to build Trump Tower. Bonwit Teller relocates inside Trump Tower.

1990s: Files for Chapter 11. Assets acquired by Pyramid Cos.

2000: Pyramid's plans to expand retailer to malls fails. Last Bonwit Teller store closes.

2006: River West Brands acquires name, plans revival of brand.



Grace Kelly in "To Catch a Thief"

CORBIS

Bringing back Bonwit

Local firm bets there's some glitz left in Camelot-era couturier

BY SANDRA JONES

Bonwit Teller, the defunct luxury department store that outfitted Grace Kelly and Jacqueline Kennedy and discovered Calvin Klein, is getting a second chance.

Chicago-based River West Brands LLC acquired the exclusive North American rights to the Bonwit Teller brand name from shopping mall developer Pyramid Cos. this spring, and plans to roll out merchandise bearing the legendary name by the end of the year, says Paul W. Earle Jr., founder and president of the brand revival firm.

River West is looking for emerging designers to create luxury products such as handbags, women's clothing and fragrances, and a retail partner to open Bonwit Teller boutiques. But don't expect full-scale department stores. "We're bold and aggressive, but not crazy," Mr. Earle says.

Even so, the deal marks a pioneering attempt to resurrect a dormant department store brand at a time when regional department stores are disappearing. And it will test how much emotional resonance and marketing clout is left in the grande dame department store monikers—L. Magnin, B. Altman and most recently Marshall Field's, to name a few—today's consumers may recall as places where their mothers shopped.

Bonwit Teller, based in New York, filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection in 1990. The high-profile Mag Mile store at the John Hancock Center, the 16-store chain's second-largest, and a store at Oakbrook Center closed the same year. The last Bonwit Teller closed in 2000.

VIOLETS ON BAGS WON'T BE ENOUGH

River West must do more than recycle Bonwit Teller's distinctive violet-adorned shopping

bags if it is to connect with shoppers born well after the store's Kennedy-era heyday.

"All the brand does is, it's a way to jar a customer's point of view and say, 'Hey, take a look at me,'" says Love Goel, CEO of Growth Ventures Group, a Minneapolis-based retail investment firm and a former Federated Department Stores Inc. executive. "The question is, are they really offering something new? If that doesn't happen, it's a marketing gimmick that doesn't last very long."

Mr. Earle, a former executive at Kraft Foods Inc. and Saatchi & Saatchi Worldwide, vows that won't happen. He's canvassing the design community to build a stable of product development talent and considering a marketing campaign that would evoke the fashion icons of Bonwit Teller's past.

A self-described "brand historian," Mr. Earle has more than money invested in the project. "It will break my heart if we fail," he says.

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