# LEATHER CHANNEL

## With a 200-plus year history, London Harness certainly knows its leather

By Lauren Parker

What happens when a 232-year-old retailer of leather horse saddles, harness and steamer trunks moves into the 20th century? It updates with more contemporary luggage and desk items. And what happens when that same company moves into the 21st century? It adds hip leather handbags to draw in fashionable women and gift items to attract a broader base of customer.

Massachusetts-based London Harness might have gone through some acquisitions, name changes and product updates over the centuries (eventually becoming London Harness Company in 1973), but it has remained true to its leather heritage. With three stores in Boston, Hingham and Wellesley, Mass., not to mention a growing website, the leather retailer certainly knows its stuff.

So what's in a heritage? A lot. Maybe today's customers don't dwell on the fact that Buffalo Bill and P.T. Barnum relied on their harness for their circuses, or that Ben Franklin was a customer, but they certainly reap the benefits of experience from London Harness' history as the oldest luggage retailer in the country.

Leather luggage had always been the mainstay for the company, but when that classification began to suffer about four years ago, the company transitioned with more departments such as handbags and gifts. "For the most part, we'd had vendors that are more conservative and traditional, but in the last year or two we've explored more modern brands," says Demian Wendrow, director of operations. London Harness added Longchamp, Furla, Cole Haan, Eric Javits, Bodhi, Carlos Falchi, and smaller evening bags from Whiting & Davis, for example.

Regarding gift items, the store carries artisan items like wine bottle stoppers or animal wooden puzzles. "We're trying to be creative and different, and bring back some made-in-the-U.S.A. craft vendors," says Wendrow.

Of course, as the store's offerings have transitioned, so has the customer. "Our generic customer has been shopping with us for years, and their parents too," says Wendrow, noting that as the handbag business has grown, so has the store's female base. With so many area universities, London Harness draws in the college student as well. "We work with the colleges—we'll put our name out there by lending merchandise for fashion shows or promoting discounts at concerts."

Merchandise is tailored per store (Boston serves the businessperson; Wellesley serves moms and college students; Hingham is best known for its handbags), but London Harness tries to stay as consistent as possible. "We might represent smaller assortments but we still want to represent each department in the same way from store to store," says Wendrow.

E-mail blasts to all customers keep them up to date on what's new. Because even though the store's heritage is old, it's not afraid to look ahead to the future.