

Simply Swede

Vincent designers Patrick Österman and Thomas Elbaum are getting back to basics in the kids' market. << By Erin Clack



Patrick Österman (left) and Thomas Elbaum with their young muse, Vincent.

For Patrick Österman and Thomas Elbaum, the duo behind Swedish brand Vincent, less is more.

While many kids' players use heavy embellishments, the designers keep their styles clean and simple, a Scandinavian trademark. "[We think] most higher-end kids' shoes on the market today are over-designed, with too many competing colors, details and applications," Österman said.

The pair honed their design instincts working a variety of jobs. Österman spent 15 years at H&M as a store decorator, staff training coordinator and apparel buyer, while Elbaum's colorful résumé includes stints as a model, preschool teacher, interior decorator and restaurateur.

The brand was launched nine years ago, following the birth of Elbaum's nephew, Vincent. When Elbaum and partner Österman scoured the stores for the perfect pair of shoes to give as a baby gift, they found little to their liking. That inspired them to design — and name — their own collection after Vincent.

Now a well-known name overseas, Vincent operates 11 stores in Sweden, as well as franchise stores in the U.S., Italy, Japan and throughout Scandinavia. Riding the momentum, the company made its stateside debut last fall and since has been picked up by a number of top accounts. Here, Österman and Elbaum talk about the importance of staying true to your customer and why the kids' market is *the* place to be.

1. How have your unique backgrounds influenced your role as kids' shoe designers?

PO: While we've been lucky enough to work in several different fields, we don't feel they're as much of an influence on our designs as our travels throughout Europe. Each Vincent collection is a direct result of the impressions we receive during our travels, experiencing and absorbing different locales and meeting Vincent customers face-to-face. Feedback from customers we meet along the way naturally finds its way into each Vincent collection.

2. There are lots of line builders in this market. Why aren't there as many visible children's designers?

TE: We feel most designers would rather focus on and design for adults. Kids' shoes are typically seen as second tier — taking up less time, attention and retail space. But we absolutely love designing for kids. It's so rewarding to see a child fall in love with a pair of shoes.

3. What's missing in the kids' market?

PO: In our eyes, most higher-end kids' shoes on the market today are over-designed, with too many competing colors, details and applications, and often over-priced. We think Vincent shoes are the perfect combination of fun, fashion and quality. That's the void [the brand] fills.

4. Are kids' designers too concerned with how shoes look, not how they're worn?

PO: Yes. Most kids' shoes today are not designed with the wearer in mind. We feel that too many brands use too many colors, details and applications, forgetting that the shoes are actually meant for everyday use, everyday wear and tear. Vincent shoes are the perfect combination of style and practicality. [We believe in] focusing on one great, major detail — bold lettering, for example — instead of a lot of smaller ones.

5. Since the line was inspired by a real-life Vincent, are you placing particular emphasis on boys', especially considering there's a void there?

TE: Vincent is our inspiration, from brand name to design philosophy. Vincent Shoes was essentially created for him. And, yes, it is difficult to find really great, stylish shoes for boys. That being said, the collection isn't necessarily more focused on boys'. We try to keep the collection as balanced as possible, with great styles for both boys and girls.

6. Do you use Vincent for ideas and involve him in the design process?

TE: Vincent is 9 years old now, but we continue to ask him for feedback. He has very clear opinions as to what a Vincent shoe should look like — hip, cool and fun. They do bear his name, after all.

7. Scandinavian design is very distinctive. How do you bring your heritage into the collection?

PO: Since we're Swedish, we're surrounded by Scandinavian values and design on a day-to-day basis, in our art, architecture and way of life. It's part of our heritage. Clean, modern lines with a sense of timelessness are what we do best. We listen to feedback from our Scandinavian customers and use that as inspiration to improve on our designs. And as Vincent has expanded, we've married our Scandinavian roots with other global influences.

8. You offer everything from dress shoes to winter boots, for babies and up. Is it challenging to design a line this broad?

PO: It's actually a lot of fun for us to try to put ourselves in the mind-set of our different customers and think about how each of the different styles will be used. From babies learning to walk to toddlers splashing through puddles, it's fun to work through the design process for each, choosing colors, materials and even style names.

9. You've added accessories such as bags and umbrellas. Do you envision Vincent becoming a complete lifestyle brand?

TE: Although we have fun adding different accessories to the line when appropriate, we don't want to ever stray too far from home, from our core shoe market. It's important to keep our focus on designing the very best kids' shoes possible. We often get requests from parents asking if we'll ever make an adult line. Even though our oldest customer is 86 years old — she apparently has rather small feet — we're committed to sticking with kids'.

10. What has surprised you most about the American market?

TE: We've been surprised to find that moms and dads the world over think much the same way, regardless of where they're from. They all want their kids to have the best in stylish, comfortable, practical, affordable shoes. It's been especially exciting to see how quickly the U.S. market has embraced our designs, and the Vincent concept as a whole.