Bettans: Attention To Quality



“The footwear business is one of the most difficult businesses in the world,” says Chandralal De Silva, Chairman/CEO of Bettans. Starting the company as its sole proprietor, right after his university education, Chandralal De Silva, is now the driving force behind one of Sri Lanka’s largest leather shoe manufacturing industries, which has grown in production consistently, since 1982.

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Photography Damith Wickramasinghe

Chandralal De Silva believes that Bettans would not have come this far if it wasn’t for the company’s uncompromising stand on quality “no matter how high the market prices go.” Sri Lanka’s footwear industry, being apparent to only a few large scale manufacturers, especially in leather shoes, Bettans boasts footwear, which, according to Chandralal De Silva, is recognised by Sri Lankans as one of the most popular local brand names in leather shoes, in the country. “We produce footwear

according to the right quality and method.” That is why, he continues, “the name Bettans has been reputable for this long,” mostly among the working community, as they are already aware of the high durability factor in Bettans products.

Bettans Lanka Leather Tannery, Chandralal De Silva attests, is the largest in Sri Lanka and while generating all the needed raw materials for the production of leather shoes, is also approved under the Environment Protection License. “Bettans Leather Tannery is the only tannery in Sri Lanka that has obtained the Environment Protection License,” said Chandralal De Silva. “We are very proud of this. We have built water treatment plants, recovery plants and have done much to ensure that the tannery remains as a space that is environmentally friendly.”

Products are never given to outside facilities, instead are produced only within the Bettans’ Group. Although leather becomes considerably costly material if imported, Chandralal De Silva says, that with a shortage of good quality leather in Sri Lanka, Bettans does resort to importing, what is known as semi leather, which is then, “refined in our tannery” using state-of-the-art chemicals to achieve the best quality leather for footwear. Well in tune with the prices of leather in the world market, Chandralal De Silva discloses the exceptionally high estimates for a foot of good leather, “more than five USD,” and the making of a shoe requires over three feet of leather.

“90 percent of the shoes that are currently in the market are made using synthetic material,” remarked the Chairman explaining that leather shoes only occupy a small share of the market. “However, the shoes made of synthetic material are not durable and people soon come back to our stores asking for leather shoes.”

Designs for Bettans shoes are developed through ideas gathered from the many travels to international fairs “such as GADA, GDS, Hong Kong, Milan and Las Vegas,” adds Chandralal De Silva. Meanwhile, the internet, he explains, plays an arbitrary role in researching new trends in style (heel, sole and point) and colour for their shoes. Bettans footwear, while catering to Sri Lanka’s working community, also realises that now more than ever, the people of this country are well-travelled and know the value of looking smart and good quality that comes at affordable prices. Taking this into consideration, “it still costs less to buy good quality footwear in Sri

Lanka," adds Chandralal De Silva.

Since Bettans produces mainly for the local market, consumers are no strangers to their products, hence the challenges the company faces are far less than it is for those of which are new and upcoming. "We manufacture shoes in a safe way," he appends. For example, Chandralal De Silva expresses, that because Bettans manufactures its own leather, it is the single and most significant support facilitating the company's growth and above all staying buoyant in the industry.

He further stressed the benefits of using leather shoes stating that they provide better ventilation while safe guarding the feet. "That is why leather footwear is very expensive in the world market and comparatively expensive in the local market as well," said Chandralal De Silva. However, in Sri Lanka, Bettans has refrained from charging high prices similar to that of overseas merchandises, as he states, "in Sri Lanka there is only a limited high-end market. Prices of shoes haven't increased much in the past years as there are many substitutes that people can afford."

Exports to regions such as Italy and the UK, had been prevalent in the past years, nevertheless, more recently due to the economic situation in Europe, such exports have been temporarily impeded. With emphasis to ties in line with imports, Chandralal De Silva says, "if we take leather, the chemical for it is brought down from India, and we maintain sound relationships with countries such as Pakistan, Bangladesh, Thailand, China, UK, Italy, France and Germany as well, with regard to material, including chemicals and even equipment needed for the manufacturing of our products here." However, the Chairman asserted that plans are under way to resume the haulted exports to Italy and UK.

Chandralal De Silva commends the efforts of his 400 plus workforce adding that they have been vital in producing the best quality in footwear. He also stresses the pride he feels when customers who come to the store, leaving behind synthetic brands that are no match for the elements, as opposed to the quality leather products at Bettans. He sees the future as successful as it has been through the past years, and alongside the many showrooms island wide, he hopes to expand further into the high-end market by introducing a new addition: 'softy leather into the market.'

Bettans plans to launch several new products to the market in the near future. One such product include clog shoes made using leather uppers that are both soft and comfortable for the feet. “You can feel a big difference when you wear it and this shoe is especially designed for ladies and the younger generation,” said Chandralal De Silva. One of the most eagerly awaited and innovative products that Bettans aim to introduce to the market is a herbal shoe made inserting 25 different herbal ingredients to the sole of the shoe. Commenting on this pioneering product Chandralal De Silva said, “the research is complete and the ingredients are inserted to the sole in such a way that the benefits could be conveyed from your feet to your head.”

Bettans have recieved many awards through the years including the New York quality award and the Chairman affirmed that more than awards he is concerned about the quality of products that are presented to the customers. Armed with a limited number of outlets in the Island, Bettans hopes to branch out more by partnering with agents in order to reach all 24 districts in Sri Lanka.

“You Cannot Sell Something With A Flaw; You Have To Keep An Eye On Everything.”

On a conclusive note, Chandralal De Silva says, “the shoe indutry is not an easy business to conduct and it requires much attention and we aim to be South Asia’s No 1 in footwear,” thus shoe designs need to express the creative factor, the right design for the relevant time and not a flaw should be in sight. “You cannot sell something with a flaw; you have to keep an eye on everything.”

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