Vogue: Understanding The Customer

Vogue is synonymous with quality, elegance and master craftsmanship in the gold jewellery industry in Sri Lanka. Celebrating its 50th year, Vogue aims to be the ‘Bridal Jeweller for Sri Lankans’ identifying the requirements of all customers from the various communities in the country and thus being the selected place to go to for one’s wedding jewellery requirements. Managing Director, Anura Hemachandra and Director, Nandadeva Perera spoke to Business Today about Vogue’s journey through the years to maintain the rich traditions of Sri Lankan jewellery while offering a wide range of trendy and modern jewellery.

By Udeshi Amarasinghe | Photography by Menaka Aravinda

Vogue will be celebrating 50 years this year and is a leader in this industry, can you tell us about the company's journey since its inception?

Vogue Jewellers opened its doors to the people of Sri Lanka in 1962. However the family has been in the jewellery business for generations and Vogue remains a family business. Our grandfather used to manufacture jewellery at home, as Sri Lankans were not allowed to open shops during the British era. He used to bring the jewellery to Colombo and showcase them from house-to-house. One day, he was invited to a coffee morning and a lady asked him to open a shop in Colombo. That is how Hemachandra Brothers was established and that is where the family first based its business. Sarath Hemachandra branched out from the family business and founded Vogue Jewellers.

Vogue was the pioneer in moving a business entity to Colpetty from Pettah as Colpetty was primarily a residential area at the time. Sarath Hemachandra was a very innovative man, and he was also a trendsetter – a jeweller for the rich and the famous, at the time. Yvonne Gulam-Hussain, Padma Maharajah and Saundari Rockwood were some of his customers and their wedding jewellery was done by him. The highlight was that he designed and manufactured a pair of earrings that could be lit up. He adorned Yvonne Gulam Hussain with these earrings and lit them at midnight at a 31st night dance. He was truly a man ahead of his time.

We Don't Just Sell Jewellery. We Forge A Lasting Relationship With Our Customers And Help Them Select The Pieces Of Jewellery.

Are there any special events planned to celebrate the 50th anniversary of Vogue Jewellers?

Yes, this is our 50th year, which we will be completing in 2012. Firstly, we want to say thank you to our customers, without whom, we would not have been able to achieve this great milestone. We are doing something very special. We will be sponsoring a wedding every month. Many people have told us that this is the first time such an event is taking place in the world. Every month we will select a couple and organize their entire wedding. Our aim is to be the bridal jeweller for Sri Lankans, where ever in the world they may be.

At Vogue Jewellers the manufacturing and selling of jewellery is not a mere

commercial activity; it is a way of life. We have a passion for jewellery and thus, we are dedicated to maintaining quality at all times. A wedding is a very important day. It is a day that a young lady fantasizes about her entire life. We want to make her dream wedding a reality. Wouldn't it be nice if someone said that your wedding will be taken care of with all expenses paid? This is the promotion we are putting forward together with Sirasa, where Sirasa will make the event into a reality show called 'Mangala Sihina'.

We will be choosing one couple each from the cities where we have branches, mainly Kandy, Kurunegala, Negombo and Nugegoda. The couples could be from any ethnic community in the country.

How will the couples be selected?

The selection process began at the Wedding Show held at the BMICH recently. The applications are open to anyone getting married during this year. Our selection criteria range from the matching of horoscopes to the more traditional matching of the two people as husband and wife. The couple will go through a series of interviews in order to ascertain their compatibility to lead a happy wedded life. We also want our chosen couple to set an example to society.

We launched the programme in February. We received thousands of applications from all over the country; from areas panning from Nuwara Eliya to Jaffna to Trincomalee. We have narrowed it down to about 200 and have interviewed all of them. From the first 200 we brought it down to a 100, and then to 20 and now we have the final 12. Out of the twelve we will choose the lucky couple. In the selection panel there is a Government representative, an auditor from Sirasa, a Vogue representative, a celebrity judge and a few other judges that Sirasa will appoint.

Branches have been opened in Kandy, Kurunegala, Negombo and Nugegoda. What was the thinking behind this?

The primary objective was to make it easier for our customers to reach a Vogue Jewellers showroom. The original 'Vogue Jewellers' was on First Cross Street in Pettah. It was the business hub for Sri Lanka during the 60s. However, as time went by traffic made it very difficult to go to Pettah. Therefore Sarath Hemachandra felt that the shop should be situated at a location with easy access to the customers. Therefore, he constructed this building in Colpetty and opened for business in 1967.

At that time, Vogue Jewellers was the only business establishment in this residential area.

We Say Very Confidently And Proudly That We Have The Best Designers In Sri Lanka.

Vogue Jewellers is a reputed name for gold jewellery in Sri Lanka. What can you tell us about the brand and product?

Vogue Jewellers is almost a brand icon when it comes to wedding jewellery. Our customer loyalty spans generations. This is how strong our brand image is in Sri Lanka. Our products cater to all ethnic communities in Sri Lanka. We capture tradition and exquisite design in every piece of jewellery that we execute with master craftsmanship. We don't just sell jewellery. We forge a lasting relationship with our customers and help them select the pieces of jewellery. And our jewellery comes with a lifetime guarantee. This is what makes us the bridal jeweller for Sri Lankans.

Our gold is 22 carat, we have a computerised gold analyzer, and we maintain an extremely high quality control system. That is why we say it is not just jewellery it is an inheritance, it carries enormous sentimental value.

Sometimes mothers bring their heavy gold necklaces and have three pieces of gold jewellery made out of it. They say, "I should give one each for my daughters for their weddings". It has such an intrinsic value rather than just a commercial value.

Sri Lanka Now Produces Some Of The Finest Jewellery In The World. Therefore, The First Step Is To Educate Our People About How Fine Our Jewellery Is.

Vogue's new line of wedding jewellery has exclusive designs for the the Sinhalese wedding, Hindu wedding, Muslim wedding and the more Western style wedding. Can you tell us about each segment of this new line?

This line of jewellery captures the essence of tradition while maintaining a sense of high fashion. We were very focused on creating jewellery like the 'padakkama', for

the Sinhala Buddhist bride. We then researched the cultural intricacies of each ethnic community in Sri Lanka and then embarked on designing our current wedding jewellery collection. We then educated our staff who represents all ethnic communities on what each cultural segment would require when it comes to wedding jewellery. Currently our wedding jewellery collection is probably one of the widest ranges of jewellery for every Sri Lankan bride.

Does this mean that you will cater to customers other than brides?

Absolutely not; producing a wide range of bridal jewellery does not mean that we have given up our wider range of jewellery. We maintain our wide range of diamond and coloured stone jewellery that caters to a very diverse clientele. For example when a child is born, the Dhamma Chakra or a Cross is the most popular choice of jewellery which we will always continue to provide. Then, we have special sets for young girls who attain age.

We do focus on wedding jewellery because it is the starting point of that life cycle. We also have exquisite, signature pieces for the woman who wants to make a bold statement.

Our focus is on gold; 22 carat yellow gold and 18 carat yellow and white gold and platinum of course.

What about the skill base available in this industry? Are the craftsmen working at Vogue Jewellers those who have been in the industry for generations?

This is a very fascinating industry. It is an industry that transcends from generation to generation because the skills are passed down from parent to child. Therefore it stays within the family. But times have changed and modern technology and teaching methodology has allowed people from outside this tradition to learn and engage in jewellery manufacturing, which is a good thing. For example, we were able to gather much knowledge by bringing in a jewellery-manufacturing consultant from overseas where he passed on his skills not to his children but to everyone at Vogue Jewellers.

From a cottage industry we have evolved into a mechanized industry. The Export Development Board must be given credit for introducing this new machinery to Sri Lanka. As mentioned earlier we have a gold analyzer and casting machines. These

machines are more precise than the human eye. This eliminates the “human error” factor.

With that said, it is important to note that we respect the skills of the craftsmen as there are designs that no machine can make. We need skilled craftsmen and we would like to see the Government taking an initiative and having a centre, such as a vocational training centre to teach these skills to a larger number of people. We are certain that the local jewellery industry can absorb the skilled craftsmen.

Ninety percent of our craftsmen come from Matara and the rest of Southern Sri Lanka. They have been craftsmen for generations. They have a special talent in manufacturing jewellery. We have craftsmen who have been with us for generations but the number is dwindling.

Times have changed in the sense that a craftsman would rather his son or daughter hold a white collar job rather than continue the family tradition. Furthermore, the fact that we do not have adequate training institutes where those interested can obtain a qualification that is recognized worldwide is also a deterrent. Therefore a father is a little reluctant to say that ‘my son is a craftsman’. But, if we can enhance the level of training and qualification in the jewellery industry in Sri Lanka, I am sure a traditional craftsman would readily encourage his child to follow his footsteps, knowing that he/she will excel in this trade and make a good living for him/herself.

None of the people working for us now are training their children to become craftsmen. This is the sad truth. Therefore the number of craftsmen is reducing day by day. It is hard to imagine how the next generation is going to cope with the demand and supply. The jewellery industry of Sri Lanka is crying out for skilled craftsmen.

In our travels overseas we find that the best jewellers are not craftsmen whose families have been in the trade for generations. We believe very strongly that if someone spends the time learning the skill they can engage in this industry and be very successful. We see high quality jewellery being manufactured in Italy and also in the Far-Eastern countries.

We say very confidently and proudly that we have the best designers in Sri Lanka. Recently the Gem and Jewellery Association held a competition, and out of the 20 prizes we won six. We have designers who have been with us for more than 20 years.

Who is your target market?

Vogue Jewellers targets the middle segment of the jewellery market. We want to provide our local buyers with jewellery of global standard, for their weddings.

We are very proud to showcase, our jewellery that is of a global standard, which has been designed and crafted by our skilled team. No longer do Sri Lankans have to travel overseas and spend more money to purchase their ensemble of choice for their wedding day.

As you mentioned before, Vogue Jewellers began its operations as a boutique style jeweller, catering to the high-end of the market. So how has this transition from a high-end to a mid market segment been?

The mid-market continues to grow very significantly in Sri Lanka. Before, there was quite a disparity between the high end and the next level but now the difference between the two segments is minimal. Therefore the growth of the mid market attracted us to it.

However, Vogue Jewellers has been in existence for generations. Therefore, we will always cater to our long standing, loyal customers irrespective of which market segment they belong to. We have also learnt the formula that is required to interact with the modern and younger customer.

We maintain the very delicate balance between overall quality and price. We are conscious of the changing lifestyles in Sri Lanka and will always cater to the demands of our customers. Sri Lanka is changing; with the dawning of peace on our shores, we see people free and more willing and able to purchase and adorn fine jewellery. And, they equate this to purchasing fine jewellery from a reliable jeweller. This is why people choose Vogue Jewellers as their jeweller of choice.

Most people are caught in a mentality that they should purchase their jewellery abroad. How can we change this thinking?

First, we must look at the root cause of this mentality. It stems from a belief that if you want a quality product, you must purchase it overseas. This argument no longer holds water because Sri Lanka now produces some of the finest jewellery in the world. Therefore, the first step is to educate our people about how fine our jewellery

is. And this must be done by all jewellery manufacturing companies in the country. While doing so, our consumers must be made aware of the huge price disparity between buying jewellery in Sri Lanka as opposed to buying it overseas. Our jewellery is of a finer quality and is forged out of higher quality materials.

But, we are confident that this trend is changing. We see the change as our sales are increasing rapidly year on year. We also see an increase in sales from our Sri Lankan Diaspora. Although they are exposed to the international jewellery market, they choose to buy Sri Lankan jewellery via our website or at our showrooms.

Vogue Jewellers became the first in Asia to receive the ISO 9001:2008 certification. What is the significance of this certification?

Yes, we were the first company to receive the International ISO Standard certification. The ISO quality standard is not about the quality of the product but the systems that are employed from production to sales. If you don't have a good system of quality in place, you will never improve. Therefore ISO starts from production systems, to information systems to management systems to the product display to security; it is a very comprehensive certification.

Every month we have an ISO meeting to maintain the certification. They have an auditor coming in to make sure the systems are good so that the quality of the end product is ensured. Hence the ISO is not merely certifying the quality of a product; it is certifying that the organization has a system good enough to maintain international standards.

With Vogue Jewellers being a brand icon in Sri Lanka's jewellery industry, would you consider entering the international market?

We are still very focused on the local market. We want to be completely happy that we are catering to Sri Lanka and quenching the thirst of the Sri Lankan consumer. We are very positive; since the tourism industry is growing we may look at catering to a wider international market from our home base rather than establishing ourselves overseas.

Finally, what are the future-plans?

Our future plan is to strengthen our brand image and to make it synonymous with wedding jewellery. We are also focused on extending our branch network to ensure

that every Sri Lankan, both within our shores and overseas, has the ability to own their selected piece of Vogue Jewellery, which comes to them with a lifetime guarantee. We wish to further strengthen our market position as the bridal jeweller for Sri Lankans and we wish to be the jeweller of choice to the most discerning jewellery wearer. That is where we want to be.