



# O lucky man

It took hard work as well as luck for Johnnie Boden to build his business. Now, with a foray into Germany—not to mention Walton-on-Thames—he's looking to keep the business growing

By Sherry Chiger

## Boden by the numbers

### Sales for 2006:

£128.5 million, up 25 per cent from 2005

### Profit for 2006:

£22.75 million, up 60 per cent from 2005

### Percentage of sales that come via the web:

56 per cent in UK, 70 per cent in US

### Number of active customers:

more than 710,000

### Number of staff:

more than 600

### Average number of calls received an hour:

200

## Power of the press?

Research commissioned by Boden showed that the brand had only 36 per cent awareness among the public. Given the frequency with which the Boden name, image and all they stand for are referenced in newspapers and magazines, this relatively low showing reflects poorly not on Boden so much as on the media—one could conclude that the public simply doesn't read very much.

A sampling of recent citations of Boden in newspaper articles that ostensibly had nothing to do with retail or fashion:

"Such premium prices confirm the position of Aldeburgh and Southwold among the select resorts... beloved of the Boden-wearing classes."—"Thank you for the music", *The Times*, 22nd July

"I conjured visions of an Arcadian idyll that was a cross between Enid Blyton and the Boden catalogue."—"Gales, tent pegs and ear plugs: the perils of being an Alpha Mummy", *The Times*, 11th July

"Padstow... is chocolate-box pretty, but sadly infested at high season by Ray Ban-wearing City type poseurs, their yummy-mummy wives and Boden-clothed brats..."—"Cornwall's siren voices", *Manchester Evening News*, 10th July

*The Daily Mail* "caught [David Cameron] last year looking like a page out of the Boden catalogue. He was snapped in Corfu in a pair of the company's flowery swimming trunks: cue a huge boost in sales. And although he was 'sunburned' and 'portly', according to the *Mail*, which wondered in print whether he'd perhaps had a chest wax, they also noted that Samantha, in her black bikini, looked 'particularly well, given she'd given birth five months earlier'. Together, in the sea, there they are: the dream Boden electoral team."—"Forget policies—will the next PM wear trunks or cagoule?", *The Observer*, 8th July

"Blair babe Oona King... releases her diaries on 17 September. Titled *House Music*, with a cover that would be at home on a Boden magazine..."—Pandora column, *The Independent*, 2nd July

Johnnie Boden describes himself as "lucky, incredibly lucky". And why shouldn't he? The eponymous mail order business he founded in 1991 has grown beyond selling upscale casual men's apparel to encompass women's and children's clothing—£128.5 million worth in 2006. And having conquered the stockbroker belt here, Boden advanced into the US in 2002. Consumers in the States succumbed quite willingly to the charms of Boden's bold colours and graphics: Boden's sales in the US are estimated to have exceeded £34 million last year.

But businesses don't enjoy growth of 25-30 per cent a year solely due to luck. Now Boden the entrepreneur is focused on maintaining that growth for Boden the business by branching out—into Germany, retail, new product areas—while staying true to the brand.

## What's new? Plenty

On a surprisingly humid and sunny afternoon in July, Johnnie Boden dashes into the Silk Room of Boden headquarters in North London. (Many of the rooms at Boden HQ are named after fabrics.) The walls of the Silk Room are adorned with boards of photos from the spring/summer 2008 collection; to get a sense of what next year's catalogues will offer, think Glastonbury and Mexican fiestas. Boden himself is wearing a blue-and-white pinstripe shirt that no doubt came from his product line and Chuck Taylor sneakers that didn't.

The Boden back story is well known: Eton and Oxford alum becomes a stockbroker but isn't fulfilled. Whilst working in New York he becomes enamoured of upscale US fashion catalogues like J. Crew and J. Peterman. After inheriting some money, he turns his back on the City to launch a small menswear catalogue from his flat. After the inevitable years of growing pains, during which the company adds womenswear and children's clothing to its offering, "Boden" becomes synonymous with "yummy mummies" and aspirants to the green-welly brigade.

Given how entwined the bright and breezy Boden aesthetic is with the British middle class—at least in the eyes of the British media—Boden's entrance into the American market could have been viewed as risky. But Boden dismisses the contention that his company's clothing is quintessentially British, let alone quintessentially British middle class.

"The English journalists love labelling you," he says. "It's an easy shorthand. I think our sort of clothing is fairly international. If you go to a restaurant or a sales conference in America they wear the same sort of clothes as in England or France".



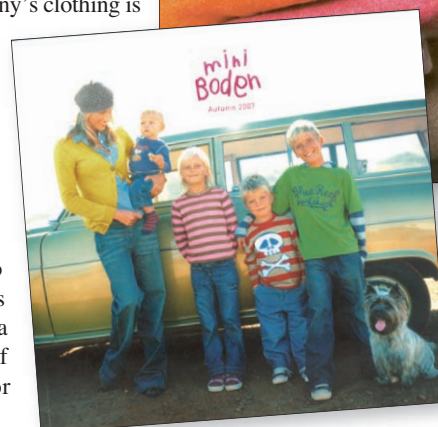
Johnnie Boden

And, one assumes, in Germany. Boden is launching a German catalogue in autumn. When asked if the product line needs to be toned down a bit for the new market—will German men embrace navy, baby-blue and violet striped cardigans?—Boden says that the

principal change the company has had to make is accepting open-order payments. Instead of paying via credit or debit cards, most Germans pay after being invoiced upon receiving their order, which can cause temporary cash-flow shortages to a business unaccustomed to this practice.

Before entering Germany, however, the company opened its second store, in Walton-on-Thames, Surrey, earlier this month, "in a low-key kind of way," Boden says. The company's only other bricks-and-mortar presence is a small store down the street from its headquarters.

A great deal of analysis of customer data preceded the decision of where to open the store: "There's no point of doing this if we're not going to sort out the cannibalisation issue," Boden says. At the same time, he acknowledges that



“all mail order competition really is the high street”.

And even businesses that are giants among speciality business-to-consumer cataloguers are dwarfed by the major high-street names. Research that Boden recently commissioned showed that despite the company’s frequent mentions in magazine and newspaper articles, the brand had only a 36 per cent awareness among consumers.

“We’ve tried radio, door drops, but there’s certainly no easy answer” to the question of how to expand brand awareness, Boden says. But he’s continuing to search: The recent research initiative included having Boden’s PR company interview 50 key journalists regarding perceptions of the brand, and Boden has hired a new brand agency.

Hand in hand with raising its brand profile, Boden is looking to refresh the company’s creative. “We’re getting imitated,” he says.

Though Boden won’t disclose specifics, even the quirky Q&As of the models within the print catalogues could be deleted as part of the creative facelift. The concept began as a way to differentiate Boden from the competition and encourage consumers to spend more time reading the catalogues. But the company recently tested a catalogue that didn’t include the models’ responses to statements such as “I wish I could...” and “I can’t resist...” and no one noticed the absence, Boden says.

**Brand maintenance**

Another new initiative for Boden: the launch of a babywear line—Strawberry Party Spot Velvet Trim Baggies for £16, Retro Spot Velvet Dresses for £24—in time for the autumn season. And more product extensions are in the works, with Boden promising to reveal “three or four new ones” come spring.

But homewares won’t be among the new lines, he adds. “It’s a difficult, more fragmented market” than apparel and increasingly commoditised. What’s more, “people are willing to spend 40 quid on a shirt that you’ve seen other people wear, but if you’re going to spend 1,000 quid on a sofa you don’t want anyone else to have it”.

Boden sounds somewhat conflicted about adding product lines. “We’ve looked at companies that have done too many things,” he says, citing Laura

Ashley as an example. “You can get into a bit of a muddle tweaking your products for different markets”.

Then again, Boden continues, “you might think you should just get better at what you do, but when you think like that you forget that you need to excite the customer”. That’s why “we’re always examining our navels and wondering how we can make this better”.

He’s not using the royal “we”—time and again throughout the conversation Boden credits his “good team” and “great staff” for much of the company’s success. And when he leads a whippet-fast tour through Boden headquarters (whose walls are as brightly coloured as you’d expect), he appears to know every order-taker and merchandiser by name.

As for his own role, Boden cringes when it is suggested that he is the “keeper of the brand”, but he admits that the phrase does sum up one of his key responsibilities. “A good brand has a strong point of view,” he notes.

So how does he define the Boden brand? “It would include words like *spirit, colour, energy, value, service*”.

His own energy hasn’t flagged when it comes to maintaining and stoking the brand and the business. Many entrepreneurs are happy to sell off their companies after 15 years and concentrate on their golf game. Not Boden.

“What would I do if I retire?” he asks. As for the thought of building another business, “I don’t want to start manning the photocopier again,” he says.

“If you’re lucky, incredibly lucky as I am to be doing something you enjoy,” Boden says, “anything you would do next would be a bit of a disappointment”. ■



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