

Award-Winning Innovators

BY GARRETT LAI

Attending The Travel Goods Show is always rewarding. But for some it's an award-winning experience, a chance to stand up and be recognized. These are the products, people and companies that earned that kind of distinction from their peers at this year's Show.

Product Innovation Awards

THE TRAVEL GOODS SHOW IS THE ultimate product showcase for our industry, and receiving a Product Innovation Award is the ultimate recognition of good design, product relevance and a good indicator of what's hot in travel goods.

This year's first-place winner in the Product Innovation Awards was RIMOWA for its Salsa Air Multiwheel Roller (see "Seen @ The Show" page 46 for a closer look) that proves the adage "Less is More." Light weight continues to be a huge driving force, fueled by rigid enforcement of overweight bag-

gage fees and consumer demand for luggage that's easier to handle, and the Salsa Air is a terrific example of how our industry is meeting demand. RIMOWA didn't attempt to reinvent the wheel, but stuck with a tried and true foundation in the form of a 100% polycarbonate outer shell and easy-to-manuever four-wheel castering layout from its proven Salsa line. A lightweight frame and other clever gram-shaving strategies manage to strip 26% off the weight of a standard Salsa case, paring it down to an 8.2-pound all-up weight

for a 32-inch case — and that's with a built-in TSA lock that's the first to employ an ABUS lock cylinder for additional peace of mind.

Traveler's Choice Travelware managed to pile a busload of technology into its Solar-Powered Computer Case (see "Seen @ The Show" page 48 for a closer look), and power away to second place in the Product Innovation Awards with an item that highlights two growing trends in travel goods — multi-tasking functionality as a matter of course, and more integration of



Dieter Morszeck is all smiles after RIMOWA's first place win in the Product Innovation Awards competition for its Salsa Air 28" Upright. Presenting is Edward Gerch of Kingport Trading, chairman of the TGA Awards Committee.



Traveler's Choice earned the second place Product Innovation Award for its very smart Pacific Gear Solar Powered Briefcase. Accepting the award are (L to R) Roger Yang and Larry Gutkin.



Steve Bendzak snags the third place Product Innovation Award for ExOfficio's Storm Logic Jacket. Presenting is Edward Gerch of Kingport Trading, Chairman of the TGA Awards Committee.

electronics in our everyday lives. This sleek laptop carrier looks smart and chic enough to be deployed in big time boardroom pow-wows, accommodating big 17" laptops. It's travel-friendly, too, with a checkpoint-friendly design — something that's quickly become almost mandatory for business cases. But it goes a step further, with a solar panel stitched into the top flap that can provide charging power for portable electronics, for those times when you're so on-the-go you can't be tied down by a power cord. A built-in capacitor stores electricity on board, and even includes an energy meter so you'll know just how much juice you have on hand.

Third place went to ExOfficio's new-for-2010 Storm Logic Jacket (see "Seen @ The Show" page 37 for a closer look), which follows the lightweight and multi-tasking trends by being a lightweight insulated outer layer that's a terrific travel garment, but also transforms itself into a comfy, smartly shaped travel pillow. Deployed as a pillow, the Storm Logic's snake-like shape allows it to be secured around the neck like a conventional horseshoe-shape travel pillow, or strapped around the waist as a lower lumbar support. As a jacket, its Primaloft One insulation and 20-denier ripstop polyester liner ensure cozy warmth and durability. Four smartly sized, cleverly marked interior pockets keep travelers organized and their stuff secure, with embroidered pictograms that remind them which pocket holds eyeglasses, passport, boarding pass and cell phone.

The Buzz Award

THE BUZZ AWARD — VOTED ON at The Show by attending media and retailers — was swept by first-time Travel Goods Show exhibitor VinniBag for its inflatable transporter for wine, liquids and other fragile items. (See "Seen @ The Show" page 37 for a closer look.) The see-through plastic torpedo is a shockingly smart, surprisingly tough transporter that's a lightweight way to provide heavyweight protection for wine bottles in checked luggage. The bag features a watertight rollup closure and inflatable air chambers that provide a snug, zero-slop fit around its

contents that should be more than able to withstand baggage handlers (there's a reason why they're called "throwers" in the airline industry). Once inflated, the contents are completely immobilized, well-padded against shock and vibration, and even thermally insulated.

VinniBag was originally designed for wine and olive oil bottles, but it will cradle and cushion anything small enough to fit inside. So anything delicate and smaller than a wine bottle — cell phones, cameras, watches and the like — can be transported safely in the VinniBag.



Winner of the Buzz Award: VinniBag by Ellesco. L to R: Summer Scarbrough, Elizabeth Scarbrough

Community Service Award

THIS YEAR'S COMMUNITY SERVICE Award went to KIVA Designs, which has an impressive track record for philanthropy in a variety of arenas. Highlights of KIVA's commitment to making the world a better place include:

Partnering with Kittery Trading Post to put 200 bags in the hands of children in an orphanage in India; Co-sponsoring Rick Steve's Multiple Sclerosis 150-mile Bike-a-thon, three years; Sponsoring Benicia High School Athletics, three years; Multi-year donor for local elementary school programs, residential drug and alcohol treatment facilities and special needs kids and adult programs such as Wasatch Adaptive Sports and Ski for Light.

It's an impressive assortment of philanthropic activities and a terrific example of how a progressive company can provide great value for its partner

retailers and consumers, while making meaningful contributions to activities and programs that make a real impact in the community.



Accepting the Community Service Award on behalf of KIVA Designs are Jerica Howard and Magi Raible. Edward Gerch of Kingport Trading, chairman of the TGA Awards Committee, presented the award.

The TGA Award Profile: Frank Fine



Frank Fine, founder of Lieber's Luggage, accepts the 2010 TGA Award in recognition of his outstanding professional achievements.

THE TGA AWARD RECOGNIZES OUTSTANDING contributions to the industry and community at large. It's our industry's equivalent of a lifetime achievement award, and this year's winner went to longtime travel goods retailer, longtime TGA Board member and ALDA executive director Frank Fine.

"I'm a specialty store guy," he said simply, in his acceptance speech on the Show floor. "That means I'm dedicated to the role and success of those small, independent retailers who struggle so

mightily to survive in our fast-changing world.” That may be, but Fine has had a lot more impact on this industry than a mere specialty store guy. And he didn’t set out to be a retailer, much less involved in travel goods.

It was serendipity that brought Fine to travel goods, but it took awhile for him to find his calling.

Fine, now 62, was born and raised in Cleveland, Ohio, and travel goods weren’t on his initial career path. “I wasn’t one of those kids who had a

“I was doing urban simulation modeling for the electric power industry, working for Westinghouse, and this was long before desktop computers,” he explains. “I’d go in after five o’clock with tapes and punch cards — I was borrowing someone’s computing power so I couldn’t do this during business hours.” Fine was working on expanding the power grid, figuring out where to locate substations and the like, and he liked the work.

“Then I reached a crisis point. I couldn’t pursue the area I was working in and remain in Albuquerque. I had to move out of state to someplace this kind of work was getting done, or find something else to do.”

One thing that weighed in Fine’s decision-making was the fact that he’d become a single parent to his daughter Daria. “I wanted something I could do, something simple where I could be my own boss, someplace I could bring my daughter to when she wasn’t in school, so she could do homework in a back room, watch TV, whatever. I was involved in a steel warehousing business for awhile, but it was very demanding and the partnership was strained,” he remembers.

“My father was an entrepreneur in paint manufacturing,” Fine explains. “So, I guess being a business owner was always in the family blood.” Back home in Ohio, his cousin was running a retail luggage store in Cleveland and he thought that would be “a good kind of work to do that would allow me to take care of my daughter in a fashion I thought was appropriate.” So in 1978, Lieber’s Luggage opened its doors in Albuquerque.

Why Lieber’s? “I knew this was a very small industry, and I quickly learned if I said I was with ‘Frank’s Luggage,’ it didn’t do anything for me. But if I was with Lieber’s, it did something. Lieber’s was a long-time retail operation, established in 1906 by Max Lieber, and pur-

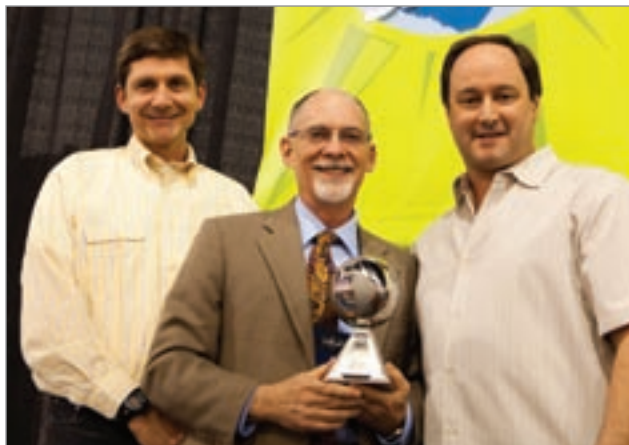
chased in 1940 by Frank’s uncle.

Frank’s version of Lieber’s Luggage grew, eventually occupying three locations in Albuquerque. “We bought a vacant lot in a strong retail area in 1988, building a 6,000-square-foot building to house the store. We closed all three of our locations and centralized everything in this building, which became a destination store. It was one of our better moves.” That seems like it might be a risky proposition, to mess with success, but when asked about it Fine didn’t have any doubt at all. “I was certain this would work. It was a few blocks down from our main store, in an ideal retail location. And that proved to be the case.”

“I don’t think being a good retailer is magic, but you’ve got to do a lot of things, and you’ve got to do them pretty darn well,” he says of his success with Lieber’s. “You need to have good selection, fair pricing, and *great* service. You have to give people a good reason to come to you — you’re competing with department stores, catalogs, and these days the Internet. You need to make the customer experience so special when they go home they tell their friends and family this is really something out of the ordinary when it comes to shopping. One of the keys to that is how you train your employees. You have a culture in your store, they have to understand what that is, be part of it,” says Fine. “You have to be smart, know more about the product you’re selling than anyone, anywhere. It’s implicit you have to know about travel, and how people travel.”

In the early 1990s Fine was ready for something else. “I was contemplating a career change and really wanted to do something else. So, I started on a MBA from UCLA, and racked up some frequent flyer miles commuting on Southwest — I was actually a featured frequent flyer in their magazine once,” he remembers of the time invested in earning his MBA.

By this point in his life Fine had met, and married, Leslee Richards, who’d worked for some time as a technical writer, and was then in marketing for the software industry. And this was about the same time Amber, who would become their adopted daughter, came to live with them. “We went from being empty nesters to having a daughter. We thought we’d travel, live abroad.



Frank Fine was presented with the 2010 TGA Award by Peter Cobb (L), co-founder and senior vice president of eBags, TGA Board of Directors chair and 2009 recipient of the award, and Jay Friedman (R), TGA board member, NLDA Executive Committee member and owner of Lazar’s Luggage and Gifts.

‘this is it’ moment growing up, when they knew what they wanted to do,” he recalls. He went to Boston University, majoring in philosophy and religion and graduating in 1969.

“I worked as a business manager for a rock & roll club for awhile,” he remembers of that time in his life. “I really didn’t know what I wanted to do, and eventually drove out to New Mexico with a friend of mine, and ended up living in a commune there. I was a hippie, an educated hippie. I met my first wife, and started getting serious about my life and went back to school.”

Fine started out with an interest in architecture, but like a lot of people, discovered that his interest and his skills didn’t quite add up. “I discovered I was much better at organization and planning than design. I was more interested in how places worked than what they looked like.” So, that’s how Fine came to earn his master’s degree in urban planning from the University of New Mexico, and began his first real career.

So, I guess daughters have had major impacts on my career, for which I have no regrets,” says Fine.

“Throughout the 1990s I started doing business consulting work, mostly with small businesses around here, and with arts organizations. Leslee was very frustrated with what was happening in her industry, and I was becoming frustrated with running the store. She came home one day and said to me, ‘Why don’t I take over the store and you start doing something else?’ I started focusing on my consulting work with arts organizations and also interim management. I would go into an organization and assist the CEO as a sort of executive director, while they searched for a permanent one. So, I lived out of a suitcase from 1998 to 2004, all over the west and Midwest, from Nebraska to California,” explains Fine. “The work was interesting, but being away from home was not.”

And then opportunity came knocking, in the form of the American Luggage Dealers Association, which was then based in Santa Barbara. “I said I’d do it if I could move the office to Albuquerque, and that’s what we did,” says Fine.

The ALDA that moved to Albuquerque was a far cry from the strong dealer association of recent memory. It was low on membership and influence, and nearly insolvent. And with his experience fostering Lieber’s Luggage into a successful business, and his consulting as an interim manager, Fine was the right guy in the right place at the right time.

“The best way to explain ALDA’s position is the newspaper analogy — it’s almost impossible to have two newspapers in a town. If you’re the big gorilla you have so many advantages, the other guy isn’t in a position to compete effectively,” explains Fine. The National Luggage Dealers Association was the older, larger entity — and because it only allowed for one member in each market its members tended to be the strongest players in their regions. They were a bigger organization, and their individual members were the biggest retailers. ALDA’s members, being the newer, smaller outfits, just didn’t have the buying power to compete. Or so it seemed.

Eighteen months after becoming ALDA’s executive director, the organi-

zation was strongly in the black, with membership rolls pumped up to an all-time high from several new programs that lent ALDA’s strength to individual stores, building stronger relationships with manufacturers and ALDA’s members.

“I knew ALDA’s success or failure was not unlike that of a single store,” Fine says. “We had to be really good at what we did, we had to be good at marketing to retailers, provide great service to members, and market to independent stores that weren’t affiliated with the association — these were two things I really focused on. We had to provide better services for our members, and reach out to independents to show them how ALDA could make them better retailers. That’s how we built up our membership.”

ALDA was now big enough to not only stay afloat, but to be an empowering association for independent luggage retailers. It was a strong alternative to NLDA and its one member, one market policy, but there was another problem — the pond was shrinking. The industry was changing as the Internet and big-box retailers rose to prominence, and department store consolidation made it more difficult to compete as an independent.

“It became apparent that both associations should merge,” Fine says. “Neither was big enough at that point, and we both needed bigger, stronger numbers to get the economies of scale needed to do the best job. By this point ALDA could speak as relative equals with NLDA.” The two organizations did just that, speaking as equals and agreeing to a merger effective December 31, 2009 that would create a new organization under the NLDA banner. He has no role in this new organization.

So what’s next? “I’m going into semi-retirement,” he quips. “I actually have a consulting agreement with ALDA during this transition, and I’m building up my own consulting as well.

One of the areas I have interest in is social entrepreneurship for non-profits, a fancy way of saying I like helping non-profit organizations build for-profit ventures that help support their mission. One major project I’ve been working on is building a cold-storage service business for our local food bank, Roadrunner Food Bank. We built a very large freezer, over 15,000 square feet. Half of this space is used for Roadrunner’s operations, the other half is leased to local food manufacturers,



A Fine gathering: Leslee Richards, Frank Fine’s wife and co-owner of Lieber’s Luggage; daughter Amber Elwell; Frank Fine; and daughter Daria Fine.

processors and distributors, and this generates a profit for the food bank operation.”

This doesn’t mean Fine is abandoning the travel goods industry, not by a long stretch. Shortly after starting at ALDA, Fine also began serving on the TGA Board, in a stint stretching from 2005 to 2008. He was an influential member, and instrumental in the creation of the highly regarded Travel Goods Specialist Certificate Program that launched in 2008. He not only proposed the program at a strategy meeting, but chaired the effort and helped draw together subject matter experts from across the industry to create a curriculum that has helped elevate our entire industry’s retailing standards. He rejoined TGA’s board in 2009.

Fine may have failed in his initial attempt to become an architect, but given his career path in travel goods, and his influence, an architect is precisely what he has become for the travel goods industry, thanks to his work with ALDA and the Travel Goods Association. ■