

Interview With Gregg Stein

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PHOTO/EMILY MICUCCI

Gregg Stein

Knowing your target market is crucial for any business, and for a company like Libratone Inc., knowing the importance of sound quality is part of that knowledge bank. Most people love music, and many have discriminating ears. Framingham-based Bose Corp. has been a leader in the sound industry for decades, but newcomer Libratone, a Danish maker of wireless speakers, won't be ignored. Armed with a collection of industry awards and glowing reviews by industry publications for its wireless speakers – sleek designs that can be dressed up in vibrant wool covers – the company is seeking to make Libratone a big name in the United States and Canada, as it is in Denmark.

Leading the charge is Gregg Stein, a Framingham resident with a background in marketing and communications in the musical instrument and electronics industry. Stein was hired in the spring to build North American brand awareness and a sales team, and increase retail store partnerships. A former professional musician, he offers a valuable perspective on what the customer wants.

What are the challenges of bringing a product, known primarily in Europe, to North America?

You know, our whole thing is getting away from the ugly black boxes that have (become) a thing of the past. Our thing is bringing color and design and aesthetics as much as technology and high-quality audio and that, in itself, separates us from the rest. And I don't think it matters where, geographically, it is. In Denmark, Libratone is like a household name. Because we're still new here in the U.S., maybe we aren't quite there yet, but we sure are on our way. Yeah, the U.S. is a big place. It takes a long time to go across (the) country to talk to everyone. But

with the right team in place, the right sales and marketing, it all starts to work.”

What strides have you made in creating brand awareness here?

(Recently), we launched (a new speaker), the Loop, and I think a really good metric is, 24 hours into the launch, every major technology-oriented publication has already given us accolades on the product and quite frankly, other than a handful of people that we talked to, there hasn't been too many people who have even seen it or heard it yet. Which goes to tell me that the brand is actually getting a lot of recognition. The other thing is we also just hit over 30,000 Facebook friends just this past week, which for us was a pretty big milestone. And that's coming from zero not that long ago.

Libratone has been recognized for design quality as well as engineering, and other electronics makers are always making products sleeker, smaller and lighter. Is the look and feel of electronics becoming as important as performance?

I think there's kind of a convergence going, I do think so. I think for us it is about interior design as much as it is the audio experience. Remember, all of your music now is on these portable devices. So it's no longer about having those ugly black boxes surrounding the room. You can customize the speaker to your visual décor.

In September, you announced the launch of the company's new e-commerce site, Are there challenges to online selling?

The challenge online is you can't hear and experiencing the speaker, so connecting those dots for customers online can sometimes be difficult. So that's why we're also focused on that physical store presence to make sure we get that experience across. I think we have a good handle on our general sales forecast and the supply and demand side of things. It can be difficult to make sure your goods are

there on time, but without distribution partners in place, we feel confident we have the right stock levels.

You've hired 10 employees since the spring. Will your Framingham office grow in the next year? And was it the right choice for a North American headquarters?

I don't want to quote any numbers, but what I see is the team continuing to expand. The sales team is getting beefed up, the marketing team is getting beefed up, and our general operations, distribution and supply chain is, as well. (Framingham) is the best. I think I said in the past that it's a hotbed of intellectual people, and I think that proves to be true. We have brought in a variety of people from different educational backgrounds and experience and it's been relatively easy to find the right people. I only started this hiring spree maybe (in early August) and in that time all the positions have been filled.

How important is it for a CEO to have an interest in the product they're selling, as you do?

I am passionate about sound, audio, quality, all of those things. And I don't think (success) can come from anywhere else but that passion. I'm also passionate about business, so for me it's a little unique. This is a fun, unique company that really is not about just the traditional basics. This is about having fun. We move very quickly. We are small and nimble but I think being design-minded and experience minded (is also important). We're so focused on that out-of-box experience and again that ties back to the passion. How can you really understand what the customer experience is if you don't really understand that audio experience and what the customer really wants?