

# Nick Wooster Buys Stake in Atrium

By JEAN E. PALMIERI

NEW YORK — Nick Wooster is back in the retail business — but this time, he's got a piece of the action.

Sam Ben-Avraham, the owner of the Atrium stores and founder of the Liberty Fairs trade show, has sold a partnership stake in Atrium's two New York stores to Wooster. He declined to provide details on the size of the stake or the level of Wooster's investment.

Wooster, who most recently served as senior vice president of brand, trend and design for J.C. Penney and was also men's fashion director for Neiman Marcus and Bergdorf Goodman, will play the role of creative director of Atrium, the new partners said in an interview in Ben-Avraham's SoHo office here. Ben-Avraham will continue to own the company's Miami store exclusively, he said.

The New York stores on Flatbush Avenue in Brooklyn and Broadway in NoHo will be renamed Atrium Wooster within the next few weeks; the Florida store will continue to sport just the Atrium name. This year marks Atrium's 20th year in business.

"We're going to keep the foundation and move into a new era," Ben-Avraham said. "I've always run the show myself and I love the game of retail, but lately I've been doing a lot of other things. And I realized I can't do everything well. [To be successful in retail,] you have to live this every day and dream it every day."

Earlier this year, Ben-Avraham launched a new trade show under the name Liberty Fairs and formed a strategic alliance with other trade show operators to compete against Advanstar Communications' MAGIC Marketplace and its flagship show Project. Ben-Avraham founded Project in 2003 and sold it to Advanstar in 2005.

He said that juggling this while acting as the buyer for the stores and keeping up with the changing fashion trends has gotten increasingly difficult. Because of this, he converted Atrium into men's-only earlier this year, dropping the fast-moving women's merchandise. "You have to know what you're doing today with all the new vendors. You have to travel to shows in Japan and Paris and find new brands. I just cannot do that," Ben-Avraham said.

"And I want to do that," Wooster said. "It's no secret I'm a compulsive shopper."



Sam Ben-Avraham and Nick Wooster

Photo By Cristiano Morroy

Wooster said buying a stake in a retail store has been a lifelong dream, ever since he started working in a Kansas specialty store when he was 15. "I've always thought of myself as a retailer. Anybody can pick fantastic product, but you have to be able to make money too."

He said his impact on the merchandising will begin to be seen for spring but the bulk of the changes will be felt next fall. Atrium is known for its large selection of denim as well as designer merchandise.

"The first thing is to understand the business," Wooster said. "I'm very interested in traditional men's wear and nontraditional men's wear, and the store will reflect that." He said denim is the store's "best developed" business, "but the fashion part is up for grabs. I'll respect the heritage and keep an eye on the future."

He is also expected to significantly improve the company's online presence, in terms of both e-commerce and social media. Wooster is an avid participant in social media.

Ben-Avraham said Atrium's best years were 2005 to 2007 and volume hasn't come back to that place yet. "But we survived." And with Wooster's ability to find new brands, coupled with his expertise online, "we can really increase sales." He declined to provide a sales volume for the business.

Ben-Avraham said he had been considering bringing on a partner for a while. Sitting next to Wooster at a dinner in Las Vegas last month led to the conversation that resulted in this week's deal.