

# Luv Connection

A new line of novelty ballerinas aims to get women collecting. BY BARBARA SCHNEIDER-LEVY



Dream Flat in a range of fall '13 colors

**M**ichael Toschi has a deep appreciation for the ballet flat. So now the designer is focusing on the look with his niche brand, Luv Footwear, which debuted in spring '12. Launched with the Dream Flat, a classic silhouette in a spectrum of colors and patterns, the line now includes a Mary Jane and crisscross-strap style, targeted to everyone from toddlers to adults, for \$35 to \$46. "It's simple comfort," said Toschi, whose expertise is in the development of performance technologies. "It's less is more in its most extreme version."

All styles are built on Luv's signature comfort platform — a lightweight molded EVA outsole that features a built-in sculpted footbed. The comfort story continues on the uppers with stretch Lycra lining the entire shoe.

So far, the brand's retail accounts include surf shops, independent shoe stores, children's boutiques such as Lester's in New York and e-tailers like Piperlime.com. In addition, the San Francisco-based company recently opened six freestanding stores in Taiwan.

While Toschi considers himself a tech guy (and continues to helm his eponymous men's shoe label), he has concentrated on fashion with Luv, adding whimsical uppers developed in-house by director of design Caroline Cecil.

To encourage consumers to buy multiple Luv styles, five new mini collections will debut each season in three key prints in three colorways. Each line targets different markets with teen, surf and even a "Mommy & Me" series.

The company also has turned to consumers for design inspiration: The Luv Open Call design competition is under way, allowing the public to submit original artwork for a future collection. Entries are posted on Luv's Facebook page, where fans can vote for their favorites.

Here, Toschi reveals his simple take on comfort and desire to resonate with a range of consumers.

## 1 What is behind your fascination with the ballet flat?

**MT:** It's the single most popular article of footwear I've seen in my career. I've worked with Esprit and Sam Edelman, among others, and always had an affection for the silhouette. It's the only shoe that's simultaneously cute, sexy, elegant, sophisticated and comfortable. My [goal] was to build an iconic product in the footwear industry, like Swatch did with watches — one platform, infinite surface design opportunities, collectible editions every season. The ballerina flat was my obvious choice.

## 2 How is the Luv ballerina different from others on the market?

**MT:** [I wanted] to distill the knowledge I gained over the years making technical, performance and comfort

shoes and apply it to a ballerina flat. Also, I believe in the less-is-more philosophy, so I wanted to make it with as few components as possible, but still be supportive, protective and anatomically sound. After overcoming several challenges during development, the Dream Flat was born. It thrives without a lasting board, shank, insole, heel counter, toe box and lining. However, it delivers support from its internal anatomical shape, protection from its molded toe-cap and comfort from its upper and outsole.

## 3 Not many brands appeal to kids, teens and adults. How does Luv bridge the generation gap?

**MT:** Toms Shoes, Crocs and Ugg Australia [have broken] generation barriers in their own ways, and I think Luv can, too. Because the Dream Flat is a blank canvas for art, color and pattern, it has a way of transforming itself like a chameleon. I am really determined for Luv to be an inclusive brand, rather than an exclusive brand. I want it to unite its wearers.

## 4 What are the challenges in designing within Luv's moderate price structure?

**MT:** It's not easy for anyone to design a product, package it, ship it, pay duties and keep a moderate price based on many people's expectations. For just the design part, at least for the Dream Flat, more colors add more cost and so do embellishments such as rhinestones. I put a lot of thought and time into creating a shoe with an iconic enough form for it to remain relatively simple. The big challenge was the journey getting there, which is now just the beginning.

## 5 Where do you see Luv's biggest growth potential?

**MT:** I see it growing in the sports and fitness markets as an after-sport shoe. When women are done running, cycling and golfing, they want and need a stylish shoe that's still comfortable and supportive. The Dream Flat is the [ideal] choice to slip on and go.



Michael Toschi