



The faces behind the new image campaign photographed by Yu Tsai are top CE model Catherine Russell (right) and British model star David Gandy (left).



## A NEW SOUL

The futuristic design of Freesoul's oversized stand at the last BREAD & butter in Barcelona made it clear that the brand has set a new course for the future. Since its takeover by Luxembourg-based company Balham Holding in 2008, the denim brand has undergone major restructuring and repositioning. Ernesto Barbieri, the brand's CEO since March 2008, explains all about Freesoul's new face.

Text Isabel Baker Photos Freesoul

"The market demands a different product today than it did 10 years ago. The focus is once again more on the quality and the product itself." Ernesto Barbieri

**F**reesoul was taken over by Balham Holding from Luxembourg in early 2008. To what extent has this affected the brand?

It was obviously the ideal time to thoroughly restructure Freesoul's brand strategy and philosophy. Freesoul was originally aimed at a very young target group. The restructuring of the brand and the new brand image, reflected in the new advertising campaign and the overall brand identity, have enabled us to trade up within the collection, taking Freesoul to a higher level which is primarily seen in the quality. With our design team, we attach great importance to the details of the individual products. We believe that the quality of a product is significantly more important to the customer now and in the future than it used to be. Offering this quality at a reasonable price is our primary goal.

Do you think that the takeover came at exactly the right time for Freesoul?

Yes, if the management of the company hadn't changed, there would have been no repositioning. As the new owner of the brand, Balham Holding was and is the initiator. Nevertheless, the whole process has not yet been completed, of course. Like everyone else, we've been affected by the financial crisis. Yet in this crisis, we see a great opportunity for us to position ourselves in an upward segment and to occupy a new field that Freesoul hadn't previously covered. This also involves reorganising our distribution structures throughout Europe, with our own sales agents working for Freesoul around the clock. We're also planning to set up subsidiaries in every country.

What changes have there been to the Freesoul team?

After the takeover, there were fundamental changes within the team, and we appointed a number of new team members, first and foremost new head designer Modesto de Luca. To a significant extent, we developed Freesoul's new philosophy around him. At the moment, we're selling the first collection for autumn/winter 2009, for which he was responsible, and the reaction from customers has been very positive. I think that customers are excited about our new philosophy, new energy and the idea behind it

all because it represents a completely different image from what Freesoul used to be. We needed to take this major and slightly radical step in order to reposition the brand.

Will Freesoul remain a denim brand?

Jeans will remain the focus of the collection. Denim continues to make up 90 per cent of the overall collection, and we don't intend to change that. We can base the restructuring and trade-up of the entire brand on the core competence of denim.

Why do you believe that Freesoul needed to be restructured?

The market demands a different product today than it did ten years ago. The details and quality of a product are much more important now. Consumers are also much more critical and responsible nowadays than they used to be. Both the product and the entire philosophy and image of a brand need to meet these high standards. We view this repositioning as the ideal way to take Freesoul into a secure and successful future.

Being backed by a financially strong investor doesn't just open up new opportunities; it also sets new requirements. How do you meet these challenges?

We can virtually write off 2008 and 2009. These two years have been difficult for everyone, including us, but the holding company is convinced that we'll achieve good results in the medium term if we work hard enough. That probably won't happen for another three to five years. With the holding company, we have an investor that prefers long-term, solid commitment to short-term profits. This is an advantage

for us, of course, and so I work very closely with the holding company.

What retail activities do you have planned?

For season AW 2009/10 we will inaugurate 20 corners with a new concept. Most of them will be opened in France in specialty jeans stores and one in Galleries Lafayette. The market in Germany will be covered again by specialty denim stores and the market in Greece by Attica. There are serious discussions with Harrods and Selfridges for a start-up in the UK. Almost all the corners will be rolled out between the next months of July and September, and these openings will continue during 2010.

The new corner concept has been created to show the new image, philosophy and sophistication of the brand. For the denim wall, we are going to use the latest technology and special packaging to communicate our core business denim. LCD screens will be used strongly as a product guide.

The repositioning of Freesoul is most apparent in the autumn/winter 2009 advertising campaign. Why did you decide on these images?

The key criterion for us was to imbue the brand and products with new values in order to vividly show our customers the repositioning and restructuring of Freesoul. To do so we worked with the photographer Yu Tsai because he perfectly illustrates the new philosophy. The two faces behind the campaign, US fashion top model Catherine Russell and famous British model David Gandy, also play a key role, of course. We'll be presenting the campaign at the coming fashion fairs.

### Freesoul

Founded by the Italian fashion group Eads Srl in 1994, Freesoul is now available at retailers in more than 40 countries. The label will open its new concept shop in shops in the following months. In 2008, Freesoul was bought by the Luxembourg-based company Balham Holding, a group of investors involved in the fashion industry in an advisory and financial capacity. One of the companies owned by Balham Holding is a retail chain with around 140 stores - Ernesto Barbieri was appointed new CEO of Freesoul by Balham Holding in March 2008. He comes from the field of strategic management and financial consultancy, and entered new thematic territory when he took over the reins at Freesoul.