

BARDSLEY & CARLOS LLP

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SAN DIEGO - A Del Mar boutique owner accused of selling knockoff Louis Vuitton, Christian Dior and Gucci merchandise pleaded innocent Friday to nine felony counts.

Del Mar shopkeeper pleads innocent in counterfeiting case

Suresh Mehta, 54, was arrested last Friday after investigators from the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement and the San Diego County District Attorney's Office raided his "Bene Del Mar" store in Del Mar Plaza.

Authorities said they seized more than 150 counterfeit items, including handbags, luggage, watches, jewelry, sunglasses and scarves with an estimated value of \$76,000.

Agents also seized counterfeit items bearing the brands Chanel, Burberry, Coach, Tiffany and Fendi.

Outside court, Deputy District Attorney William La Fond said employers who knowingly sell counterfeit merchandise should be aware "that they're violating the law. This is a serious offense."

He said Mehta is charged with nine counts of trademark violations. Each count carries a penalty of three years in prison and a \$250,000 fine, La Fond said.

"Profits from the sale of counterfeit merchandise worldwide have funded some of the worst criminal organizations," La Fond said last week. "Retailers should be aware that we take these matters very seriously."

Mehta -- free on \$50,000 bail -- declined to comment outside court, other than to agree with his attorney, Marc Carlos, that he is innocent.

Carlos said Mehta -- a U.S. citizen from India -- is a scapegoat for government prosecutors.

"I can walk down to Horton Plaza and buy one of these bags," Carlos told reporters.

The attorney said the bags in question were clearly marked "knock-off" bags and were not made by the original designer.

"Everybody knew that these were not original bags," Carlos said.

Over the seven-month investigation, ICE agents and private investigators hired by the trademark holders met undercover with Mehta, authorities said.

Mehta allegedly told the agents he sold the high-priced counterfeit items, such as the Louis Vuitton handbags, for \$400 apiece to local residents and tourists who frequently shop at the Del Mar Plaza.

Superior Court Judge Roger Krauel ordered Mehta to return to court Aug. 25 for a readiness conference. A preliminary hearing was scheduled for Sept. 10.

