
As the former SVP of Sales & Retail Marketing for TOMS, Sarah Lassek recently relaunched [SL Apparel Solutions](#), where she is focused on building brands and teams in the fashion industry.

As you read this article, it is not news that you are simultaneously being bombarded by hundreds of other bits of information from other sources – emails, things you are supposed to “like” on Instagram, Tweets, political noise, products people are trying to get you to buy and so on. It is a miracle any of that actually gets through to us and sticks. So if you are the founder of a burgeoning brand or trying to launch a new product, it is critical to maximize brand relevance and get your product or idea to stick with your target consumers.

I think the natural inclination here is to jump straight into thinking ‘I just have to put up a website, get on social media and Tweet the hell out of my product.’ But while the digital age has presented us with endless marketing and communication tools, there’s too much noise here to rely solely on this approach for your brand.

A photograph of a woman with long, wavy blonde hair, wearing a blue denim shirt and dark pants. She is holding a vintage-style camera with both hands in front of her. The background is a blurred outdoor setting with fallen leaves on the ground.

BRAND RELEVANCE

By Sarah Lassek

My career has been spent predominantly in the greater fashion industry, so many of the following suggestions come directly from my own successes (and failures!) with ready-to-wear, accessories and footwear. However, to give the Digital Age props...it has brought us all a lot closer and allowed for more synergies between industries and ideas so there is certainly a broader application past fashion.

WHAT IS YOUR STORY?

Back to busting through all those bits of information we are bombarded with everyday, the most critical thing for a new brand to do is to identify, develop and stick to your story. If you think about some of the most successful and identifiable brands in the world – Apple, BMW, Rolex, Whole Foods, Vogue, Nike – each one of them from inception have not waived from their story. In developing not just a clear mission statement, but a consistent story that is the thread through all product offerings, supports the design aesthetic, guides the pricing and reaches your target consumer, it is much harder to get ‘lost’. The story should come first as it is the foundation of the brand and the litmus test for all decisions. It is also what determines who your target consumer is and helps identify all the ways you can communicate with them.

MEAN SOMETHING

Understanding how consumers shop and what drives them to make a purchase is critical to your brand staying relevant. This does not mean you have to do intense consumer focus groups or buy expensive industry data reports, it can be as simple as getting into stores and talking to people, observing behaviors, soliciting feedback and understanding what the triggers are for purchasing. For example, contemporary apparel or handbags are not “needs” they are “wants” and purchases are usually driven by emotion. We have all heard of “retail therapy” – no one goes to the drug store to buy tissues when they are upset – we go to the mall. Most

often these purchases are not researched, they are impulsive and the product they are buying is likely feeding some emotion. Understanding where your brand or product falls on the spectrum is important because it will dictate the odds of connecting with your target consumer and how you sell (e-commerce, brick & mortar retail, trunk shows, promotional and social media strategy), where you sell (what type of retailers – high end, mass, pop up’s) and when you sell (seasonality, delivery frequency).



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EDITING IS KING

A mistake new brands often make is trying to be all things to all people with its initial collections or product offerings. When launching a new line, my suggestion is to take a bit of the less-is-more approach. Taking the time to edit the collection so it maintains the DNA of the brand and stays focused on the core product offering is critical in appealing to buyers or end consumers. If the collection or offering is well-merchandised so it is made up of tight, edited stories or groupings that are representative of what the brand/season/trends are about, a buyer is able to better visualize why your brand is important and how it will look on his or her floor. If there are too many SKU's or product offerings that start to stray from the core offering, you will not only lose focus, but will likely sell less because orders will be scattered across too many styles and you cannot drive volume into key items. Merchandising and SKU planning are instrumental to achieving your sales targets. Understanding exactly what you need to offer to meet your financial targets each season is the best place to start planning your line.

If you are a digital-only company, the same theory applies to e-commerce. Think about how your target consumer shops. Will they tend to come back once a month or once a season? Should you have a tightly edited offering more frequently so the consumer finds newness each time he or she visits the site or is your product something that is a big, one-time purchase? Regardless, your website is a virtual retail floor so make sure the site is well-merchandised where not only does the assortment reflect your brand story and grab the customer but the collection(s) or items are shoppable and easy to navigate.

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INSPIRING CREATIVE.”**

PARTNER UP

I state the obvious when I say great marketing is one of the most critical aspects to the success of a new brand or product launch. What is not so obvious is what constitutes ‘great marketing’ and identifying ways to make an impact without necessarily breaking the bank. One way that is impactful, relatively inexpensive and generates incremental brand awareness is a partnership or collaboration with another brand or brands. There has been an influx of great collaborations in the fashion industry as of late including Missoni x Converse, Alexander Wang x H&M, VANS x Star Wars and recently announced, both Nike x Sacai and H&M x Coachella. The latter is to me one of the more interesting because of the industry cross-over and strategy to expose both brands to a wider audience. While Coachella has now become synonymous with fashionistas, it is good to take a cue from this partnership in that thinking outside of your industry box is a good place to start developing a collaboration or partnership. For example, if you sell fixed gear bicycles, think about what other lifestyles are complementary – maybe music, food, potentially social causes, art, etc. Cross-merchandising in a partner brand’s store or establishment or on their website, hosting a joint event or promotion or even creating dual-branded product are ways to capture consumers that may have been going to get a snack and were not thinking about a bike...until then.

