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Think Tank

Meeting the Millennial Challenge

By Cherie Serota

Millennials present a new and clearly unique marketing challenge from what the fashion industry has encountered in the past. Today's young consumers live in a world where they have instantaneous access to fashion: live-streaming of the shows, accessing bloggers and sites on their smartphones 24/7 and comparative shopping.

With this expanded and instantaneous access comes a new set of attitudes and expectations – and, to meet those demands, marketers must implement fresh and ever-changing strategies. This means creating a new paradigm where the traditional structures of the fashion community are reinterpreted and recalibrated at breakneck speed.

As a professor in fashion merchandising at LIU Post, I have a front-row view of the Millennial fashion mind-set. Having spent a good part of my career in the buying, fashion and marketing offices of Saks Fifth Avenue and Henri Bendel, and then developing my own global brand as an entrepreneur, I now have a clear bird's-eye perspective of how Millennials operate. As well as teaching my students, I also learn from them every day, gaining a unique look at what makes Millennials tick.

First and foremost, this generation has a constantly evolving array of tools and portals to navigate them through the retail environment – from information to actual goods. Accessibility is key. They expect to instantaneously see what's new through myriad apps and sites; then have the ability and wherewithal to shop and purchase at the click of a button.

This accelerated pace begins with the seasonal fashion shows. Instead of waiting until fashion magazines hit newsstands to view the collections, as many of us did only a decade ago, Millennials live-stream the shows and watch alongside buyers and editors in real time. Viewing it sooner means expecting to buy it sooner, therefore the turnaround needs to be fast. The rhythm has accelerated beyond the much-anticipated seasonal collections; now the fashion world is turning on its axis daily.

From my viewpoint, there are three key components to meeting the Millennial challenge: fast fashion and rapid response; gaining the attention and support of their specific influencers, and accessibility and omnichannel presence.

Regarding fast fashion, Zara was an early pioneer of fast fashion, with new deliveries of on-trend merchandise at affordable prices arriving in its stores twice weekly. If a certain style or design suddenly becomes the rage, Zara is able to react quickly and get it to the stores while the trend is still peaking, proving there are two keys to the success of fast fashion: one obviously being price,



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As leaders in a rapid vertically integrated supply chain, designers and product managers are skilled in rapid response. They ensure that the company stays on point and can reinterpret trends right off the runways and the streets in as little as two weeks. The company sources close to its markets, and then sells at the right price point to keep it moving at a "Millennial speed."

Meanwhile, H&M and Forever 21 have been keeping pace, but what is intriguing is that now some top designer companies are taking the cue as well. Pre-collections (basically new and additional deliveries) of apparel and accessories in limited quantities are becoming increasingly important. The concept of two seasons is obsolete.

Also consider fashion influences: My students get notifications from fashion sites on a daily basis. Millennials are also watching closely what their favorite reality-show stars, musicians, actors and sports figures are wearing. But what is really new about this generation is their devotion to fashion bloggers. Man Repeller, The Blonde Salad, Fashion Toast, Song of Style, Gal Meets Glam and The Glamourai are just a few of the au courant blogs that my students follow. Savvy fashion marketers know that they need to partner with these popular bloggers to get them to wear and showcase their styles.

Accessibility is also key. Once the fashion has been produced faster and brought to their attention with digital speed, Millennials expect to be able to buy it quickly and at the best possible price. In order to stay in front of this, retailers and brands are best poised with an omnichannel presence; to be present on all possible touchpoints (online and off-line), offering the customer a full brand experience, rather than a single-channel experience. Shopping is no longer a linear process. A given customer may shop in store and then buy the product online or vice versa. In order to capture that sale, it helps to be on all fronts.

Millennial consumers still love to shop in person and know the value of being able to try on a garment in a store. Yet they also want the accessibility of the digital world when they are in the physical realm. To meet this demand, retailers need to create an ultra-buyer-friendly environment with all colors and sizes of a style available at a given time. And if there is a lapse in this accessibility, they have armed their salespeople with tablets allowing them to locate the merchandise elsewhere in order to not lose the sale. The Millennial consumer has begun to expect this omnichannel presence.

Ultimately, the tried-and-true Five Rs of fashion merchandising are still relevant: the right fashion-oriented merchandise still needs to be brought in at the right time, in the right place, in the right quantities, at the right price and with the right sales promotion for a targeted customer.

But each of these elements has been redefined – and accelerated – to satisfy the Millennial marketing challenge. Their loyalty can be multi-dimensional and may encompass many layers of influence including the world of fashion bloggers, online and off-line stores, daily trend notifications from fashion Web sites, designers and the brands themselves.

While the dynamics of fashion seem unchanged, the playing fields have developed and advanced rapidly, and it is our job to keep up with the pace and stay ahead of the curve.

Cherie Serota is adjunct professor of fashion merchandising at LIU Post. She is a former director of special events for Henri Bendel and a former buyer for Saks Fifth Avenue who rose to become the associate fashion director at the store. Serota is also a cofounder of international apparel company Belly Basics.

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Eye on Couture

On the runway and behind the scenes at the Paris shows.

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