



What 18 years of selling Swimwear and Sportswear online taught me. Lessons in branding, private labeling and customer relationships.

If you're an online business, most of your customers will probably visit your website after typing a specific search query into Google. In our industry, it could be as detailed as, "Tie dye leggings for women and girls with pockets," or "animal print leggings for yoga and working out in the gym" or something broad like "private label bikini manufacturer." For almost two decades, I've been managing sales and marketing for a Brazilian bikini manufacturer and more recently for a sportswear manufacturer that produces work out clothing for women. Dealing with thousands of customers from around the world has provided me with insights that can be used not only in the swimwear and activewear industry, but across all industries.

During the last several years, I noticed a steady growth in inquiries for private labeled sportswear and bikinis. Essentially customers wanting to create their own private label brand rather than resell the manufacturer's brand. Of course this makes sense in the "Selfie" world where anyone can easily create a brand or become one themselves. In the past, most orders were from people wishing to stock or resell "Mar Egeu" branded bikinis or "CajuBrasil" fitness wear. In contrast, more than two thirds of orders placed today are for private labeled swimwear and fitness apparel. We don't see this abating, especially with personal brands harnessing the power of the Internet, in particular social media platforms. So what has changed? Manufacturers are gradually becoming the "brand behind the brand."

Established brands are losing market share to startups which are much leaner. A lot of companies are now stuck with inventory, debt and the possibility of going bankrupt. They feel threatened by the hundreds of new brands appearing overnight. This is a reason why brand recollection in the fashion industry is declining and people's allegiance to traditional brands is deteriorating. Consumers aren't as brand loyal as they used to be. They're more demanding and know exactly what they want. For instance, they search for benefits such as UV protection, ethically produced, or sustainable fabrics that any label can offer.

Threats and Opportunities

The world is witnessing an unprecedented and accelerated decline in the way products and services are sold. Department stores and mom and pop shops are closing down everywhere, in part, because digital commerce empowers anybody with an Internet connection to promote and sell a product. Internet companies such as Amazon, Facebook, Google and Instagram have disrupted entire sectors and brands. These platforms have proven to be a curse for traditional

retailers but a blessing for newcomers launching on a shoestring budget. Many of our customers own boutiques or sell to fashion outlets while others promote their bikini or sportswear brands solely online. This explains why the retail landscape poses both a threat and an opportunity.

Opportunities

We're witnessing a new era of branding where an infinite number of people with an interest in fashion or commerce can compete on an equal footing against bigger players. Billions of people have access to the same tools and can use them to express and monetize their creative outlet. The Internet is democratizing everything including the business of fashion branding. In almost every industry, the Internet is empowering people to create brands around their passion such as beauty products, skin care or shoes in cities from Topeka to Tokyo. The choices are infinite.

The internet released a global army of virtual gold miners and the platforms they use are deemed successful such as Google, Amazon, Youtube, SnapChat, Tik Tok, Instagram and Facebook. Users of these digital channels have the potential to become global celebrities, garnering more followers and reach than brands that have been around for decades. Influencers and youtubers have the power to impact brands and drive sales. The new word of mouth is a share on Facebook, a mention on Youtube or a like on Instagram.

Core Belief

People buy from people and those who engage with their customers on a human level, will succeed. This means paying attention to clients online just like they were catered to when they visited their local "mom and pop" grocery store. The relationship was based on trust and empathy and serving their customer personally, like greeting them by their name. It was based on having a genuine interest in their well-being and life in general. Being obsessive about serving your customers is crucial, even more so if you're not visible online.

Trust is Tone

Trust is the contract without the contract. Once earned, you've probably gained a super-fan, an ambassador for your product who can become a customer for life. A repeat customer is the ultimate compliment, it endorses your work and proves you've exceeded your client's expectations. That's why your branding should include your team and not just what you produce and sell.

It has to deliver the "Wow" factor.

More than ever before, your product has to be amazing in order to compete in the global marketplace and digital landscape. It has to sell itself, be its own billboard because average products don't survive unless the person behind the product is amazing. Just as good bait attracts fish to a hook, a respected brand or product will have the market seek them with less effort. Remember, people don't just buy a product but the person and team behind the product. That's one of the most important lessons I've learned and comforting because brands can be

imitated, duplicated or copied but nobody can clone the people serving them.

Branding

Gone are the days when we could just position ourselves solely as bikini manufacturers or a sportswear producer. We have to constantly communicate and be visibly present where our customers consume content. We don't consider ourselves just as a swimwear or sportswear producer, but also a digital company, creating and publishing relevant content. We try to be as transparent as possible, giving our production facilities a face and team a voice. In a way, we'll have to become a movie star, a genuine actor that reflects our business and brand. The Oscar performances will separate the winners from the losers.

Understanding your client's online behavior will be critical in helping you understand how to communicate your services. Consumer's attention span is getting shorter as they randomly consume a tsunami of content available online across multiple platforms in the form of plain text, audio, images and video. Some brands are experimenting with 6 second videos to help build brand recognition. Personal brands compete with such intensity for market attention that they've been labeled "attention whores." In fact, personal brands end up having to broadcast their life to the world on a 24/7 basis to the point that marketing lines have blurred between what's real and what's fake.

Analogy

Everyone has equal access to the same tools and resources to produce product X. If millions offer product X on the same platform and pitch the same features at about the same price, who do you buy from? You buy from the person you identify and can relate to. Someone you call "one of yours" based on affinity, trust and values.

Products won't be able to out design, out brand or out discount to secure a sale since they'll almost be identical. Sure branding will play an important role but it will be drowned out in an endless sea of commoditized brands. To succeed, people and their products will have to become brands. Big companies will have to be as agile as small companies and every company will have to become a 24/7 media company. The key differentiator is "You" with features such as – she's a single mother like me, he loves football, she's kind, polite, and punctual. These communities or tribes will become more obvious as traditional jobs dry up and everybody joins the gig economy, some by choice and others involuntarily. Some will survive the online lops, others will thrive and become medalists, but most won't make it to the elusive finish line.

New Paradigm

Successful fashion brands grow with technology, sales and marketing but its foundation is built on genuine relationships. The relationship is the brand. Relationships trump technology but together, as a whole, become greater than the sum of their parts. It isn't always just about the product and service but also the connection you have with the person behind the brand. For example, you can welcome prospective clients with a personal email and include a video clip addressing them by their name and thanking them for contacting you. Replies should never be

automated and sent instantly, if not within 24 hours. This is crucial when competitors are a click away and customers have little patience.

To qualify for the Olympics athletes compete in pre-qualifiers before reaching the finals. In today's digital landscape, almost everybody has an equal chance at qualifying for the finals and becoming a medalist since everyone owns a mobile device on the start line. The success of each lap will be determined, in part, by their digital footprint and ability to articulate their product in a manner that resonates with the market.

Fake and flashy is out. Being transparent, small, and keeping it real are in. Technology can be used to deliver a "mom and pop" store experience provided it's personal and genuine. Nothing can replace a strong relationship built on a foundation of trust and respect between two humans. Everything about "You" and not just your product is the new competitive advantage.

Differentiate by sharing your story and delivering an exceptional experience through cross-channels on and offline. Don't just sell the merits of your products and services but become trusted advisors. After all, nobody can replicate your story or the personal experience you deliver. The experience is the interaction and feelings exchanged between you and your client, one that big companies try to emulate but are challenged by scale. Nimble start up brands can have a personal dialog with their customers and develop rapport that can heavily influence sales.

As fashion brands are challenged to stand-out in an increasingly crowded market, customers will be swayed to support those that connect with them on a personal level. Those who operate on the premise of building brands around the human condition will win. They'll be the ones who not only survive online laps, but become brand and sales medalists.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Thales', with a stylized flourish at the end.

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