

Technology & Business Insight – From Concept to Consumer

Apparel™

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TOP INNOVATORS

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COVERSTORY

This year’s crop of Innovators is on the front lines when it comes to harnessing technology to please their customers and make their businesses run better. In the profiles that follow, you’ll learn how companies are innovating in a multitude of ways, from new product ideation, to tapping into data to improve fit and maximize fabric yield, to refining garments for particular professions, to embracing BI for greater insight into supply chains and inventory, to forging new digital strategies and much, much more.

BY JORDAN K. SPEER, JESSICA BINNS, DEENA M. AMATO-MCCOY AND LIZ HARTNETT

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TOP INNO

Apparel's 2016

It's no secret that listening to the consumer is a critical component of retail success, but the role that technology is playing in both listening to the consumer and enabling solutions to meet their desires is at an all-time high. Consider first that consumers are sharing more than ever before via social media. That advanced algorithms are enabling companies to yield more actionable intelligence from the data they gather — which is greater than it's ever been before — data that can then be fed back into the supply chain to improve everything from design to sourcing to fulfillment to assortment planning to marketing. Apparel companies are also able to respond better to consumer demands due to rapid advances in materials technology and IoT that are enabling the development of more comfortable and functional and stylish apparel. The variety of innovation in our industry is nothing short of remarkable.

This year's crop of Innovators is on the front lines when it comes to harnessing technology to please their customers and make their businesses run better. In the profiles that follow, you'll learn how companies are tapping into data to improve fit and maximize fabric yield, to refine garments for particular professions and gain greater insight into inventory. One of this year's Innovators is incorporating a smart yarn into its denim that uses infrared technology to improve the appearance of cellulite by absorbing body heat. Another has stepped away from the brink of bankruptcy in part by tapping into the joy created by the friendships that had developed at the store level between associates and customers.

We honor all of our innovators for listening to their customers, for their hard work — and for their moments of inspiration that fuel excitement and progress for our entire industry.



OVATORS

Lucky Brand Jeans

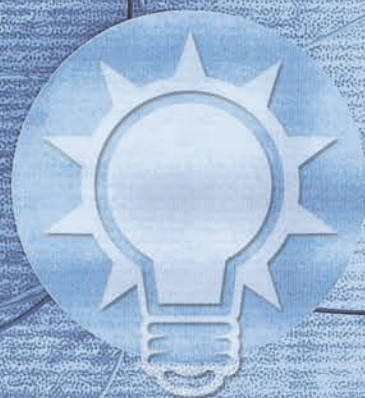
Los Angeles, Calif. | www.luckybrand.com

NOMINATED BY: NetSuite | www.netsuite.com

Brand longevity and industry experience go a long way in the apparel marketplace, but when it comes to omnichannel retailing — which today, is really just retailing — new start-ups often come on the scene with a built-in advantage. That is, they're not bogged down by cumbersome legacy systems whose siloed channels and custom integrations are a major hindrance to a seamless supply chain experience, for both company and consumer.

It's rare that an established brand has the opportunity to start with a clean slate on which to build its IT, but that's just what happened for Lucky Brand. The denim maker, which is positioned as "accessible premium" and was founded 26 years ago by Gene Montesano and Barry Perlman, was acquired in December 2013 for \$225 million by private equity firm Leonard Green & Partners from its former parent, Fifth & Pacific Companies, now Kate Spade.

Under its former owner, "IT had been one of many shared services, which Lucky Brand needed to build from scratch, in order to become an independent, stand-alone company," says Jason Richard, who joined as the team leader five months into the two-year time-frame that Lucky had been given to transition off of its legacy ERP platform while building an entirely new IT team and infrastructure to support growth of its wholesale customers, its expanding store network and increasingly omnichannel consumers. Lucky sells direct



BY JORDAN K. SPEER,
JESSICA BINNS,
DEENA M. AMATO-MCCOY
AND LIZ HARTNETT

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to consumer via its e-commerce website and 259 Lucky Brand store locations (many of which are currently being converted from mall-based locations to free-standing stores), and also distributes through large department store retailers including Macy's, Dillard's and Nordstrom.

How did it go? "We built an IT team while completing the entire transition in 15 months," says Richard.

Lucky Brand named its program Project Leapfrog, "a mantra to everyone that we would take advantage of this unique opportunity to completely reinvent the technology landscape," says Richard. Critical to its transformation was an ERP solution that could meet its immediate needs as well as one that would scale with its growth, he says.

Richard, who already had experience working with cloud-based applications during his tenure at Williams-Sonoma, thought that Lucky would benefit from the agility and scalability the cloud would offer to both its retail and wholesale businesses. After evaluating several ERP providers, the company selected NetSuite OneWorld for the technical flexibility that its cloud offering provided, the ability to implement on a very aggressive schedule, and the overall cost of implementation, says Richard. The system runs business processes for financial consolidation, inventory management, procure-to-pay, fixed assets, and multi-currency and multi-tax compliance management.

A key feature of the ERP solution was the integration of inventory and financials on a unified platform — having that one single version of the truth will "ultimately be the biggest game-changer," he says. "In many companies, there are often timing issues, discrepancies or reconciliations to perform, leading to questions about the integrity of data at the core. The integrated foundation is key to helping us manage our business effectively.

The trust it can now have in the integrity of its data — and having just one version of it — opens up possibilities across the organization. Internally, says Richard "our largely-millennial user base appreciates the modern feel and response of the solution" — a crucial point when you consider how difficult it can be to recruit and keep good talent. Millennials, in particular, do not want to be bogged down with systems that use clunky and counterintuitive technology.

The new system has also automated business activities that were previously manual, or required multiple entries across disparate systems, he says, which frees up time for that user base to focus on tasks that build value — such as expanding its channel offerings and getting hot new product in front of Millennial shoppers quickly.

Most companies don't get the chance to start with a clean slate. Sometimes you're just Lucky.

— Jordan K. Speer

Reebok CrossFit Apparel

Canton, Mass. | news.reebok.com/GLOBAL

NOMINATED BY: Alvanon | www.alvanon.com

In 2010, CrossFit® signed a 10-year partnership with Reebok to produce the brand's apparel and footwear. As Reebok's experience with the sport's athletes grew, it became clear that the CrossFit athlete had a different body shape from other athletes, and that athletic wear designed for other sports was not meeting the unique needs of this group.

"If you talk to any CrossFit athlete, they'll all say they have a tough time finding clothing that fits their bodies, whether athletic wear or jeans. They have an extreme body shape," says Michael Morganti, director of pattern apparel.

Most athletes have a somewhat standard chest-to-hip-to-waist ratio, he explains, but this proportion is more extreme for a CrossFit athlete than for the general athletic population, which has a lot to do with the movements performed in wods (that's CrossFit parlance for workout of the day).

"There's a lot of squatting and lifting and other exercises that build a big upper body and big lower body, but in their core, they become very lean."

The bottom half, with its defined glutes and quad muscles, presents the most challenges when it comes to fit. "CrossFit athletes have to have almost everything altered. If it fits the hips, they have to take the waist in, and vice versa. You'd go into a CrossFit box [that's CrossFit parlance for a CrossFit gym] and see them working out in tights or elastic-waist-band shorts, because they have trouble finding woven shorts that fit."

As the relationship with CrossFit evolved and Reebok began to understand that the sport produced a different body type, it decided to take a closer and more scientific look at the body shapes and sizes of the sport's athletes with the goal of fulfilling



its customers' needs across all ranges of fitness or athletic ability.

While it had anecdotal evidence, there was no hard, empirical data about body variations, and that's when Reebok decided to tap the expertise of Alvanon and Sizestream so that it could understand the CrossFit body — not only how it differed from athletes in other competitive disciplines, but also how CrossFit bodies themselves were similar and different from each other — and develop clothing to match.

In gathering data, Alvanon scanned the bodies of more than 500 CrossFit athletes, both amateurs and professionals, many of whom were competing in the

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Reebok CrossFit games. The scanner's 16 infrared light points scanned each body, generating more than 80 measurements, from which were generated 3D electronic avatars of each person's body shape.

The company knew going in that the CrossFit athlete had a small waist, big hips and a big chest, but body scanning allowed Reebok to see distribution of muscle in detail. For example, says Morganti, "we knew that [CrossFit athletes'] waists were small, but their waists aren't smaller than other athletes; it's just that the ratio is greater. Their waists are actually getting bigger, but not at the rate that their chests are, so they have a very tapered V shape." Generally speaking, the CrossFit athlete has a much more extreme distribution of muscle, he says.

Once it had collected the data, Reebok worked with Alvanon to analyze it and develop a unique proprietary fit standard

that accommodated the CrossFit body's differences. "It wasn't just about increasing, but enlarging in specific places," explains Morganti. For example, he said, "How do you make a pair of woven board shorts fit the hip and thigh, but also the waist when you have that extreme [variance between them]? You have to make sure the back rise isn't plunging down. Often, you'd see that the athletes would be fine when they squatted down, and then when they stood up, the shorts would be stuck around the thigh. If you're squatting with heavy weights, the last thing you want is to be uncomfortable," he says.

The companies worked together to create new pattern blocks and grade rules, and from the data, Reebok was able to determine such factors as the ideal placement for cut seams, where a garment needed unrestricted movement and where it required

the insertion of more specific zoning in terms of heat regulation and anti-abrasion protection.

Reebok launched with the reworked line in fall 2014, and since then has been continuing to refine and develop it, performing wear testing with its CrossFit athletes — this is "for CrossFitters by CrossFitters," says Morganti — and also employing both live models and fit forms (developed specifically for the CrossFit body by Alvanon) to ensure it is meeting the needs of athletes in this popular sport, which is growing rapidly around the world, says Morganti.

"The amount of time and energy we put into developing this line is really paying off," he says. "It's the only apparel line developed specifically to fit, and enhance the performance of the CrossFit athlete."

— Jordan K. Speer

Tommy John

New York, N.Y. | www.tommyjohn.com

NOMINATED BY: Self

During his five years working as a medical device salesman, Tom Patterson wore a suit and tie, and for five years, he was aggravated by the undershirts, underwear and socks that untucked easily and yellowed quickly, bunched uncomfortably and sagged.

When the Great Recession of 2008 hit and Patterson was laid off from his job, it seemed the perfect opportunity to invent some undergarments that would address all of those problems.

Patterson not only made it his mission to solve those problems, but to use humor to get men talking about them. After all, you can't really address a problem if you don't acknowledge that it exists. A few minutes at TommyJohn.com will get you laughing at the company's video of "The Big Adjustment" (you know, the creative ways men try to subtly, er, unbunch their underwear), tag line: "You can't un-see it. But we can make sure you never have to see it again."

The conversation around men's underwear has not evolved much since a gyrating Marky Mark famously remarked, "Now that could definitely come between me and my Calvins" 25 years ago, says Patterson, but Tommy John is changing all that. "The Big Adjustment video really addresses a problem that guys have," says Patterson. "It's an uncomfortable experience that all guys can relate to."

Since its launch in 2008, Tommy John has continued to work with mills and factories around the globe to innovate and create problem-solving products from loungewear to socks by focusing



on fabric (such as its micro modal that never pills and looks newer longer), fit (its patented undershirt design is guaranteed never to come untucked) and function (it's Quick Draw® Fly — well, you get the picture).

In November, Tommy John introduced its newest product, Air, to address the need for lighter, more comfortable, more quick-drying, anti-odor undergarments, and it's been the company's most successful launch to date.

"I fly 100,000-150,000 miles each year," says Patterson. Understanding the benefits of traveling light and getting "more out of less," Patterson wanted to develop a product that could be washed easily in a hotel sink, for example, and that would dry quickly. Tommy John worked on the program for about two years, "literally putting underwear in a bowl, taking it out, and figuring it out how long it takes to dry with a stopwatch, testing, getting guys' feedback." ▶

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Air is the result. It dries in two to four hours, and Patterson claims it is the lightest men's underwear ever created. The underwear weighs an average 1.5 ounces, and the undershirt 2.0 ounces. "It's half the weight of any product we've created previously."

"Our customer, the Tommy John guy, likes evolution, innovation. We're never going to be the cheapest, but we're going to be the best quality, and that allows us to build really high customer loyalty," says Patterson. "Guys always want to feel that they have an edge. We pay attention to the small details we think may make a difference. ... We work with manufacturers and mills across the world to solve problems we feel are in the market that other brands haven't told a story about."

That said, "we don't launch a new product unless we have a reason to," says Patterson, who says the company doesn't subscribe to the "Cheesecake Factory menu" philosophy, i.e. there are so many choices that it takes forever to figure out what you want. Tommy John sticks with a strategy more resembling the menu of In-N-Out Burger — a limited number of offerings, but each the very best. "We have the best micro modal, the best cotton," he says.

Indeed, Tommy John is definitely not your five-to-a-pack underwear. Its undergarments are sold in units of one at retailers such as Bloomingdales, Nordstrom, Mitchell's, Stanley Korshak and about 500 other stores across the country and Canada. It also sells online, and ships to more than 50 countries.

Tommy John has clearly struck a chord, with the company growing two and a half times in the past two years, and forecasting 100 percent growth this year. "Men have had to take a MacGyver approach to jerry-rigging their underwear. ... I've heard of guys attaching garter clips from the bottom of their shirts to the top of their socks to keep them in place.

"Men don't talk about [the challenges of undergarments] ... and they can't even remember the underwear they're wearing, but they remember the first time they wear Tommy John. When they try it, it's an 'a-ha' moment: 'Hey, this is not constricting or smashing my important assets.' Guys don't like to feel restricted.

We're getting guys to talk about underwear at holiday parties, at dinners. They've found something that has finally solved all of their problems," Patterson concludes.

— Jordan K. Speer



CCW Breakaways

New Cumberland, Pa. | www.ccwbreakaways.com

NOMINATED BY: Self



We can't all have 007's tailor, but thanks to CCW Breakaways, law enforcement, military and security personnel have new clothing options specifically designed with them in mind. Specially designed concealed-carry pants from CCW Breakaways are also available to the general public.

Aimed at a very particular market, the CCW designs are the result of extensive research and experimentation. The pants are fashionable and well made, and they incorporate a unique holster pocket that allows for less conspicuous and more comfortable carrying of weapons. The products are used in the military and for law enforcement, and they're especially useful in "covert" situations where carriers wish to remain inconspicuous.

The design of these garments is so unique that the designers, Jay and Georgeann French — both certified NRA instructors — have obtained five related patents. These are men's pants with built-in holster pockets made of rip-stop nylon that have adjustable depth, Velcro straps and enlargeable openings. Basically, they're designed to make carrying a handgun more comfortable and accessing the weapon faster and easier, with only one hand needed.

These pockets replace the traditional holster, which hasn't seen much change in design over the years.

This update improves comfort and performance, and the products available include shorts, cargo pants, khakis and jeans. The wearer can comfortably squat, sit, bend over, or lie down, thanks to the placement of the breakaway pocket.

In addition to better comfort, CCW Breakaway's products give the wearer a tactical advantage. Concealment is more complete, and deploying the weapon is much faster than with conventional holsters. According to Jay French, this deployment is "pre-staged," because the weapon's position is more accessible, allowing the user to obtain a full grip while the weapon is still concealed.

These concealed carry pants are a prime example of a product developed to solve a specific problem. The design is unique and use of the pants has been shown to reduce draw time by as much as 60 percent. The company reports that its customers can deploy their weapons in .66 seconds.

In business since 2010, the company continues to add new products, including belts and other accessories. Plans include production of a ladies' purse for the near future. The products are currently available online and at specialty events held around the country.

— Liz Hartnett



ABL Denim

Los Angeles, Calif. | www.ABLdenim.com

NOMINATED BY: Self

Innovation often begins with identifying a need. Stephanie Alves was aware of the need for custom clothing design for the disability community, thanks in part to watching family members cope with mobility challenges. She designed jeans for them that met their needs and were also fashionable and well made.

This inspired her to launch ABL (Adaptive Brand and Lifestyle) Denim in 2013. According to the company, it is the only manufacturer of adaptive jeans for men, women and children.

As CEO of ABL Denim, Alves applies 25 years of design experience to the task, having worked at prominent fashion houses including Ann Taylor Loft.

The company caters to a niche market that represents 56 million Americans. People of all ages can find dressing difficult due to a variety of conditions, including multiple sclerosis, spinal cord injury, stroke, autism, tactile sensitivities and arthritis. Whatever their condition, says Alves, "they still want jeans, like everyone else."

For people with such challenges, ABL Denim designs jeans and shorts using premium quality denim and then incorporates features that make them easier and more comfortable to use, including: zipper access through either the front or both sides; longer zippers with larger pulls for greater access; hook and bar easy front closure; higher back waists with elastic that allows for stretching across the back; side pockets for catheter bags or personal items; and ultra-soft denim material and inside-out seams to provide for added comfort for people with sensory issues.

One of the most popular designs is a skinny basic jean with inner leg zippers to assist in getting the foot through the leg opening and/or using a catheter. The company plans new designs based on requests that it receives, so customer loyalty and satisfaction is



high. This makes the work very fulfilling, according to Alves, who said, "We often hear 'I haven't worn jeans in years and finally I can.'"

The future looks bright for ABL. A \$250,000 Mission Main Street grant received in 2014 helped spur development of the company, which recently added dealers in Canada and the U.K.

CEO Alves hopes to partner with rehabilitation centers and hospital shops to offer ABL products more widely. Walmart recently became the first mainstream retailer to offer ABL Denim products, available online and in stores. It carries a lower-priced men's jean designed specifically for those with limited mobility. The design incorporates strategic placement of zippers, pockets and seaming, simplifying daily tasks while still providing a fashionable fit. Thoughtful details include lasso-style pull loops on zippers — a boon to those with finger dexterity issues.

ABL Denim is at the leading edge of this niche market, combining top quality materials with ingenious design to empower those with daily physical challenges.

— Liz Hartnett

New Balance

Boston, Mass. | www.newbalance.com

NOMINATED BY: Aptos | www.aptos.com

Scroll through your Facebook feed and you'll likely see smiling snapshots of folks in your network posing at the finish line of some race somewhere. More than 550,000 people finished a marathon in the United States last year, on top of the countless others who entered half marathons, 10Ks, 5Ks and more. Running remains a stubbornly popular way to get fit and stay that way, or just get moving, period.

This is all good news, of course, for athletic footwear and apparel company New Balance of Boston, known first and foremost as a running brand. "New Balance consumers are looking to perform



at their highest level and training to complete that goal is most important," says business solutions manager Dave Chaput. "They may run, but they also engage in a variety of sports and fitness activities. They crave technology and demand performance, but aesthetic carries equal weight."

New Balance's new-for-2016 Trinamic Performance Collection strives to be just that blend of technology and aesthetics. The line of tops and bottoms for both women and men incorporates NB Flex X technology, described as a pinnacle 3D stretch technology



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that offers a close, comfortable, breathable fit. "Strategically placed laser cut perforation patterns, inspired by Data to Design thermal imaging, optimizes breathability and adds to the overall design and modern aesthetic of the garments," Chaput says.

While it's focusing on delivering innovative products for customers, in recent years, New Balance has transitioned from mostly a wholesaler and manufacturer to now running 55 stores, including several outlets, and expanding its web and licensee presence. To drive this continued growth, the company deployed Aptos Merchandising, a cloud-based retail platform, to minimize its out-of-pocket IT investment while giving its merchandising, operations and finance teams robust tools to streamline the business. It also upgraded to a new point-of-sale system in order to handle omnichannel selling. New Balance is building a foundation to support the next generation of retail that includes shared item, price, inventory, promo engine, financial structure, and customer across back office retail channels.



Prior to the deployment, Chaput says, processes in both the web and retail channels were largely manual and Excel-based. Employees wasted 500 hours each year inputting style creation and UPC maintenance across both factory and corporate stores combined. By automating that process and managing by exception, New Balance now frees up 400 merchandising hours annually. What's more, merchandise replenishment now takes only one hour, a drastic reduction from the 41 hours employees used to spend on the top 50 styles across all stores each month. This saves 492 additional merchandising hours that the department can use for more meaningful work.

New Balance has also been able to improve stock rates at size/width level while increasing order frequency. Staff spends just 2,500 hours receiving footwear by carton, a 50 percent decrease. The company now automates and calculates taxes more accurately, saving 30 IT hours every month. And employee number setup and discount monitoring at the register go much more smoothly and quickly now, redirecting 240 back-of-house hours onto the sales floor each year.

As New Balance grows as a retail brand, it's finding its social media voice, too, interacting with consumers on Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, Periscope, and Pinterest and targeting those consumers by category, (such as baseball, women, or running) to build relationships with them based on their interests. "This allows us to serve unique consumer experiences and information specific to their lifestyle," adds Chaput.

— Jessica Binns

See Aptos' ad on page 15.

Patagonia

Ventura, Calif. | www.patagonia.com

NOMINATED BY: Alvanon | www.alvanon.com

It's no secret that Patagonia loves the earth. "Everything we make is with the environment in mind," says product development director Alma Balling. "We try to use less harmful materials and make sure that when we can, we incorporate recycled fabrics. We use all-organic cotton for styles that are cotton-based. It's important to produce something that's going to last forever, especially jackets and similar products that could be passed down as heirlooms."

Whereas many apparel companies today peddle fast fashion that wears out seemingly overnight, Patagonia wants customers to enjoy its outdoor-oriented products forever, offering an Ironclad Guarantee that enables shoppers to bring back purchases to any of its retail stores for return, repair or refund. It's a bold promise, and one that made Patagonia think twice about a big driver of apparel purchases: fit.

Producing 12 categories of technical apparel products is one of Patagonia's big challenges. "If a customer comes in and he wears a medium in running shorts, we want to be sure he can buy



the same size in outerwear and the fit is consistent," Balling explains, adding that the company produces 900 styles for each of its two seasons annually.

"We have really loyal customers," she continues. "You can see in the reviews on our website that the customers are pretty vocal. We'll hear feedback from them asking, 'why did you change XYZ?'"

Realizing there was a significant opportunity to address customer concerns and standardize fit across all apparel products, two years ago Patagonia enlisted the help of industry fit leader Alvanon, with which it has worked in the past. Alvanon analyzed

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Patagonia's product lifecycle from design through sales, including data such as sales by size, return figures, and customer feedback. Armed with this information, Alvanon reviewed its own vast database of consumer body scan data to determine the core size of the Patagonia customer.

Balling says the core size for men that the two firms came up with was a very close match, and her team only made a few minor adjustments to the grading standard. Patagonia discovered, however, that the core female customer has an athletic, less curvy body type, she adds.

Involving designers, product developers, patternmakers, the quality team and the audit department, Patagonia successfully created a new fit platform for all product categories, including new fit blocks and libraries that are easily distributed to its global network of vendors. "The block library is the starting point for most of our products," Balling says. "It ensures consistency and that things like arm holes are always the same size."

As a result of the fit project, Balling says, Patagonia now introduces more styles closer to market and has product developers and designers working on innovation concepts earlier on in the process, instead of not having enough time at the ideation phase. "That has set the bar pretty high for us," she says.

What's more, over two years the company has improved its garments completed on time rate by 29 percent. "We're meeting production schedules and not jeopardizing on-time delivery," Balling says. It also takes 20 fewer days, on average, to secure final photo approval, further accelerating the design and development process.

As sales data starts to trickle in, Patagonia is looking forward to enlisting the quality team to sift through fit returns data and leveraging the e-commerce and customer service teams to analyze customer comments on the company website to determine if shoppers are more satisfied with the newly standardized fit.

— Jessica Binns

Omega Apparel

Nashville, Tenn. | www.omegaapparelinc.com

NOMINATED BY: Self

The craft of apparel manufacturing is not something you hear a lot about these days, but it's at the heart of this company's business strategy. Based near Nashville, Omega Apparel was established in 1994 to produce dress uniforms for the U.S. Armed Forces. The company continues in that capacity, but recently took steps to expand the scope of its operations and "lead the rebuilding of the U.S. apparel industry."

When budget cuts reduced the volume of work coming from the military, Omega Apparel's reaction was bold. "Instead of downsizing, we bought a second building and launched a full service apparel factory, offering design, production and other services," said president and CEO Dean Wegner. "We plan to hire 1,000 employees over five years."

This reflects the company's commitment to its stated mission, which is to create jobs in the apparel industry. A key part of the plan is training. Omega Apparel partners with community groups to provide training to grow a skilled workforce that will master the craft and become a new generation of workers for American manufacturing. Area non-profits, led by Catholic Social Services, provide the training site and machinery that will prepare skilled workers for the apparel industry.

Omega Apparel's location may be a positive factor in the plan's success. As *StyleBlueprint* recently pointed out: Nashville and the surrounding South-

east region have the largest concentration of independent fashion brands outside of New York and Los Angeles. This seems like fertile ground for the skilled workforce that's now being nurtured through the partnership.

Wegner believes this to be true, and said that there is support in the region for Omega's efforts. "The percentage of clothing Americans buy that's made in the U.S. has dwindled to just over 2 percent," he said. "People want to see apparel manufacturing come back. Our mission is to create more jobs in the industry, both for our company and others."

One way that this is being accomplished is through Omega's diversification, which allows the company to serve small designers and entrepreneurs while remaining the top supplier of dress uniform pants and skirts to the U.S. Armed Forces. Encouraging the growth of new businesses involves the production of smaller batches, and providing a full range of services. As these new businesses thrive, they in turn provide more opportunities for jobs in the industry.

Wegner is optimistic about the plan, but recognizes the challenges involved in reviving the apparel industry in his region. "I never realized how hard this would be," he said. "But if it were easy, every one would be doing it."

— Liz Hartnett



MAS Active

Colombo, Sri Lanka | www.masholdings.com

NOMINATED BY: ThreadSol | www.threadsol.com

Forward thinking has a funny little habit of showing up in interesting ways. Back in 2011, the innovation division of MAS Holdings, Asia's largest apparel manufacturer and exporter, created the world's first carbon-neutral bra in partnership with British high street retailer Marks & Spencer. The pretty underpinning was produced in one of MAS's Sri Lankan factories that's powered by hydroelectricity from a nearby waterway as well as rooftop solar panels. Lighting came from both natural sunlight and low-energy light bulbs. The carbon dioxide produced in making the bra was offset by 6,000 trees planted in the community surrounding the factory, including native flora to enhance the wildlife as well as fruit trees that were envisioned to drive revenue for the local population.

Proving that sustainable thinking isn't just for splashy ideas such as the zero-impact bra, MAS Holdings took a good hard look at its MAS Active division, which specializes in sportswear, to find opportunities to run a better business and use its raw materials in a more earth-friendly fashion. With a global footprint from the headquarters in the Sri Lankan capital of Colombo to facilities in China, India and Jordan, MAS Active wanted to significantly trim its material costs after corporate lead-

ers determined that a full 40 percent of its turnover was devoted to buying fabric.

To achieve this goal, MAS Active launched Project Consumption and identified several areas ripe for saving fabric: first, during the initial buying stage, and then through lay planning, marker efficiency, sales order clubbing and width segregation during production. In addition to embracing time-tested methods of reducing consumption such as upgrading to a new CAD system, MAS Active went one step further by adopting ThreadSol's fabric yield estimation system, IntelloBuy, in order to purchase no more than the material needed, as well as the fabric planning system, IntelloCut, to maximize the fabric in hand.

Using the new fabric systems drastically improved MAS Active's materials usage and processes. Instead of navigating 18 critical steps beginning from receiving customer orders to creating material purchase orders for suppliers, the company whittled that unwieldy process down to just six.

Chandrakumar Theivendran, head of business at MAS Active, says the old way of working was hampered by reliance on manual processes, such as shifting information in and out of Excel, entering

data points by hand, and physically transferring documents from one location to another. "As a result there was overprocessing, due to stringent customer order processing timelines that resulted in overtime and weekend work, low productivity, duplication of work and errors, and finally poor employee job satisfaction," he explains.

Today, MAS Active has cut three to five days out of its typical garment lead time and also drastically reduced overall production lead time, creating 100,000 hours of capacity and enhanced operational output. Using IntelloBuy, which integrates with its CAD platform, reduced the company's buying consumption by 2 percent to 3 percent.

IntelloCut has further transformed the production process. For every order, IntelloCut plugs into the fabric store and selects the rolls with fewest shade, shrinkage and width variations, grouping the fabric together to simplify on-floor variations while maintaining quality. Next, the software examines millions of marker and roll usage combinations to formulate a cut plan, a lay plan and a roll plan with as little wastage as possible. In total, IntelloCut has reduced MAS Active's fabric consumption by as much as 5 percent.

According to Theivendran, manual work is virtually eliminated, processes have been standardized and are now 99 percent error-free, and the best part — weekend shifts are a thing of the past. MAS Active's clients are happy with the results, too.

"The benefits of this project have been demonstrated by meeting our clients' performance index ratings and also becoming sustainable in our supply chain, which we achieved by reducing the carbon footprint as a result of optimizing the material yield," Theivendran concludes, "and we are also working on reducing the lead time in our value chain."

— Jessica Binns



Hardwick Clothes

Cleveland, TN | www.hardwick.com

NOMINATED BY: Self

Stolen identity. It's something we all fear, and it's on the rise. If you've ever had your credit card or other ID stolen, you know how expensive and time-consuming it can be to get your affairs back in order. And if you're a guy in a sharp-looking suit, well, heck, you're probably an even more valuable target. Today, technology provides more opportunities for the bad guys to pilfer your data — but also more opportunities for the good guys to stay one step ahead.

Enter Hardwick Clothes, America's oldest maker of tailored clothing, whose latest offering is the first of its kind in the industry. The clothing maker partnered with Germany-based Kufner on a made-for-textiles version of the Faraday cage — designed to block electric fields — realizing its potential to provide a layer of security in suit coat and blazer pockets, where men carry their wallets. Hardwick obtained the exclusive rights in North America for the technology from Kufner, which originally developed related technology for the German military. If you're wearing one of its high-end H-Tech suits or blazers, no one can skim the data from your credit card. It's an innovation worthy of James Bond.

The technology, dubbed the Hardwick H-Tech Privacy Pocket, is the latest development from the 136-year-old company, which boasts a long history of adapting to change. Its 175,000-square-foot facility features a high-tech testing and collaborative design space — a facility more typical of Silicon Valley than the Smokey Mountains.

Indeed, Hardwick, founded in 1880, has faced its share of challenges, including factory fires, The Great Depression, two world wars and, more recently, competition from offshore sourcing and a waning interest in tailored clothing as the “business casual” trend took hold, says Jake Cremer, director of brand and digital strategy. (Interesting factoid: during the Great Depression, as demand plummeted, the company reduced costs by moving its sewing operations into



workers' homes, delivering fabric and picking up finished product via truck.)

In 2014, after struggling for several years, the company was acquired by a Cleveland, Tennessee entrepreneur, Allan Jones, and it switched gears — rather than try to compete on price, Hardwick decided to establish itself as a “great American brand,” says Cremer, going “up market” to reach a different type of customer through better men's specialty stores and via hardwick.com, by modernizing its factory and improving quality. “We've also introduced new fits to appeal to different markets and we're sourcing beautiful fabrics from some of the best mills in Italy,” he says, adding that the company is also developing its own high-tech fabrics with mills throughout the world.

It's an approach that has proven successful, he says. To wit: the company recently won *Garden & Gun's* “Made in the South Award” for its Super 150s Italian Blazer. “It's of a quality Hardwick wasn't [previously] known for and it retailed at twice our normal price point,” says Cremer. “It had a 90 percent sell through in just a couple of weeks.”

As its product has evolved, so has its customer, and the Hardwick brand is a distinct part of its selling power. “Our heritage is important to our customers, as well as the fact that we continue to make our product in the United States; they want to know that their purchase contributes to more than 300 jobs in Cleveland, Tennessee. ... People appreciate integrity and a story,” says Cremer.

This is also a crowd that expects its clothing to “perform like its smart phones,” he says, “and so we've tried to take the same approach.” Prime example: the H-Tech Pocket; but also, the company has focused on comfort, incorporating performance features such as stretch and wrinkle resistance into what were once considered basic suits, he says.

“Every season we try to identify emerging fashion trends with an American sensibility,” says Cremer. “We're still focused on fabric, however there's a special effort to see how we can improve the interior components of the garment, in both quality and performance — items customers can't necessarily see, but they can tell [a difference] by the way it feels.”

In particular, for spring 2017, Hardwick has identified a new type of chest piece for its garments that improves comfort. “Traditionally, a chest piece was made out of a stiff horse hair to give structure to the garment, but it came at the cost of stiffness and weight,” says Cremer. By contrast, Hardwick's new canvas chest piece incorporates a newly developed fiber along with the horsehair that makes it much lighter in weight and softer to the touch. “The result is a jacket that feels less like a tailored jacket and more like your favorite sweater,” he concludes.

— Jordan K. Speer

Anatomie

Miami, Fla. | www.anatomiestyle.com

NOMINATED BY: Pam Kramer & Associates | www.pamkramerandassociates.com and Self-nominated

Have you ever found yourself carefully tucking your clothing into tissue paper before carefully setting it in your suitcase, hoping it won't wrinkle? Most of us women have been faced at one time or another with the challenge of packing our luggage as carefully as possible so that clothing arrives unruffled at our travel destinations — and most of us have failed.

But wrinkles aren't a problem if your wardrobe is drawn from Anatomie, which has created an innovative line of chic, high-performance travel clothing that is designed to be, as co-founder and CEO Kate Boyer says, "as flexible as your jetsetter lifestyle."

After seeing too many women traveling in sweatpants and yoga pants, Boyer recognized an unmet need for garments that could travel well and support an active lifestyle but were also fashionable. Thus was born Anatomie, founded by Boyer and her husband, Shawn — a former body-builder who already had deep industry experience in technical fabrics for custom-designed performance apparel. The brand blends a European fashion sensibility with high performance and great comfort, she says.

Made from the finest French and Italian performance fabrics — the company uses the same "designer" mills and factories as brands such as Burberry, Cucinelli, Armani, and Versace Sport, says Boyer — Anatomie nonetheless offers a price point that is a fraction of the cost of these high-end designer lines.

The company's garments dry quickly and are highly breathable, but they're also easy to care for — all of the pieces are machine washable and remain free of wrinkles, whether you wear them onto the plane or stuff them into your suitcase. They also do not shrink or stretch over time, are super lightweight (pants are .6 pounds, for example), body shaping and transition easily from day to night.

Now, you certainly don't have to travel to wear Anatomie — it travels as well from board room to dinner as from plane to safari — but the brand has focused on this unique

segment and established itself as a 'go-to' brand in this category, says Boyer. In fact, 90 percent of Anatomie's 11,000 private clients recommend the brand for travel, and 80 percent actually board the plane in Anatomie, she says.

How Anatomie came to dominate in this category also demonstrates its flair for innovation: the company established a partner program and has connected with many elite travel-related businesses, including NetJets (owned by Warren Buffett's Berkshire Hathaway), IC Bellagio, Nobel Travel, China Elite Focus, Trans Africa Safaris, Made for Spain, Inspirato (the luxury destination club owned by American Express) and the International Spa Association.

As part of this unique program, Anatomie and each of its partners have dedicated

phone lines to serve customers on either side, and each provides VIP perks to the other. Nobel Travel clients, for example, receive a gift certificate for Anatomie clothing, along with a one-on-one consultation with the Boyers to assist in selecting the most appropriate items for their travel itinerary, while Anatomie clients connected to IC Bellagio will receive perks such as complimentary city tours and dinners. "It works both ways," says Boyer.

Anatomie is an incredibly high-touch business. The brand is available in more than 300 high-end specialty stores including boutiques, country clubs, golf shops and resorts such as Four Seasons and Canyon Ranch, and the Boyers also work closely with clients to help select the garments that best suit their travel plans — what you'd pack for an African safari wouldn't necessarily work for a weekend yoga retreat, for example. The Boyers are on the road almost every day, visiting these locations as well as installing pop-up stores and trunk shows across the country.

The company's extreme attention to quality and fit are maintained consistently by having feet on the ground where its apparel is produced. Anatomie's vice president of production, Cesario Mele, whose previous experience includes stints at Armani and Versace, moved himself and his entire family from Italy to Hungary to provide the same type of high-touch attention to production that the Boyers are known for on the client side. He also travels to the company's other factories in Italy, France and Romania.

This type of personalized attention has helped build Anatomie customers into loyalists: an amazing 65 percent of sales come from repeat customers, Boyer says. "When you talk about omnichannel, in terms of providing unique ways for customers to purchase apparel, this is a real game changer," she concludes.

— Jordan K. Speer



Delta Apparel

Duluth, Ga. | www.deltaapparel.com

NOMINATED BY: Self

A t-shirt is a t-shirt is a t-shirt, right? Wrong. While Americans show no signs of letting up on the athleisure trend, and for many that means spending the day in a t-shirt, it's not always one that provides both comfort and performance — and that's why Delta went to work on a new product for its customers.

When it was near launch of its new Delta Dri performance line, Delta Apparel decided to sample the product at a small "one-on-one" trade show, and provided each attendee with his or her own t-shirt. The next day at the show, attendees were wearing them in droves, sending the company photos of themselves wearing them out and about, and, says Mary Bostwick, director of marketing and customer service, they began purchasing them in such great quantities that the company has increased its forecast for the product five times!

Delta Apparel — the eponymous brand of Delta Apparel Inc., which is also parent to the Salt Life, Junk Food, Intensity, Softe and Art Gun brands — developed Delta Dri in response to what it saw as a need for a performance t-shirt with a softer,



better hand, rather than the "slick" feeling of polyester — "that feeling that you're encased in it, like a sausage," says Bostwick. It also wanted a fabric that didn't pill, and that would feature the antimicrobial and moisture-management properties of traditional polyester performance tees. Drawing on its experience developing private-label product for its clients, Delta went to work developing

a fabric that would meet all of those demands.

Enter the Delta Dri performance line, a super soft, antimicrobial, moisture-wicking t-shirt available in both the original 65 percent polyester/35 percent cotton (adult sizes only) and the more recently developed 100 percent poly (adults and youth sizes). Available in short and long sleeves, the t-shirts are great for a workout or for everyday wear, says Bostwick.

— Jordan K. Speer

Century Place Apparel

Charlotte, N.C. | www.centuryplace.com

NOMINATED BY: Bermuda Sands Apparel | www.bermudasandsapparel.com

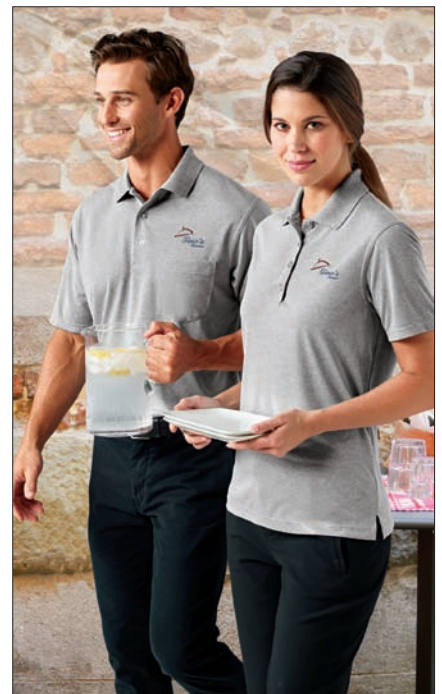
Not unlike individual consumers, distributors expect to have the ability to place online orders on a 24/7 basis — especially because they are often busy during normal business hours. This was one of many drivers for Century Place Apparel to revamp its e-commerce site to be more user-friendly, intuitive and engaging.

Charlotte, N.C.-based Century Place Apparel is a supplier of wearable styles for the uniform and promotional markets. As a vertical manufacturer, Century Place Apparel controls the manufacturing and quality of its performance wear from start to finish. The company's design team makes use of the latest industry developments, such as high lustre threads and performance microfibers, to create shirts with superior drape. It also utilizes technologies, such as snag resistance and moisture wicking, to produce products that are appealing, functional and comfortable.

Keeping all processing in-house, Century Place Apparel also manages the color selection, sizes and pricing of its three lines, Bermuda Sands, Century Place and Paragon, to make it easier for customers to find and buy exactly what they need for their business.

"What makes us different in the industry is we are vertical, meaning we control the entire process in-house, from knitting, dyeing, cutting and sewing to sourcing orders to fill inventory," said Tim Stiene, the company's vice president of sales. "All merchandise is made by us, and all manufacturing is done in Guatemala. This keeps design and production in the same hemisphere, an effort that allows us to manage inventory better."

These efforts have clearly helped Century Place Apparel create a niche in the marketplace, however the one area it inadvertently overlooked was the importance of its online



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presence. "Our site was not as current as it needed to be, and didn't give distributors the ease of use they needed," he explained. "After talking to our clients about how they want to use the site, and analyzing what our competitors were doing, we decided to take our site one step further."

Among the demands distributor clients had were the ability to gain information and pricing, and order merchandise "at any given moment," Stiene said. "The Internet is playing a significant role in the modern age, especially when shaping the direction of the ordering process. If we can't [conform], our customers will bypass us and go elsewhere."

Another challenge Century Place Apparel was eager to resolve was the quality of its online images. Oftentimes, only one color would be highlighted for specific merchandise. To engage clients, the company needed to present how all available colors look on all product lines. "Knowing a picture is worth a thousand words, we wanted to enable customers to see individual coloring and present each one in a user-friendly format," he said.

These prerequisites prompted the company to redesign its e-commerce site, and add more flexible functionality for everyone. The first step was to integrate its purchase order (PO) system from FDM₄. The PO solution, which was adopted in May

2014, provides real-time inventory down to the second. "Making data as real-time as this will play an intricate role in our future growth," Stiene explained.

Integrating the PO system with e-commerce allowed the web site to tie into inventory. As users log in and place an order, inventory is automatically pulled out of the inventory management system, and pricing is available in real-time. Orders are pushed through the platform, and shared with the warehouse, where orders are picked, packed and shipped, and payments are tendered. On average, the entire end-to-end process is complete within 30 minutes.

"In an omnichannel world, the ability to ship the same day is paramount," Stiene said. "In the past, we used to cut off order times, but now we can process same-day orders up until the end of the business day."

Century Place Apparel also upped the ante on its color rendering by offering individual images of all styles and colors, a move that allows customers to pick and use the exact color they are looking for in presentations. Once their product and color is chosen, another intuitive feature enables users to create a virtual sample.

With FDM₄ Decorator, users can create a custom design, from logos and embroidery to designs positioned across the front of shirts and uniforms. Users can select a product and then add text and graphics,

including personal images to customize the design. The software displays a virtual sample, and emails the client for approval. "Once the design is approved, the order moves through the FDM₄ system," he said.

The new web site launched early summer 2015, and the product Decorator module was added nine months ago. "It is an ever-changing program that we can evolve based on customer needs," Stiene said.

Since adding the PO system, and integrating it within the upgraded web site, the combination "has increased sales and is helping drive revenue to the bottom line," he said. "From a marketing perspective, the addition of customization and ease of use is addressing the needs of our customer demand. It is a combination that is contributing to our year-over-year growth."

Always eager to deliver a unique experience, Century Place Apparel is exploring new ways to engage its customers. Next up: educational videos. "These could be focused on how to sell product, how to embroider and decorate product, and techniques for better results, as well as how to handle different fabrics," Stiene said. "We want to become an informational source to learn about product, and by signing onto our site, they will be able to get the answers they need."

— Deena M. Amato-McCoy

FILA and Urban Outfitters

New York, N.Y. | www.fila.com and Philadelphia, Pa. | www.urbanoutfitters.com

NOMINATED BY: FILA

What's more powerful than one well-loved brand? Two well-loved brands! In an equation that seems to subvert normal math to the tune of $1+1=3$, the trend toward unique partnerships between apparel brands — or between apparel brands and retailers, or between apparel brands and other industry brands — is on the rise. We've seen everything from Alexander Wang at H&M to Barbie™ at Forever21, to Timberland boots made with Omni tires, and in Fall 2015, FILA and Urban Outfitters formed their own partnership, collaborating to

launch an exclusive collection of apparel and accessories, drawing upon FILA's iconic heritage and infusing it with a modern twist that would appeal to the UO customer seeking vintage-inspired styles.

For inspiration, FILA dug deep into its archives — literally — sending "coffins" of apparel from the FILA museum in Biella, Italy to UO's design team in the United States. After looking through FILA's rich cache, UO decided to anchor the Fall collaboration by updating FILA's iconic Borg tennis polo for a new generation. (The ten-

nis star's endorsement helped launch FILA into sportswear in the 1970s, an evolution for the brand, which previously had produced men's undergarments as well as yarns and fabrics.)

FILA was thrilled, says Kelly Funke, vice president of marketing, North America. "Tennis is our brand DNA. We were excited to reintroduce FILA to a younger demographic with a modern lifestyle collection that drew its inspiration from a sport we proudly recognize as integral to our success." Working together, FILA and UO

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updated classic staples from the 1970s, '80s and '90s, including raglan sweatshirts and athletic-detailed jackets. Also, in a nod to the brand's tennis history, each piece in the FILA + UO line was adorned with the original FILA F-Box red, navy and ecru logo.

While FILA has for several seasons been partnering with other brands to create exclusive footwear collaborations, its partnership with UO on the apparel side was unique. "We have not done that level of product plus marketing customization with the apparel piece of the puzzle in recent history," said Funke.

One example of that marketing customization was a Snapchat contest that received 600 entries in just 24 hours. Urban Outfitters asked customers to snap back their favorite looks in order to win the entire collection. "It was one of UO's earliest times marketing on the Snapchat platform and a fun way to share what was in essence a look book," Funke says. That's key for UO's target Millennial demographic, which communicates, shares and draws inspiration primarily through social media.



Reintroducing FILA's classic silhouettes and brand story to a new generation of shoppers through Urban Outfitters has worked well for both companies, says Funke. The two brands are working on three more lines due out this June, September and for Holiday 2016 that will again fuse ele-

ments of FILA's past into lifestyle pieces for the thriving retro market and the millennial consumer. "Just wait until you see the motocross jacket for back-to-school," teases Funke.

— Jordan K. Speer

Jet Blue Airlines

Long Island City, N.Y. | www.jetblue.com

NOMINATED BY: HPI Direct, a division of Superior Uniform Group | www.HPIdirect.net

Tom Ford: "Dressing well is a form of good manners."

Looking good feels good, and it shows that you care — that's a simple but powerful idea that helped motivate Jet Blue Airlines to introduce sharp new uniforms for their employees nationwide last summer. The garments themselves are notable for their style and functionality, but the real innovation here was the slick process devised to launch the new line.

Legendary designer Stan Herman created the snappy new uniforms. Often called the "Father of Fashion Week," Herman has been designing uniforms for high-profile companies since the 1970s, and created Jet Blue's original design in 2000. He understands the role that uniforms play in company culture and job satisfaction. In a 2012 interview with CNN, Herman explained:



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"The most important thing is likeability," Herman said. "If a corporation walks around in a uniform they don't like, they become a grumpy corporation."

There's little chance of Jet Blue's becoming a "grumpy corporation," given the quality and style of the new garments. They build on the classic design that characterized Jet Blue's first uniforms, and push forward with a more graphic play of color. The design emphasizes shape and fit, incorporating durable, high-quality fabrics and details such as piping in a sophisticated blue palette.

Designing clothes that work for diverse groups such as the 9,000 Jet Blue crewmembers — including pilots, flight attendants, gate agents, aircraft maintenance, and ramp personnel — is no small feat. Getting custom-fitted uniforms delivered and ready to wear in just six weeks is incredible. But that's just what happened.

In producing the finished product, Herman worked closely with HPI Direct, a division of Superior Uniform Group based near Atlanta. They developed an implementation plan that made it possible to launch the new uniforms across the country on the same day. This was quite a challenge given the fact that many of these people start their day on one coast and end it on the other.

The team's approach was to set up pop-up uniform stores at six hub locations across the United States. Most crewmembers could take care of fitting and ordering where they worked.

These stores included fitting "rooms," computers for online order entry, complete fit lines, and specially trained fitting experts. Employees selected fitting times and locations through Jet Blue's scheduling system.

HPI's vice president for design, Lisa Stewart, credits up-front planning with the effort's success. "We started the planning four months in advance and held weekly planning calls with the Jet-Blue uniform team," she explained. Other key components to the plan were the allocation of space for the pop-up fitting rooms and the use of scheduling software to allow employees to choose their fitting appointment. "We held extended shifts and in some locations double shifts to accommodate their varied work schedules," Stewart said.

HPI direct manufactured the custom-fitted uniforms and delivered them to employees at home. On June 1, 2015 the entire organization went to work in fabulous new ensembles. And the old design? Unworn items have been recycled to produce, in collaboration with Manhattan Portage, the JetBlue Uniform Bag Collection. Well played, JetBlue!

— Liz Hartnett

F&F Clothing (Tesco)

Progress House, Shire Park, U.K. | www.tesco.com

NOMINATED BY: SML Group | www.sml-iis.com

One of F&F Clothing's stated goals is to surprise and delight its customers with great fashion and brilliant product choices, at affordable prices. But keeping merchandise in stock and meeting customer expectations can be challenging when you operate in more than 20 countries and deliver to more than 70.

That's why the apparel retailer, part of British multinational grocery and general merchandise retailer Tesco, decided to implement an RFID solution to get a better handle on customer service and stock management.

F&F partnered with SML Intelligent Inventory Solutions (SML-IIS) to roll-out its Clarity™ solution across all of its F&F Clothing brands stores within its Tesco superstores in the U.K. By tagging its merchandise at the factories, and using RFID to trace it throughout the supply chain from factory to retail floor, F&F hoped to dra-

matically improve inventory accuracy and thus reduce out-stocks. Tesco began with a brief pilot in three stores in 2013 to test the technology and shortly thereafter rolled out the full solution to a small set of stores to further tweak the processes and technology. Following the initial roll out, the technology was then implemented across the entire chain of more than 500 stores in the U.K. In addition to providing the software, SML Group is the supplier for the majority of the 2.4 million RFID tags to F&F factories around the world.

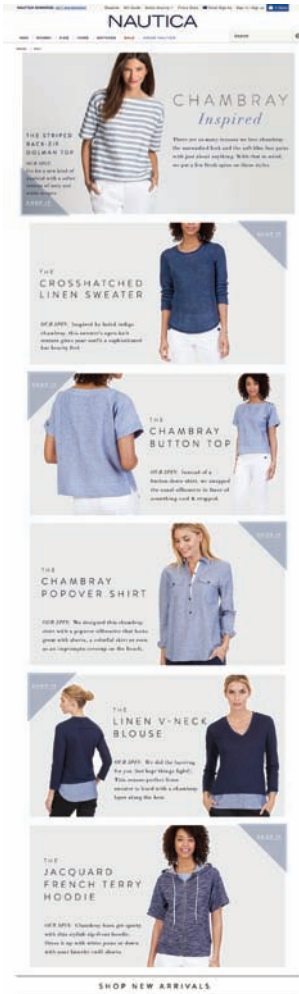
In rolling out the solution, Tesco worked closely with SML to develop its most recent version of Clarity, so the application was developed around Tesco use case and architecture requirements, with custom interfaces developed between Clarity and several Tesco enterprise systems. This put an enormous amount of capability into the hands of store associates. The solution enables



them to ratchet up the level of customer service they provide to customers, from quickly locating "missing" items on the store floor and taking inventory counts to replenishing stock quickly and accurately to ensure that customers always have access to available product. Store associates are also able to provide more information to customers about products, and provide insight into available inventory both on the floor, in other stores and in the warehouse.

F&F reports that employees have been avid adopters of the solution, and love that they have more time to dedicate to customers. Stock counts now take just 7 percent of the time they used to. That's time they can now devote to surprising and delighting customers.

— Jordan K. Speer



Nautica

New York, N.Y. | www.nautica.com

NOMINATED BY: Zmags | www.zmags.com

Nautica’s brand reflects a classic aesthetic, inspired by the nautical lifestyle. It appeals to some pretty traditional sensibilities, but the company is showing its techy side through an innovative partnership with the shoppable content specialists at Zmags.

Nautica was looking to engage online customers with richer content on all of its digital channels. It knew that providing this sort of content that seamlessly connects with purchasing options is a proven way to reduce “bounce rates” and improve sales.

So-called “shoppable content” provides users with engaging information and includes features such as “shop the look” or “buy it now” buttons to shift smoothly into the retail transaction. This creates a shorter path to purchase, and so far it has decreased the lifestyle campaign exit rates at Nautica.com by 64 percent.

To provide this sort of online experience for customers, the creatives at Nautica needed tools that enabled them to respond quickly to their fast-paced business. Their existing methods relied too heavily on third parties and separate departments, causing updates to be slow and less frequent.

Using Zmags Creator, the Nautica e-commerce team has averaged a 300 percent increase in new shoppable lifestyle campaigns each month — all of which they create without writing a single line of code.

The software allows the Nautica team to produce new content at will. The site now offers a more interactive, visually engaging experience. The new approach facilitates easy access to Nautica’s expansive library of print imagery and videography, so the company makes optimal use of those pricey resources.

Nautica’s e-commerce team is no longer hampered by concerns over whether an idea is realistic in a tight timeframe. “Before, we had to think about our systems and resources before committing to an idea and we always had to eliminate features,” says creative director Louis Hellinger. “Now we can be pie-in-the-sky with creative because we have a tool that will make it possible.”

With more freedom to create content that’s worthy of the merchandise it represents, it looks like Nautica’s e-commerce team is in for some smooth sailing.

— Liz Hartnett

Alchemi Labs

Scottsdale, Az. | www.alchemilabs.com

NOMINATED BY: Black Dog Venture Partners | www.blackdogpromotions.com

According to science fiction writer Arthur C. Clarke, “Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic.” Alchemi Labs’ goal is to create products that perform so well that its consumer base, outdoor enthusiasts, will wonder if there really is some magic involved in its products.

Outdoor enthusiasts are excited to spend time in the sun but need to be mindful to protect themselves from its harmful effects. It is no secret that the sun’s ultraviolet waves can penetrate and damage the skin. Excessive heat from the sun, which stems from infrared waves, can also cause a multitude of heat-related illnesses, including cramps,

rashes, heat exhaustion and heatstroke — all of which can be life-threatening.

That’s where the founders of Alchemi Labs come in. Outdoor enthusiasts themselves, they are constantly on the lookout for products that can help this customer segment spend more time outdoors while staying comfortable and protected. (They are also consumer products professionals who have worked on the development and marketing of thousands of products, and “have a passion for driving innovation and ‘wowing’ consumers.”)

“The inspiration behind the company comes from our own desire to spend more



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time enjoying outdoor activities,” said Andy Birutis, CEO and co-founder. “We are avid hikers. When you spend your time outdoors, you begin to realize what products enthusiasts need.”

For Alchemi Labs, that need took the form of sun hats. Taking Scottsdale’s weather conditions (where it can hover between 115 degrees and 120 degrees in the summer) as its “control,” the company began developing a sun hat that can protect skin from sun damage. “The Ozone layer is becoming increasingly thin, a factor making it easier for Ultraviolet (UV) waves to penetrate it,” said Birutis. “Consumers need protection from these rays, and that is what these hats are all about.”

At the core of Alchemi’s patent-pending sun hats is radiant barrier technology, a material that the space industry uses in space suits and spacecraft to help protect astronauts. Developed with this tech, its

hats reflect up to 80 percent of the sun’s heat away from the body, rather than absorbing it, as conventional hats do, Birutis said. “Perhaps even more importantly, Alchemi Sun Hats can block 99.8 percent of UV rays, which can damage your skin, with a tested ultraviolet protection factor (UPF) in excess of 800.”

In addition, the hats feature moisture-wicking sweatbands and “aggressive” ventilation — features designed to keep users cool, comfortable and protected.

Currently, Alchemi offers two sun hats: the River Hat, which features a wide asymmetrical brim, and the Desert Hat, which offers a protective neck shroud. Two years in the making, Alchemi introduced its sun hats this spring.

The line is getting a boost through a crowd-funding campaign on global fundraising site Indiegogo, an effort that raised 70 percent of its funding goal just one week

into the initiative. The company is beginning to offer the products to retailers, focusing specifically on independent outdoor specialty stores, sporting goods chains, and online retailers. Hats will retail between \$35 and \$45, depending on the style.

While the radiant barrier material is naturally rather stiff and can tear easily, the company experimented with a number of different laminations to create a material that is soft, flexible, strong and perfect for apparel, Birutis explained, adding that Alchemi Labs plans to design several more hat styles, as well as other outdoor apparel and accessories.

“We have a golf hat and a running hat in development that will be introduced this summer,” he said. “We also have a patent pending for the layering and combination of materials, which is appropriate for many applications.”

— Deena M. Amato-McCoy

Madura Fashion & Lifestyle

Bangalore, Karnataka, India | www.madurafnl.com

NOMINATED BY: Infor | www.infor.com



Running one of the biggest apparel companies in India is no easy feat. Madura Fashion & Lifestyle, owned by Aditya Birla, operates a number of branded apparel lines for men, women and children, including top labels in India such as Allen Solly, Peter England, Van Heusen and Louis Philippe. From mass-market to high-end fashion, Madura for years churned out 20,000 styles for each brand annually.

The company operates a variety of retail stores including multi-brand Planet Fashion and The Collective, a luxury retail concept that features a unique blend of global styles and international trends, all backed by innovative customer service.

In order to streamline development and integrate design and production across its many brands, in 2008 Madura deployed Infor PLM. “PLM helped us to break away from the traditional workflow methodology which required physical viewing of each stage of the designing and manufacturing journey by providing a single, collaborative platform uniting people,

products, processes and technology,” said Dr. Naresh Tyagi, head of product development and quality assurance.

Madura wanted to stay on top of market trends, slash cycle times, and gain a first-mover advantage while keeping markdowns to a minimum. It also wanted to reduce the effect of the “brain drain” that occurred whenever staff left the company or changed positions. Infor PLM now acts as the centralized repository of knowledge and processes as well as information on materials and style. Now every player in the value chain from design, product development, and technical to product and sourcing teams and vendors can quickly access the most up-to-date information. The system holds 17 seasons worth of data on 450,000 styles. Beyond accessing tech packs, sample requests and cost



information, vendors now receive their purchase orders, provide updates on work-in-process and create shipments through a unified web portal. ▶

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With greater visibility into the design process, Infor PLM users are better able to avoid overdevelopment and keep sample costs on track. Madura better manages material costs with the forecasting tool and can finalize these costs at the beginning of a season. Users also leverage the scorecard index in the control module to make sourcing decisions and boost quality overall.

Of note, Madura now processes more styles without increasing processes or headcount. Just last season the company shipped 30,000 designs for four of its brands, drawing from past season data to keep development cycle times to a minimum.

Another added benefit of the Infor PLM deployment is the system's ability to store and secure intellectual property and confidential information. Only authorized personnel have the rights and approval to create styles, request samples and approve cost changes.

"With PLM, all stakeholders were able to view the product at each stage and hold discussions online from any location globally, increasing efficiency, cost-effectiveness and innovation by leaps and bounds, not to mention providing a much shorter time to market," Tyagi says.

Going forward, Madura is considering the possibility of hosting virtual fashion shows that leverage the 3D product images stored in Infor PLM and eliminate the need for physical demos.

"Within the next few years, we are working on integrating advanced data analytics and extending the entire system to our front-end and back-end vendor partners," said Tyagi.

— Jessica Binns

See Infor's ad on page 27.

Chef Works

Poway, Calif. | www.chefworks.com

NOMINATED BY: Self

The culinary marketplace is a demanding segment of the apparel industry. Clothing must stand up to hard use and designs have to help the wearer navigate an environment that's often stressful — mentally and physically.

Chef Works strives to meet the demands of this market with a range of stylish solutions for the culinary and hospitality professions. Its site offers beautifully made options for both men and women, ranging from everyday basics to footwear, aprons of all kinds, headgear and cutlery.

The company's most recent product launch, The Hartford, is a chef's jacket with ingenious, functional details in a sharp, lightweight twill fabric. The sides of the garment incorporate Cool Vent fabric that keeps the wearer comfortable in the steamiest kitchen, and also adds a bit of stretch, helping to create a more fitted look.

This is an important element for Chef Works' clients, said marketing director Amanda Stuckey. "The modern day chef is seeking out a tighter, more athletic fit. The days of loose, baggy chef coats are quickly diminishing." The company goes to great lengths to determine what its customers want in a garment and to incorporate this into the design. The Hartford's specially designed collar, with its apron snap, was designed after customer comments

regarding the "pain point" of having apron straps ride up and irritate their necks.

This great-looking jacket features a two-way zipper, convertible sleeves (long to short in a snap), and a pocket on the right sleeve for a phone or notebook and one on the left designed specifically to hold a thermometer. The lightweight fabric resists creases, dries quickly, and holds up to frequent washing. A short-sleeved version is available as well, dubbed The Springfield.

The coats are available in men's and women's sizes on the company's web site, along with its many other products. One interesting feature of the site is its "Dress the Chef" feature — a product visualization app that takes a lot of the guesswork out of combining different pieces in the collection to develop the desired look. Ensembles can be shared with other stakeholders to provide a clear idea of how the garments will look and work together.

Customers can also view the clothing at the company's Poway, Calif. showroom. Orders can be placed online or by mail or phone, and an in-house custom embroidery department offers monogramming and designs with a quick turnaround of under a week.

Chef Works devotes considerable time to researching products that its customers need, says Stuckey, who adds that the com-



pany researches trends in fashion as well as in sports — techniques and fabrics that go into high performance sports apparel make sense in the culinary arena as well.

Another source of inspiration for Chef Works is its customers. The company conducts regular surveys of customers, in the United States and internationally. Feedback is used to develop the products that customers need — and is key to the company's innovative designs.

— Liz Hartnett

Fittery

Atlanta, Ga. | www.fittery.com

NOMINATED BY: Self

Online shopping. Shop when you're in the mood, from your home, far from the madding crowd. It can be bliss. The selection is unparalleled, and particularly when you're looking for clothes, this approach can save you many hours of shopping.

One downside of buying your wardrobe online has always been uncertainty about fit. We know that sizes can vary widely depending on the manufacturer, so in many cases the item you buy may not fit as you expect it will, and will have to be returned. In fact, the return rate for online purchases is around 30 percent to 40 percent. This is frustrating for shoppers, and often costly for online retailers, in terms of lost sales, increased handling and storage costs, and the difficulty of reselling the returned items.

Fittery came to the rescue in 2015 with a product that lowers that rate to less than 1 percent, says co-founder Catherine Iger. Its site, Fittery.com, uses a proprietary approach called FitMatch to find clothes that fit. Shoppers enter some basic information about their measurements and preferences, and technology takes over, consulting a database of brands to present shoppers with an array of options that will fit. This has the potential to profoundly change the way we shop for apparel, she says.

The process is elegant — no clumsy webcams or avatars. According to Iger, the customer “doesn't have to get up from the couch” in order to submit measurements. The algorithm compares clothing across brands and matches customers with the clothes that will fit them best.

It's early days for this platform, launched in November, and new categories are being added regularly. They currently offer only



men's clothes, but the list of brands is impressive, including J. Crew, Lands' End, Ralph Lauren, Macy's, Brooks Brothers, Express and more.

Fittery, which shoppers use at no cost, was developed in response to industry data showing that fit is the number one driver of brand loyalty. Getting a great fit the first time means happy customers, which means repeat sales. Fittery can simplify all sorts of shopping experiences: It makes choosing clothes for yourself much easier, but it also makes it easier for someone to buy you a gift that will fit! It can be applied to in-person shopping as well, says Iger, and will save scads of time in dressing rooms.

Get thee to the Fittery!

— Liz Hartnett

Vivienne Westwood

London, U.K. | www.VivienneWestwood.com

NOMINATED BY: TexTrace | www.textrace.com

As a global society we have been trained to be consumers, and “we are all consuming far too much,” says Vivienne Westwood, the British fashion designer.

The relentless drive for consumption at all costs has spawned a burgeoning market for fakes and knockoffs as those who can't afford full-price high-end designs strive to present the appearance of having deep pockets and being on trend. Counterfeiting, especially among luxury goods, is a massive worldwide problem, and according to the World Trademark Organization,

sales of illegitimate products account for 7 percent of global trade and totaled \$1.7 trillion last year.

While consumer awareness and education about the counterfeiting conundrum continue to lag, some labels are taking action to protect their customers, their supply chains — and their brands.

The Vivienne Westwood brand, beloved by rock and royalty alike, takes counterfeiting and trademark infringement very seriously and has been fighting piracy on several levels, says supply chain project



Vivienne Westwood

manager Nurben Usta. Just in 2015 alone, the company shut down more than 2,000 counterfeit websites related to the Vivienne Westwood brand.

While the brand began using RFID in 2012 to combat counterfeiting, it added an innovative new strategy last year: RFID textiles woven into product labels, starting with the spring 2016 collection's men's wear accessories, such as ties and scarves. “We

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found it was the best solution for these categories,” Usta explains of the seamless inlay-free RFID labels, “as it cannot be imitated or disposed.”

Partnering with TexTrace, the fashion brand is using woven RFID brand labels for brand authentication from the point of manufacture forward. “We wanted something that could accompany the product throughout its lifecycle,” adds Usta.

Because it encodes and ships woven RFID labels direct to a retailer’s suppliers, TexTrace offers unique encoding of the RFID label, based on a sophisticated algorithm, which allows stakeholders to authenticate product at any place and any time to prevent counterfeits from entering the supply. Users need only have any widely available mobile device on hand to verify large quantities of merchandise.

As the brand label is an integral part of the product and not just one of the more commonly used hangtags or care labels, brand owners have a stronger position from which to take legal action against grey market resellers and product tampering.

According to Usta, despite the many benefits of the woven RFID labels, convincing third-party partners to get involved was a challenge. “We wanted to be sure the RFID labels wouldn’t have

a negative effect on quality control processes, and we also kept the consumer’s end experience with the product top-of-mind,” Usta says of the issues the brand grappled with along the way.

To date, the deployment has been a success. Overseas product authentication costs less and takes less time, Vivienne Westwood maintains full control over the authentication procedure, and stakeholders have password-protected item-level tracking through the entire distribution channel. The RFID labels don’t burden employees downstream in the supply chain, says Usta, while providing a competitive advantage to all affected parties through the value chain.

Vivienne Westwood is thinking beyond brand protection, however. “Aside from the brand authentication benefits, RFID technology can be applied in different concepts and for different areas of usage, being such an expandable option,” Usta says.

“Our aim is to use the advantage of RFID technology for inventory/logistics activities to reduce shrinkage and to increase warehouse accuracy and speed,” she concludes, noting that implementation toward these goals already is underway.

— Jessica Binns

Destination XL

Canton, Mass. | www.destinationxl.com

NOMINATED BY: NGC Software and Self-nominated | www.ngcsoftware.com

When David Levin’s company Designs acquired Casual Male out of bankruptcy in 2002, it added nearly 500 stores to its portfolio in a specialty niche where it had virtually no competition: big and tall. Still, Casual Male had previously filed for bankruptcy twice, and other players in the space were not particularly successful, either.

Levin wondered: “How could you own a space and not figure out the right model?” So Casual Male built up new stores, remodeled and ramped up PR and marketing. Even then, “we really weren’t growing the business,” he said. “It was very stagnant.”

Then Levin started to dig deeper. While looking through data from NPD, a lightbulb went on. Men with waists in the 40-inch to 46-inch range represented 65 percent of the market, yet only represented 25 percent of Casual Male’s business. “We realized that we owned the big and tall guy, but we really owned the tail of the market — the *really* big and tall guy.” That guy had a waist of 48 inches and up. He had a good income, but wasn’t a big spender on apparel.



In focus groups and in-home interviews, Casual Male started to talk to that 40-inch-to 46-inch-waist guy — what the company identified as the “end-of-the-rack consumer.” This consumer was highly underserved, said Levin. “He didn’t really have

anywhere to shop.” This guy would go to a nice specialty store, but the retailer would carry very few garments in that end-of-the-rack size. So with a lot of effort, he’d piece together his attire. “Maybe he buys pants at Lands’ End, a coat at Burlington. But

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he really couldn't find a wardrobe." There was a lot of psychology at play for this consumer. He didn't consider himself "big and tall." Often, in fact, a year or two prior, he'd been wearing Polo or Nautica or Calvin Klein. "Suddenly they got a little bigger and couldn't wear it," Levin said. If they did happen to go to a Casual Male store, they were very disappointed. "Selection was narrow, stores were small, dressing rooms were small, and lighting was poor. We didn't have the brands," he added.

It was at that point that Casual Male decided to do something that had never been done before. "We realized that we could continue what we were doing for 10 years and be profitable but be limited in our growth potential," Levin said. "Or, we could transform ourselves into [a new company with] a new name, new real estate and new potential. That's a model that's never been done in the history of retail."

Since it opened its first four stores in 2010 — bigger stores with bigger dressing rooms, wider aisles, all the big brands, excellent customer service, TV monitors, scents — Destination XL has been on a tear. Its bigger, big-and-tall guy "teared up. They couldn't believe what they saw," Levin recalled. As for the end-of-the-rack customer, DXL began to market to that market segment. Since 2013, this man's awareness of DXL has risen from 13 percent to 38 percent, says Levin, and he now represents 48 percent of DXL's customer base. "That guy spends twice as much per year and shops 25 percent more often. This was the holy grail," Levin said.

"We're not losing any of our bigger guys, but now we can expand into a sweet spot that was neglected by all of the retailers. It's so exciting that now we have figured out the model of where DXL is going. It exceeded my expectations of how important it was to transform ourselves, to get out of one brand into another."

Today, DXL has 180 locations, with about 120 Casual Male stores still to convert. It is adding new locations, as well, in growth areas where no Casual Male previously existed. Ultimately, the company expects to have about 400 stores domestically. Revenues for 2015 were up 6.8 percent to \$442.2 million.

DXL isn't stopping at the domestic market, though. Building on its experience with a DXL franchise in Kuwait City, the company is embarking on a new international franchise and licensing strategy. It is currently gathering data and creating the infrastructure for the strategy and expects to open additional DXL franchise stores in 2017. "We believe the men's big-and-tall population around the world is currently underserved, and that presents a tremendous opportunity for DXL," Levin said.

Domestically, the change from Casual Male to DXL was transformational for the company, but it was also transformational for its customers. Not only did DXL improve the customer experience and expand its offerings. In bringing all of the top men's brands into the big-and-tall sector, its global sourcing team has been able to work directly with the brands to develop tech packs to achieve the right fit and sizing for the brands. "You can't just add a couple inches to a regular pattern to get an XXL size, because the body doesn't grow the way a pattern grows," Levin said. DXL has made sure to "keep the DNA" of the brand fit — a Tommy Bahama will fit differently than a Calvin Klein — while ensuring that the sizing is consistent across brands and also meets the different grading and other needs of the big-and-tall guy. Big-and-tall "requires different types of quality. It has to be built much stronger because the guys put more stress on the apparel," said Levin. "One of the beauties of our working directly with these brands — especially in the online business where returns can be 20 percent to 30 percent — is that our return rate is 8 percent, because a guy knows when he's buying any one of our brands, it's going to fit him."

DXL dominates the big-and-tall market. Levin thinks that one of the reasons virtually nobody else is in this business is because it's very difficult to manage the inventory. "For example, take one of our best-selling pants. It comes in more than 50 size combinations. And we have to carry all of them," Levin said. To manage that, DXL has a very sophisticated planning and allocation system. "One store may carry 38 sizes, and another might have 42. Every store has a different model, but all stores

have 95 percent in stock — and we still have availability to ship that one size that only sells once per year.

"We're managing thousands and thousands of SKUs on a daily basis," he emphasized. "Most stores have pre-packs. We have to pick individual sizes to ship to stores, because there are so many sizes. We carry waist sizes from 38 to 60, plus different inseams. That's a lot to manage. You need amazing systems."

One of DXL's systems also now includes NGC's PLM and Supply Chain Management (SCM). DXL rolled this out in 2013 to all cross-functional departments to break down silos, streamline line planning, and increase collaboration with new and existing suppliers. Doing so significantly reduced time spent in internal meetings to review product development and production workflow on spreadsheets. "Everyone has visibility to their WIP tracking, calendar, development process, approvals and other information on their own devices through the web portal," said Angela Chan, senior vice president and chief sourcing officer for DXL.

DXL now communicates design and technical specs for approvals, color matches and revisions over the web. It also handles open bidding through the web, allowing the company to diversify its supplier base and replenishment strategies, producing identical garments in multiple countries, all to the same high quality.

With the ability to capture workflow information from the season start until goods are delivered to its [direct channel], the company also can better measure vendor performance. This centralizes reporting and improves accuracy. "Our on-time delivery, quality and compliance reached over 98 percent in 2015 versus 85 percent to 90 percent before we implemented PLM," said Chan.

Additionally, knowing the exact status of design and production at all times gives DXL the ability to respond to the latest trends, push decision-making further downstream and quickly react to unforeseen events, she said.

— Jordan K. Speer

Beija-Flor Jeans

Greenville, S.C. | www.beijaflorence.com

NOMINATED BY: TK Public Relations | www.tkpublicrelations.com

You'd think that the seemingly unstoppable athleisure trend would strike fear into the hearts of every denim brand out there, but the mother-daughter duo behind Beija-Flor Jeans believes the consumer craze for casual, easy-to-wear clothing actually is contributing to their company's success.

"The athleisure trend is really all about comfortable clothing that can be worn all day, everywhere," explains co-founder Emilie Whitaker who launched the brand in 2005 with mother Kathy Moca. "From the beginning, we have sourced only the most cutting-edge fabrics that allow comfort and fashion to co-exist."

The Beija-Flor team is serious about its fibers and fabrics. Sourcing only from Brazil, where all of its products are manufactured save for a new corduroy line, the company uses recycled, eco-friendly REPVEVE and Megaflex with Lycra and Tri-blend technology by Tavex. "This advanced fabric technology enables us to create extremely flexible and soft jeans that won't sag or stretch out like many of our competitors'," adds Whitaker.

Beija-Flor also uses T400 and DualFX, which add a high-performance factor, and Emana, a smart yarn with infrared technology that is designed to improve the appearance of cellulite by absorbing body heat and transferring the heat waves back to the wearer to stimulate skin. The effects are said to last through endless washes. Slipping into a pair of jeans sure beats signing up for cosmetic surgery.

Whitaker says her family long has been in the textile and apparel business. Her grandfather worked for Dan River Mills, which is what brought the clan to Greenville in the 1960s, and her mother owned a women's boutique for 21 years, where she was the principal buyer, transitioning later into an independent sales rep for several apparel companies.

Eleven years ago, Whitaker and Moca decided they wanted to find a great clothing product made in Brazil and bring it to the United States. "Initially we were importing a line of naturally colored cotton apparel, but in the process we discovered the incredible properties of Brazilian denim that really differed from what was being offered in the U.S. jean market," says Whitaker. "As we investigated, we found that in addition to the unique fiber content, Brazilian jeans were much more flattering to curvy figures and seemed to be made to better fit the natural shape of a woman's body."

That aha! moment touched off a thorough search for the right production partners in Brazil and also commenced the fabric technology education of Whitaker and Moca. They sold their first style, the Jennifer, direct to consumers up and down the East Coast at jeans parties. Then they began wholesaling to independent boutiques across the country. E-commerce came next, followed closely by the launch of the Beija-Flor brick-and-mortar shop in the heart of Greenville. There's now a second store in Nashville, and Beija-Flor now employs 12 staff members, a number that Whitaker says

is constantly growing. The company also offers five additional styles in different cuts, lengths and properties: Audrey, Kate, Kelly, Nicole and Sarah.

The company's latest business model is its "try-at-home" program, which Whitaker says evolved through customer feedback via the "live chat" feature on the website. Shoppers were constantly asking for help choosing the right size and style of jeans that run between \$120 and \$178 apiece, she explains, so "it just made sense to give the customer more of a selection in their first delivery, mimicking the level of personalized service we offer in our brick-and-mortar stores." In-store shoppers always take two pairs of jeans into the fitting room, and one is guaranteed to fit, Whitaker adds, which is highly unusual in the denim world.

Customers who sign up for the try-at-home program give a Beija-Flor denim advisor some information about their height, size and lifestyle, which guides the employee in choosing four pairs of jeans that the customer might like. Shoppers get to hang onto the pants for a full week and send back only the pairs that they don't want (or can't afford) to keep. In soft launches, more than half of customers kept two or more pairs of the jeans, with some buying all four pairs that arrived at their doorsteps. According to Whitaker, the conversion rate for the program is around 80 percent.

Beija-Flor, which means "hummingbird" in Portuguese, cares as much about manufacturing responsibly as it does about creating the best-fitting jeans possible. The company manufactures at a single Brazilian supplier that owns and operates an on-site washing facility in order to prevent environmental contamination, notes Whitaker, who visits the factory several times a year to ensure the vendor is compliant with social and environmental standards.

"This factory has received many awards for their environmental concerns, processes and technologies, and is also incredibly committed to safe and fair working conditions which I can personally attest to," Whitaker adds.

In addition to corduroy, Beija-Flor has branched out into ponte leggings and launched two skirts this spring, with a newly designed trouser and knit pant scheduled for a fall debut. With an expanding line of products, repeat customers always have something new to discover.

"Women fall in love with our fit and become 'Beija-believers' for life, returning to buy their favorite style (or styles) in the newest wash or fabric available," concludes Whitaker.

— Jessica Binns



Columbia Sportswear

Portland, Ore. | www.columbia.com

NOMINATED BY: Kalypso | www.kalypso.com

Columbia Sportswear prides itself on a wide range of men's and women's outdoor apparel and gear that's "tested tough," but these days the Portland, Ore.-based company might want to change its motto to "developing products faster."

The outdoor leader certainly is on a hot streak, closing out fiscal year 2015 with annual sales rising by 11 percent, or \$225.6 million, to a record \$2.33 billion. In addition to its own Columbia brand, the company also owns the Montrail running brand; alpine-oriented Mountain Hardware; prAna, the lifestyle brand acquired in 2014 for \$190 million; and Sorel, the footwear brand best known for winter boots that's making a play for the fashion-conscious female.

In the outdoor business, innovation isn't exactly an option. Competition is stiff and there's a continual push to be better, stronger, and faster, and to keep customers warmer (or cooler), and drier. Athletes and explorers constantly strive to outdo themselves and it's Columbia's job to keep up by creating breakthroughs such as Omni-Heat and TurboDown Wave technology.

But sometimes innovation isn't a product itself, but how that product is made. Looking for new ways to enhance its existing design approach, Steve Woodside, vice president of global sourcing and manufacturing, says, "We saw an opportunity to innovate on our current development

processes by using 3D virtual prototyping, enabling us to reduce physical prototypes and collaborate much earlier in the development lifecycle with our design and merchandising teams, as well as our external partners and retailers."

While 3D prototyping has been around in the industry for a while, it long dominated in footwear design and only over the past decade or so has become viable for apparel. Columbia is focused on using 3D prototyping to create photorealistic digital assets for its outerwear lines, which run from simple jackets to highly complex technical pieces. "We have been able to simulate the majority of our outerwear products in 3D, from a variety of insulated garments and those constructed with technical shells," Woodside explains.

Learning to fully understand the value of 3D prototyping has been a growth process for all stakeholders, admits Woodside. "The virtual prototype is accurate enough for us to make business decisions in real time, enabling us to react more quickly to evolving business and consumer needs," he says. "The challenges have been identifying an adoption strategy that will enable 3D throughout our supply chain."

Columbia still is in the early days of reaping all the benefits and identifying the potential cost savings of 3D prototyping, but so far the company has shaved four weeks off



the typical development cycle time and is significantly reducing the amount of money it spends to fit, produce and ship physical prototypes. "The opportunities continue to evolve as the software gets better and 3D gets more and more embedded into the greater apparel industry," Woodside says.

Using 3D enables greater collaboration across teams that may be spread out in disparate locations. "The ability to share 3D assets early in the product creation process enables key decisions to be made sooner," says Woodside.

"Ultimately, this enables Columbia Sportswear Company to deliver fantastic, differentiated products that help people enjoy the outdoors longer." Which, truly, is Columbia's sign of a job well done.

— Jessica Binns

Dropel Fabrics

New York City, N.Y. | www.dropelfabrics.com

NOMINATED BY: Jinnie Kang | www.jinniekang.portfoliobox.me and Self-nominated

Bradley Feinstein is moved by innovation and telling a good story. By focusing on moisture-, stain- and odor-repellent natural fabrics and textiles, Feinstein is helping Dropel Fabrics craft the newest chapter in its story.

"For the past 100 years, clothing has remained fundamentally the same and stagnant," said Feinstein, co-founder and president at Dropel Fabrics.

"Our company's goal is to redefine high-end fashion and uniforms," he said. "By working with different innovative brands and retailers interested in our designs, we are offering our refined concept to more customers."

The almost-two-year-old start-up company is setting the tone through a new generation of sustainable, innovative textiles available in a line of everyday clothing. The creator of hydrophobic nat-





ural textiles, Dropel Fabrics infuses cotton fibers with a patented nanotechnology process designed to repel water, stains and odors, yet maintain breathability and stay soft to the touch.

While versions of this concept have made their way into activewear and athleisure categories, “it is time to integrate this concept into everyday garments,” he said. “While this is not a new concept, the idea of creating a soft, sustainable product that doesn’t feel synthetic or rubbery is.”

And consumers are clearly ready. Customers reported they are likely to seek out performance technologies such as water repellency in their casual (37 percent) and business (29 percent) garments, according to the Cotton Incorporated Lifestyle Monitor Survey. Meanwhile, 48 percent said they would purchase casual-wear that is odor-resistant, while 44 percent said they would purchase moisture-wicking apparel, the survey said.

Hoping to appeal to these eager customers, Dropel is partnering “with a handful of brands that will help us create new opportunities, and share our story and innovations with more consumers,” Feinstein said.

Its first milestone was a partnership with Mister French. The company, which is inspired by travel and expresses its vision through a line of men’s linen shirts, wanted a new innovation: the perfect linen shirt for its jet-setting customer. The piece had to withstand the sun and fun of daytime activities, but still feature high-quality appearance and performance for a night on the town.

The collaboration yielded what was called “the world’s first hydrophobic linen shirt.” “We live in a world full of stains,” Sim Gulati, co-founder and CEO of Dropel Fabrics, said during the Decoded Fashion Summit in New York, in October. “But we don’t have to.”

Keeping this lofty goal in mind, Dropel and Mister French created a 100 percent linen, stain-resistant shirt “that can survive the champagne and the high seas,” Mike French, co-founder of Mister French, said in a recent *Forbes* article, “This Stain-Repellent Linen Shirt Might Be The Perfect Holiday Present.”

Designed exclusively for Mister French and launched in spring 2015, the shirt was available in white or black, and helped drive more exposure for the wearable technology. “Finding the right partners ensures that we can collaborate to create and deliver high-quality products to the marketplace,” Feinstein said, who added Dropel will continue innovating with start-up companies.

And Dropel’s momentum continues. In January, the company was named a finalist in the eighth annual South by Southwest (SXSW) Accelerator Pitch Competition in the Innovative World Technologies category. The event, which invites global start-up companies to pitch their trademark ideas, innovations, products or services, recognized Dropel among a pool of more than 470 entrants.

“The apparel industry is moving faster than many realize,” Feinstein said. “We see our unique recipe for fabrics and processes [positively] disrupting the performance of casual wear.”

— Deena M. Amato-McCoy

Only Nine Apparel

New York City, N.Y. | www.ONLYNINE.COM

NOMINATED BY: Self

Jamie Gorman could not be more thrilled that plus-size fashion is finally having a moment. Owner and operator of Only Nine Apparel, a \$25-million wholesale apparel sportswear company nestled in New York’s Garment district that specializes in plus sizes in addition to producing for missy and children, Gorman leveraged her deep experience in the clothing industry with companies such as Kellwood to branch out and launch her own business in 2003.

Playing in the “young missy,” “junior plus,” and “update” arenas, Only Nine is

known for moderately priced fashion knits and caters to a customer who wants a fashion-forward look on a budget. Over the past 18 to 24 months, Only Nine’s business volume has more than doubled throughout affordably priced national retail chains (such as Bealls, Stein Mart and T.J. Maxx) and has seen similar increases in its plus-size business (clients include Catherines, Ashley Stewart and DressBarn) over the same time period, despite the general downturn in the retail environment. The company typically ships 15 million to 20 million pieces each year.



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Only Nine cemented its role in the plus-fashion world by dressing “American Idol” contestants such as Mandisa and Lakisha during the show’s heyday in the mid-aughts, later partnering with bloggers and other personalities to keep its styles front and center.

Gorman attributes the success of Only Nine to a steady focus on one particular area of the market. “There are a lot of plus specialty chains,” she says. “There was a tremendous opportunity with these stores, even throughout Canada with Penningtons and Addition Elle. We just went full force and seized the opportunity to build long-term customers with these chains.”

Only Nine is so committed to its client relationships that it stood with Ashley Stewart when the retailer filed for Chapter 11 protection in 2014. “I trusted them and knew they would pay our invoices when they could,” Gorman says. “[CEO] James Rhee has been so wonderful to me, and he runs Ashley Stewart so casually and so cool that his people love working there.”

While many plus specialty chains do run their own in-house design teams, they still

need partners like Only Nine to help fill in the gaps. “Catherines does a huge portion of its business in-house but they still need us,” Gorman explains. “They can’t do sublimation printing or tie-dye on their own. They need someone who specializes in that category.”

Only Nine’s in-house design team works up specific trends and color stories based on what each client prefers to buy but also maintains a branded line for new prospects who visit the Garment District showroom. Gorman laments the decline of the storied New York neighborhood. “I can’t tell you how many fashion businesses are gone from the Garment District now,” she says. “There are refrigeration companies moving in now.”

Working with Los Angeles manufacturer C-Quest, Only Nine can cut, produce and ship goods in a four- to five-week turnaround for clients. This fast-turn approach means retailers can approach Only Nine not just at the top of the season but throughout the season as well. The company produces 30 percent of its products domestically

and in Mexico, with the bulk of production coming from Vietnam and China.

Gorman says she’s feeling the pinch of producing close to home. “The problem with domestic manufacturing is the prices,” she explains. “The minimum wage has gone up, even in Mexico.”

Only Nine continues to go where the customer is, launching a successful ath-leisure division for both plus and missy sizes. “Comfortable-casual is a trend we have to chase,” Gorman says of the \$97-billion market potential. “By staying ahead of the trends in the marketplace, we have seen major retailers who have previously gone 100 percent in-house come back to the domestic market for the trend and fashion and delivery.”

While some people would say they ventured out into business on a wing and prayer, for Gorman, naming her company simply came down to luck. “Nine just happens to be a very lucky number,” she says, “so we ran with that.” And she hasn’t looked back.

— Jessica Binns

Ashley Stewart

Secaucus, N.J. | www.ashleystewart.com

NOMINATED BY: Self

You’re a 22-year-old fashion retailer catering largely to plus-size women in urban areas. You’ve been hemorrhaging money for years (as much as \$6 million annually for as long as you can remember) and you’d already filed for bankruptcy only three years earlier. You’re on the brink of collapse. Who comes to mind as the ideal savior for your darkest hour?

How about a Harvard Law-educated son of Korean immigrants who grew up on Long Island, spent two years teaching high school, and went on to enjoy a highly successful two-decade career as an investment professional?

To say that James Rhee backed into his role as CEO and executive chairman of Ashley Stewart is an understatement. A member of the retailer’s board of directors with no prior retail experience, Rhee saw an opportunity to revive a brand whose customers were fiercely loyal, and to gain his first experience managing a company as a W-2 employee. “The customer stood by this brand despite all the failings at corporate for 20-plus years,” he says.



The “failings” are hard to fully reconcile. When Rhee decided to commit six months to the company in August 2013, resigning all of his other commitments, Ashley Stewart’s business model was obsolescent, he says. It had posted more than a decade of losses, lacked any sort of corporate credibility, had a defunct e-commerce site, no Wi-Fi and relied on antiquated DSL to operate stores. The company was based in a converted warehouse that’s now a distribution center. The conversation between cus-

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tomers and corporate was one way, he adds, and certainly not in the right direction. "It was a toxic culture," Rhee says.

Chief merchandising officer and president Kristen Gaskins, who returned to the company in 2013 after working there from 2007 to 2012, echoes those sentiments. "There was not a lot of communication between stores and headquarters, and there were some fashion misses, too. They were going in the direction of basics, and our customer is driven by what's new and hot," she explains. "The company lost sight of the customer." After her time away, Gaskins was excited to revive the brand under Rhee's new brand of entrepreneurial leadership.

The secret — though not a secret to anyone in this business, really — to turning the ship around was a relentless laser focus on the customer. "We talk about her like she's right here," says Gaskins.

Who that customer is is precisely what convinced Rhee that Ashley Stewart was a brand worth saving in the first place. Customers shopped in stores an average of two to three times a week; store managers were so close to some shoppers that they would visit sick customers in the hospital; and women often cried with happiness when they found an outfit that actually fit and flattered their figures. Multiple generations of women — mothers, daughters, grandmothers — would shop together for coordinating outfits for church.

"I saw joy," says Rhee, "and saw something very different, and frankly it reminded me of my mom."

Ashley Stewart was quickly running out of money and about two months away from filing for Chapter 7, Rhee notes, when he began the steep uphill climb of turning the company around. "There would have been well north of 1,000 jobs gone," he explains, a pressure that weighed heavily on him.

Rhee spent a good portion of those early days meeting with staff and trying to understand the company and what went wrong. "I told them, 'I'm probably the least qualified person to run this business. Can you help me?'"

Many of those initial conversations focused on the importance of kindness and

how it's often misunderstood to be a sign of weakness. "There's so much woman-to-woman friendship in our stores. Customers come in wearing sweats and no makeup. It's a very safe place," Rhee says.

As he built the vision for the future Ashley Stewart, Rhee told corporate staff that one day, people would beg to work for their company. "People laughed," he says. "I said, 'you'll tell your friends you work for a hedge fund fashion startup business.'"

Rhee was dead serious about translating the startup mentality to a company on life support. Shutting down the C-suite, employees worked collaboratively across departments for the first time. A number of staff walked away, but it was the dawn of Ashley Stewart's customer-at-all-costs approach. "A lot of people weren't happy with the change and couldn't keep up," says Gaskins. Among those who stayed, "most people haven't experienced this before in their lives," she adds. Any initial hesitation toward Rhee quickly melted away.

"He takes the time to understand every person and every department," says Gaskins. "He's very thoughtful about his approach to people. After a month of his spending time with people there was a shift that, okay, he seems to know what he's doing."

Over the next four months, Rhee and staff ignored everything that wasn't important to the customer. When Rhee couldn't get his questions answered at corporate, he visited stores in search of understanding what customers cared about when they're not shopping. "What is she thinking about and worrying about?" he says.

To this day, customers call store managers "Ms. Ashley." "It's not a just a job," Rhee explains. "For many of these women, the store manager opportunity we give them is their life."

Ashley Stewart as it exists today was officially reborn on April 23, 2014. The company shut down most of its mall stores, replatformed e-commerce on Demandware, and remapped its distribution flow. To make it all possible, Rhee says he begged investors for money. After all, who would support a company that had not made a profit in recent memory?

By fall of last year, Ashley Stewart found its footing. "We did the best we could for spring and summer but by the time October rolled around, we were better," explains Gaskins. Ashley Stewart spent much of the year focused on selling through old product and winding down stores. "We were trying to make sure we weren't canceling every single order," she adds. "We wanted to be sure we weren't hurting supplier relationships we've built over 20 years."

In 2015 Ashley Stewart posted sales of \$150 million and adjusted EBITDA of \$20 million. The company experienced double-digit sales growth at the stores and more than 60 percent sales growth on e-commerce. Additionally, year-over-year mobile sales growth accelerated approximately 130+ percent. On e-commerce, the company did more sales on Black Friday weekend and Cyber Monday than the entire month of November 2013.

The online business has been so successful partly because it has managed to attract a new customer who probably wouldn't have visited a store, says Gaskins. The company now ships to Canada, the Caribbean and the U.K. "We need to work on that," she says. "We didn't expect the international demand."

Marrying math, algorithms and emotional intelligence, Ashley Stewart has settled on a business model that will continue to fuel future growth. "There's no line between the customer and the company," says Rhee. "Some people call that social commerce. I like to call it disintermediation."

The company boasts a highly active community on social media, with nearly 600,000 engaged fans on Facebook alone. Quality and engagement are more important than just "likes," says Rhee. "Do you have good friends, or a lot of friends?"

"For one day I want to manage the business with just emojis," he concludes. "We want that level of intimacy with the customer. Emojis convey so much more than words can."

— Jessica Binns

Town Shoes Limited

Toronto, Canada | www.townshoes.com

NOMINATED BY: Jesta I.S. | www.jestais.com

In an omnichannel world, customers don't shop by channel, they shop their favorite "brands." Eager to make this transition, Town Shoes Limited added an integrated cross-banner retail platform that not only integrates ordering across all sales touchpoints, but also streamlines fulfillment efforts — a move that drives a complete omnichannel experience.

Town Shoes has gone through significant changes over the years, all positioning the company for omnichannel success. Leonard Simpson opened the first Town Shoes location in 1952. For 60 years, his family ran the 100 percent privately-owned business. In 2012, the company purchased Sterling LP, and since then, the company, now known as Town Shoes Limited, operates Town Shoes, The Shoe Company, Shoe Warehouse, Sterling and DSW Canadian locations.

"For 64 years, we have experienced rapid change and growth, a 64-year-old start-up company, of sorts," explained B.J. Morden, the chain's senior director of IT. "The merger boosted our store count, and now we are ready to migrate the company to the next level — omnichannel growth."

Morden joined the team in 2013 to help drive the company's omnichannel goals. At that time, the banners all featured marketing and promotional sites, and only Town Shoes operated a transactional web site. "It was then that we created a three-year roadmap to become an omnichannel retailer," Morden said. "Our goal is not to be cutting edge, but instead to deliver an engaging customer service model that would help us become a shopper's favorite place to buy shoes."

In 2014, the chain tapped Jesta I.S. to get the ball rolling.

The first step was to integrate a common commerce platform that would support a digital storefront for each brand, all accessible through an umbrella portal, of sorts. The next step was to incorporate the architecture within its point-of-sale (POS) platform, a move that would enable in-store associates to use the platform exactly

as shoppers use it via desktop, laptop or mobile device.

Among the features available through the new platform are product lookup, mobile checkout, gift card management, clienteling and real-time visibility into the cross-channel loyalty platform, as well as their shoppers' unique customer profiles. Most importantly, this platform gives store associates a clear vision into their inventory availability.

"This platform allowed us to create an endless aisle, one where we could check in-store merchandise availability, and order merchandise from other locations or the manufacturer — a means of allowing shoppers to always have access to the shoes they wanted," he said.

Town Shoes' endless aisle service, which is dubbed "Shoephoria," features available inventory across the chain's 200 stores, and its suppliers, on a single online platform.

Where the challenge lay, however, was in Town Shoes' ability to streamline fulfillment in an omnichannel setting, especially as the company managed two order engines: one that was associate-driven at the store level, and the other customer-driven via digital devices. "It is great that we have a platform that can process orders, but we still needed logic and a supply chain eco-system that can manage delivery information and fulfillment," Morden explained.

By leveraging the omnichannel order fulfillment algorithms of Jesta's Vision distributed order management module, Town Shoes now has centralized order management software that enables the company to use its network of brick-and-mortar stores as nationwide fulfillment centers. The system also empowers Town Shoes to tap into its unsegregated pool of inventory to improve productivity and increase order fill rates, all with the final goal of refining its customer service.

"Algorithms process almost 1,000 orders a day, managing them throughout the picking, packing and shipping processes," he



said, adding they co-developed the fulfillment feature alongside Jesta.

Meanwhile, using store inventory instead of supporting separate warehouses for each channel enables shoppers to buy, pick-up, even request that merchandise be sent to any store. Real-time inventory visibility guarantees optimal fulfillment and ensures both profitability for the retailer and efficiency for the customer.

Once the service went live in March 2015, the chain spent the first half of the year extending the complete solution, including the Shoephoria endless aisle service, into its fleet of stores, enterprise-wide. The second half of the year was spent integrating its manufacturer partners onto the system to enable drop-shipping to omnichannel shoppers using the Shoephoria service.

Over the past year, Morden reported that online sales have doubled, and 'first-hit fulfillment,' the process that occurs when the first store carrying available inventory designated to fill an online order does so successfully, is at nearly 80 percent. Orders placed and fulfilled through the platform have more than doubled since going live.

"We are taking the total opposite omnichannel approach from other retailers. Many retailers often begin the process with fulfillment centers, and then add store fulfillment, while we pioneered our service with store fulfillment," he added. "This hybrid model provides value and benefits."

— Deena M. Amato-McCoy

Herman Kay

New York, N.Y. | www.hermankay.com

NOMINATED BY: SML Group | www.sml-iss.com

Chances are you have a coat made by Herman Kay Company hanging in your closet. The designer and manufacturer, based in New York City, produces approximately 5.5 million outerwear garments annually for brands such as Anne Klein, BCBG, Diane von Furstenberg, London Fog and Michael Kors. These coats are supplied to major department stores, from Macy's and Nordstrom to Lord & Taylor and Dillard's.

As retailers began incorporating radio frequency identification (RFID) into their supply chains a couple years back, CIO/CTO Rich Haig says these partners requested that Herman Kay supply RFID hangtags on its outerwear. "From a customer service and marketing point of view, it was something we needed to do to support our customers," he explains.

With the goal of shipping 100 percent of its garments with RFID hangtags by Fall 2015, Herman Kay partnered with SML and Avery Dennison to implement RFID hangtags for each of their labels. SML prints, encodes and ships RFID hangtags directly to Herman Kay's third-party production facilities in Asia; both SML and Avery Dennison supply tags which are printed and encoded in-house for the garments produced in Herman Kay's Dominican Republic facilities.

Herman Kay realized early on that there were many advantages to using RFID technology in its distribution facility, including making them a better partner with, and supplier to, its retail customers. The company partnered with xterprise, now SML Intelligent Inventory Solutions, to develop a deployment plan. Herman Kay integrated SML's Clarity™ Software with its A2000 ERP platform and deployed Nordic ID RFID handheld scanners for both checkers and packing stations.

Next, the company integrated outbound advance shipment notices (ASN) with Clarity and Alien RFID readers on the shipping doors at its Georgia warehouse. This allowed RFID tags to

be read and verified to ensure that the correct cartons were being loaded onto the proper truck. To support the deployment, Herman Kay also created a wireless network with nearly 100 Aruba access points in the warehouse.

According to Haig, the project has been humbling. "We thought we were pretty good doing what we do. And we were. However, with RFID technology we can catch mistakes which previously may have gone undetected through the supply chain," he explains.

For example, while a shipment of 600 pieces to one major retailer might be correct in terms of the total number of items, it was possible for a box of 12 black jackets to actually contain 11 black jackets — and one that was, in fact, dark blue. "It's hard to differentiate dark navy from black when each garment is in a plastic bag and under warehouse lights," Haig says. But with RFID, it's easy to catch any error as a carton is packed, long before a shipment ever leaves the warehouse. "The technology provides proof of authenticity that we're delivering what we say we are," he adds. "In today's world, it doesn't matter if the grand total of shipped items is correct if you have overages and shortages in individual cartons. Our customers count on us to provide them with great quality merchandise, in the right quantity, at the right location, and at the right time."

Since going live this past fall, Haig says, the contents of the cartons are verified by RFID against the contents of the ASN before being loaded onto the trucks. Shipments to retailers will be potentially 100 percent accurate, leading to a reduction in chargebacks from retailers, and ultimately to a return on investment for Herman Kay. "The next step will be incorporating RFID into the receiving process, so that as containers are received, each garment will be scanned, enhancing the speed and quality of the receiving process," Haig concludes.

— Jessica Binns

Jaco & Associates

Columbia, S.C. | 365bosh@gmail.com

NOMINATED BY: Self

Studies show that creative ideas usually come to us when we least expect them. Those Eureka moments strike when you're focused on other things. So maybe it shouldn't come as a surprise that for Eugene Jacobs it came back in 2010 when he was driving down the interstate from one contracting job to another with his oldest son, Eugene. Jacobs was thinking about how fans love to scream and "let it all out" at football games. Suddenly he had the idea



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— why not enliven their school spirit with a hat that played the school fight song, or, say, crowed like a rooster?

Jacobs, you see, lives in Columbia, S.C., home of the USC Gamecocks. He mentioned the idea to his son. They batted it around a bit.

Jacobs knows all about school spirit. In addition to working as a contractor, he's been a wrestling coach for 37 years at Columbia's Eau Claire High School and Allen University. To help the kids on his team, he started a program that allows them to work the concessions at USC football, basketball and baseball games, with a portion of the proceeds going to the teams to take care of physical exams, uniforms, shoes and other needs that their families often don't have money to pay for.

But back to the hat. After that initial conversation, Jacobs didn't give it much thought again until two weeks later when his son brought it up. "Dad, you should really make that hat," he said. Jacobs comes from a family of hard-working entrepreneurs, and he's passed that spirit along to his seven children. So he called another son, James, to put him on the job of researching how to put sound in a hat. His daughter Rha-gene was charged with researching to determine if a patent already existed. (It didn't. No one had ever put a speaker on the inside of a hat. A patent did exist for a speaker on the brim, but that model had problems. "A speaker on the brim is too close to the face and the sound waves actually affect your eyes," explains Jacobs.)

That's how it all began. Along the way, Jacobs sent two friends to China to manufacture samples. He met a die-hard Gamecock fan (aren't they all?) who led him to a patent attorney. He showed people and businesses the hat. Everyone wanted one. Eugene doesn't yet have supply to meet the demand he knows is out there, but he has a patent. And he has licenses already to produce hats for USC, Clemson and SC State. He's also already had an offer of \$1 million to take the patent off his hands. That would be a mistake. Anyone can see the potential of the speaker hat.

When Jacobs was in college, he and four classmates were charged with coming up with a product and getting it market ready for a business class. The group was sure they'd clinched it. They required each member of their class to sign an NDA, and then they revealed their prototype: it was a toothbrush that used toothpaste cartridges, and would allow a person to apply the toothpaste and brush teeth all with one hand. Jacobs knew some people who had lost limbs, and he thought he and his team had created a fantastic product to meet their needs. But then the grades came, and the project received a 'D.' Jacobs was flummoxed. When he questioned his professor, she praised the product, but explained that the team had limited themselves by presenting it only as a tool for the disabled. After all, toothbrushes are used by everyone, at least twice a day. The market was so much bigger than they'd targeted.

That's a lesson not lost on Jacobs, whose vision for his hat is expansive. "Anything can be recorded on it," he says. Like any baseball cap, it can be adorned with an endless variety of designs, incorporates LED lights on the rim and lights on the crown and brim and is also blue-tooth accessible. Beyond the first samples of a USC Gamecock crowing and the Clemson Tiger roaring, the hat has virtually infinite possibilities from college and professional sports to movie and entertainment franchises to holiday celebrations (think the sound of dragging chains for Halloween). Jacobs has a sample hat with a duck call for hunters, one for NASCAR fans that plays the sound of a car zooming around the track and one for Elvis fans that plays "Blue Suede Shoes."

"Anything with a sound I can incorporate," he says. Jacobs has really thought outside the box — or, should we say, beyond the brim — considering applications for Rosetta Stone for language translation and gag hats that make noises we won't discuss in polite company. The possibilities for the hat are endless, he says.

Currently, Jacobs is trying to determine the best option for manufacturing his product in the quantities he knows he will need. He has submitted an application to appear on the next edition of "Shark Tank," and is considering crowdfunding via Kickstarter and GoSell. "The speaker hat is a true game changer," says Jacobs. "For sports fans, this is like taking your mascot to the game."

— Jordan K. Speer

LACOSTE

New York City, N.Y. | www.lacoste.com/us/lacoste

NOMINATED BY: Sky I.T. Group | www.skyitgroup.com

LACOSTE may be synonymous with its signature "crocodile" logo, but first and foremost, it is a historic luxury brand featuring a wide range of premium casual-wear products for men, women and children. To maintain its premium position in the marketplace, LACOSTE is leveraging an analytics tool that delivers insight into sales performance — and it is this mission-critical acuity that helps the brand make better distribution decisions.

Known for relaxed elegance and innovation, the LACOSTE brand was the brainchild of Rene Lacoste, a French tennis star who dominated the game during the 1920s. At that time, the superstar found traditional "tennis whites" restrictive, and longed for an alternative to competing in white, long-sleeved button-down shirts, long pants and a tie. Soon, he designed what is known today as the



signature “polo shirt.” LACOSTE’s logo, the ever-recognizable crocodile, was an ode to the nickname given to him by fans and the media.

Once an innovative passion, LACOSTE is now an iconic fashion brand. The company has such a following that two LACOSTE products are sold every second through company-owned boutiques, department stores and a selective distribution network, which includes a direct-to-consumer e-commerce operation.

At a time when many omnichannel companies — including luxury brands — are eager to expand their breadth, LACOSTE is looking for ways to streamline its distribution efforts across North America.

“Rather than expand our retail and wholesale business within North America, our new business mission is to become more strategic about where we distribute merchandise. It is a means of upholding our premium position,” said Todd Bernstein, LACOSTE’s senior vice president. “By reducing our footprint across wholesale and retail, we can remain focused on sales quality, not quantity.”

However, a lack of insight initially made this mission a challenge. Specifically, the company lacked analytics tools that could manage sales and performance data across all retail department stores, company-owned stores and digital commerce.

Eager to base business decisions on proven trends and real facts, LACOSTE adopted a retail intelligence solution from Sky I.T. Group. Called SKYPAD, the solution collects, processes and reports on internal big data, giving merchandisers and sales executives accurate insight into specific products’ sales performance across company-owned stores, and among retail customers. The

SKYPAD platform allows LACOSTE to drill down to specific information, including particular styles, colors or sizes, to further understand how specific items are selling at individual stores.

“Armed with this tool, we can analyze our business at a micro-level by specific stores, SKUs [stockkeeping unit], even by city, state or mall. We can also analyze performance at macro levels by category or operating region,” Bernstein explained. “The solution uncovers opportunities within our business that were not previously possible.”

Since going live in mid-2015, the company has “a better understanding of our business, the impact of merchandise, and what products are performing and where, as well as what is not,” Bernstein said.

“This allows us to speak more intelligently about the business, and we can knowledgeably compare performance across regions, retailers and channels,” he added. “Sharing qualitative information across our lines of business is much more dynamic as we work to approach and engage the customer.”

Looking ahead, LACOSTE plans to expand the breadth of data used to make business decisions. With plans to apply a year’s worth of information to the solution, the brand will now be able to make year-over-year comparisons across its retail and wholesale operations.

“When you consider the business opportunities based on what the tool provides, it really sheds light on how handicapped we were without it,” he said. “We have already made significant strides with the tool, but once we apply historic information, our retail and wholesale divisions will be that much more in sync.”

— Deena M. Amato-McCoy

Ivory Ella

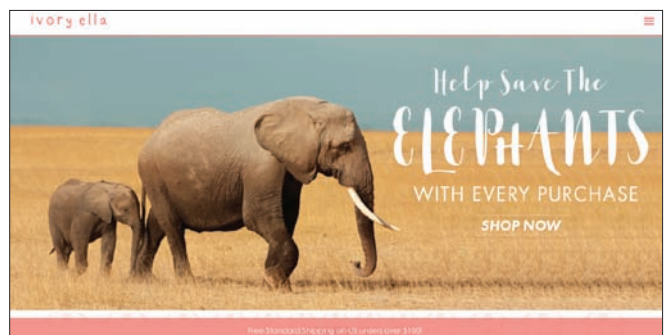
Groton, Conn. | www.ivoryella.com

NOMINATED BY: Self

If you have any doubt about the spending power and formidable influence of teens, tweens and those much-maligned Millennials, consider the overnight success of Ivory Ella.

Launched on April 18, 2015, the elephant-themed online-only apparel (tees! hoodies! hats!) and accessories (iPhone cases! water bottles!) brand has made good on its mission statement to blend business and beneficence into a company that exists first and foremost for social good, giving 10 percent of profits back to the global community. To date, Ivory Ella has donated a total of \$415,000 to charitable organizations, including \$360,000 for its flagship cause, Save the Elephants, and other groups such as the Elephants Crisis Fund, Breast Cancer Research Foundation and Toys for Tots. Not too shabby for a startup.

It’s easy to see why girls of a certain age are crazy for Ivory Ella’s bright tops, funky tie-dyes, whimsical patterns and adorable, eye-catching elephant logo. While co-founder Matt Fiano notes that the core Ivory Ella customers are 13- to 24-year-old females,



“we have something special in the works for that middle-school age group.

“I don’t think we realized how popular we were with that group on Instagram,” he adds. The brand currently has more than 850,000 followers on the photo-centric social platform and averages about 45,000 likes per post.

Despite the founders’ social media marketing and business background, Fiano and fellow co-founder John Allen still were surprised by the strong customer response right out of the gate. With 500 initial t-shirts on hand and some efforts to identify influencers on social media to help the brand go viral, selling through in a month was all Ivory Ella initially hoped for. “Selling out in a

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week would be awesome,” explains Allen. “Instead, we sold out in 17 minutes.” During the launch, Ivory Ella was a trending topic on Twitter.

That first major moment of success launched a long stretch of trying to produce enough of those trendy tees to meet demand while also ensuring customers were satisfied. The company immediately started taking preorders once the batch of 500 tees disappeared. Fiano chalks that up to inexperience. “We kind of didn’t understand the clothing market at that point,” he explains. “We sold based on what we thought would be available. I told a friend, ‘it’s really overwhelming.’ And he said, ‘the worst thing is getting an email saying, ‘hey where’s my shirt?’ But the real worst thing is not getting those emails because that means there’s no demand.”

Faced with 30,000 backorders at one point, Ivory Ella terminated pre-orders in August and by October had fulfilled the entire backlog. During that tumultuous period, Ivory Ella offered refunds to customers who inquired about their delayed orders, but the vast majority flatly refused,

according to Allen. “It’s more than a shirt to a lot of people,” he says. “Our customers love to give back, and we encourage them to give back and not just through us.”

Fiano — at 37 years old, the only non-Millennial of the six founders — says that causes are crucial for the Millennial cohort. “They feel more connected to a product that’s going to a good cause,” he explains.

One year into the business, Allen jokes that Ivory Ella isn’t quite yet out of the bootstrapping stage but is starting to find a good production groove. Apparel is sourced mainly from China, Honduras and Pakistan, with some items coming from Mexico. The company does 40 percent of its screenprinting in house, while the remainder, and some embroidery work, is outsourced to vendors local to its Connecticut headquarters.

A half dozen limited-edition products in runs of 1,500 to 2,000 pieces routinely sold out in 10 minutes over the holidays. “People were literally waiting for product to drop,” Fiano says. “Consumers like having a product that not everyone can get, and it’s awesome for a designer when a shirt sells out in minutes.”

Ivory Ella shipped about 10,000 packages daily at the peak of the season, aided by up to 70 seasonal employees in addition to 40 full-time staff. The company is making big moves as it strives to emerge from startup mode, planning to consolidate spaces imminently and lease a larger facility as it ramps up production. Ivory Ella just implemented FishBowl Inventory to get a handle on its stock. “Up until [March], we were doing manual inventory counts,” says Fiano. The company uses Shopify for e-commerce and mobile commerce and manages fulfillment with ShipStation.

Ivory Ella turned to social media to identify college ambassadors to help spread the word about the brand and now works with 30 to 40 schools. Fiano says the company’s goal is to become a full lifestyle brand offering apparel for “every climate and every time of year,” potentially expanding into bottoms and creating lines for youth as well as men. (Some initial efforts in men’s wear fizzled.)

“We have to crawl before we walk,” Allen concludes.

— Jessica Binns

Cintas

Chicago, Ill. | www.cintas.com

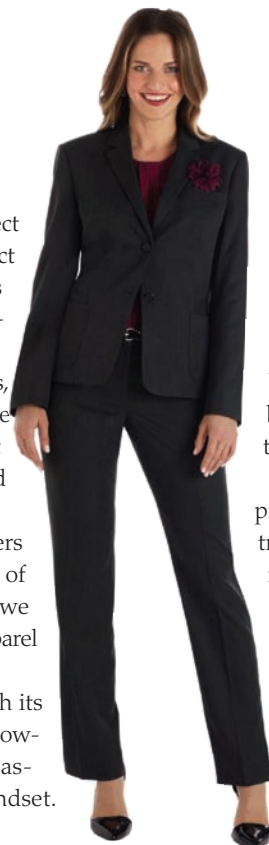
NOMINATED BY: Self

A picture may be worth a thousand words, but direct feedback from customers is priceless. Using direct customer research, Cintas has enhanced two of its product lines to help employers engage their workforce with more innovative, functional uniforms.

Ask any employer what their biggest challenge is, and the answer is often, “Figuring out how to engage with the millennial workforce.” There is no doubt that providing uniforms that are modern, edgy, and most importantly, functional, is a good start.

“We see millennials as our future decision makers and business owners,” said Kristin Sharp, director of merchandising and design at Cintas. “Not only do we need to understand them, we also need to present apparel to them in an appealing way.”

One way Cintas is accomplishing this is through its newest catalog. Launched in February, the catalog showcases an artistic take on the company’s modern classics, a move designed to appeal to a millennial mindset.



CINTAS
READY FOR THE WORKDAY™

The digital version of the catalog also makes it easier for customers to navigate options. Available via a hyperlink, this unconventional catalog replaces a traditional one-product-shot design with navigation tabs that enable customers to browse product features, style numbers, and even watch videos that highlight features and benefits of the new collection. There are also spec sheets that users can scroll through.

“As a company, we are always looking to evolve our product line, and this can be by getting insight into hot trends, making apparel easier to work in, or considering a new technology that can evolve suiting to be more eco-friendly, easier to care for or launder, or simply just make it easier to get ready for the day,” Sharp explained.

Cintas is so committed to this evolution that it created a campaign around it. Called “Ready for the Workday™,” the company supports this message through television and radio commercials, as well as

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social media, all focused on the message about how the “ready” prepared employee is the hero of the workday.

But how did Cintas ensure it could present the right message — both in its campaign, as well as across its uniforms? It used one-on-one customer research. Whether conducting one-on-one interviews, or shadowing employees to gain a “day-in-the-life” perspective into how well uniforms satisfy their needs, Cintas is clearly letting its customers lead the charge.

“We want to walk a day in our customers’ shoes,” she explained. “Members of our design and merchandise teams will work with customers who utilize the garments to understand pain points, potential innovations, and validate that it performs the way it needs to.”

And no job is off limits. While working with hotel housekeeping associates, for example, Cintas members got a first-hand perspective that uniforms should stay cool, dry and allow them to move within their work environment. This personal insight also “helps take our product to the next level when it comes to styling, comprehensive performance, and keeping designs fresh,” she said.

Cintas recently enhanced two of its collections out of this insight. The first came via its partnership with Bagir Group, a move that is enhancing Regeneration Suiting, one of Cintas’ top-selling eco-suiting collections. Made out of 100 percent recycled polyester produced entirely from post-consumer waste, this collection is exclusive to Cintas. To give a sharper image of the line, picture this: one single suit is made out of approximately 25 recycled 2-liter plastic bottles.

Bagir’s partnership is valuable to Cintas in three ways. First, Bagir’s EcoGir® Antimicrobial Recycled eco-fabric is designed to actively reduce the number of germs on fabric, making it more

hygienic. Cintas also added Bigar’s Odegon Shield®, from Odegon Technologies Ltd., a specialized underarm shield, to trap odor molecules, leaving a fresh scent. These enhancements join the Aero-cool lining designed to evaporate moisture, keeping the wearer cool and comfortable. All three features actually reduce the need to wash uniforms as often, a move that extends the life of the garment.

Customer research also helped Cintas introduce an enhancement to its Flexique® housekeeping collection. While customer feedback confirmed the line had the “right silhouette choices; the right ease of care, and the right level of durability,” the material was just “too hot.” This feedback prompted the company’s development team to add a new technology called MCS (Moisture Control System) Adaptive®, from Burlington Industries.

Designed to complement the functionality of the human body, it assists the natural processes for thermal control and transporting moisture according to the temperature of the skin and its surroundings. Specifically, the material lasts up to 50 washings with proper care; moves perspiration at a slower rate to provide a warm insulating effect in cool environments of 65° Fahrenheit (F); and in warm environments up to 95°F, MCS moves perspiration at a rapid rate to provide a cooling effect. MCS is now available in all garments containing Flexique, specifically uniforms for hospitality and healthcare.

“We are constantly looking to evolve, and use customer research to make life easier for [the people who wear our uniforms.]” she said. “And all the while, we always have our eyes open, looking for our next innovation.”

— Deena M. Amato-McCoy

SOL Lingerie

Denver, Colo. | www.solgirl.com

NOMINATED BY: Magento | www.magento.com

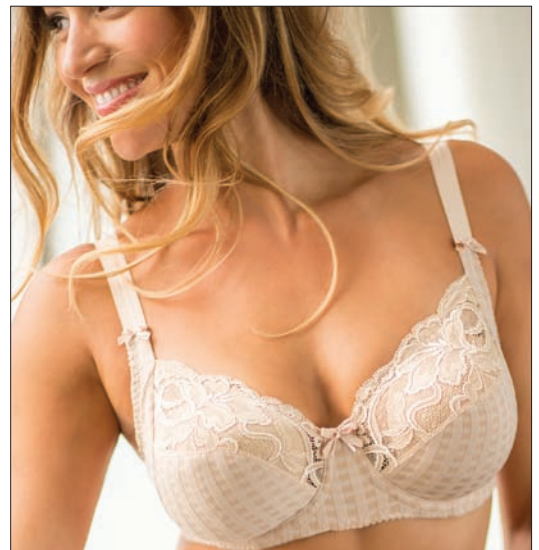
When your physical store revolves around high-touch, personalized service, how exactly do you go about replicating that experience online?

That’s the conundrum that SOL Lingerie, launched by sisters Cindy Johnson and Jeanie Peterson, found itself in recently. The 19-year-old company’s sole boutique in Denver’s Cherry Creek neighborhood has attracted a strong, devoted clientele of women who love not just the unique assortment of bras, underwear and other pretty things from brands such as Andres Sarda, Marie Jo, Daisy and Prima Donna but the memorable hands-on shopping experience of finding their perfect size with a highly trained fitter who serves them for their life-

time with the company. Indeed, SOL’s six fitters are on a mission not to push product but instead are all about selling comfort, confidence and fun, according to marketing director Steve Jones.

“We believe that buying a bra should be a safe and fun experience,” Jones says. “It’s not uncommon for women of all ages to discover they’ve been wearing the wrong size bra.”

SOL, which stands for Store of Lingerie, hires “friendly, fabulous girls you can trust,” he adds. “Their job is to understand exactly what you need and where you’re coming from. Whatever you’re worried about —



back fat, a post-baby bod, the fact that you’re wearing a bra from 1992 — they’ve seen it all! Most importantly, our girls receive months of intensive training to make sure you get the perfect fit.”

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Online shoppers wouldn't have the benefit of having the fitters' combined 25+ years' experience and expertise at the ready so SOL had to figure out another way to help customers identify the right product solutions on the website. "We come as close as we can by offering guidance on bra fitting, which includes many of the common fit problems such as 'your cup is too small,' 'your band rides up,' 'your straps fall down,' and more, with pictures and advice on how to measure yourself and get the right fit," Jones says.

SOL completed its e-commerce replatform last fall, choosing Magento 2.0 to offer a modern, easy-to-use experience. "We quickly realized that growing the business meant growing the online business," says

Peterson. "Magento 2.0 opens up the possibility of using technology to provide customers with the same fun SOL experience online as they get in store. The value of the online customer experience is what it's all about. That's what will drive our growth."

Personalizing the online experience is a bit trickier than it is in store, but the key is to take the time to understand, segment and speak to customers in as personalized manner as possible. "Understanding what products a SOL girl has purchased can help inform what brands and styles might be a great fit for her in the future," says Jones.

With the new website's digital marketing capabilities, SOL has improved its email segmentation, dynamic content and automated triggers, which the company believes

will boost customer lifetime value. What's more, the advent of mobile has upended how SOL shoppers interact with the brand.

"It seems that we've entered a mobile-first world, where everything must be considered from a mobile perspective as the primary thought, and the desktop the afterthought," says Jones. Customers use their smartphones to read SOL Girl emails, communicate directly with their fitter by text, email or voice call, or schedule an appointment. They also love to browse on mobile for what's new.

"Each season when the new Daisies arrive, it's a big deal," concludes Jones.

—Jessica Binns

Venroy

Sydney, Australia | www.venroy.com.au

NOMINATED BY: Magento | www.magento.com

Some companies claim to be lifestyle brands, but Venroy really means it. This male-centric resort wear brand inspired by the Australian beach lifestyle has already made its mark from a wholesale perspective, but the company is ready to connect directly with its loyal shoppers. With the help of a flexible e-commerce platform, Venroy is making this endeavor a reality.

The brainchild of best friends Sean Venturi and Theo Smallbone, Venroy began as nothing more than two high school friends' obsession with board shorts. "Growing up in Australia, collecting board shorts was like collecting baseball cards," quipped Venturi. "Once we graduated from university however, we started to get bored by the styles being designed in Europe and in America. So we started making our own."

The duo designed their ideal pair of shorts, and even went as far as getting a sample pair made. In the summer of 2010, the team approached boutiques across Sydney armed with 60 pair of board shorts and sold them all. Making a mere \$5 per pair, the friends had to a decision to make — was this a labor of love or could it be a viable business? With an upcoming trip planned to visit friends in Los Angeles and New York, the duo took some samples along to find out.

Venturi and Smallbone approached Fred Siegel, Barneys New York, Urban Outfitters and Nordstrom, a move that drove merchandise into approximately 100 stores across the United States. Soon, these brands comprised 95 percent of their wholesale business. From there, the team got its merchandise into "the best stores" in Japan, Canada and its home market, Venturi recalled. "By the end of 2014, we had created a home office in L.A. and a

strong wholesale presence across department stores, but we were ready to do a better job of controlling our brand and how our customers interacted with it."

This became increasingly clear as wholesale partners began asking for specific designs to fit into their contemporary sports-wear categories. "We felt like we weren't creating the designs we really wanted to," he said. "We also wanted more control of the distribution of our product."

It was a concern that prompted the pair to "pull out of wholesale, pack up our L.A. offices, move back home with our parents, and start from scratch," joked Venturi. "We lost 95 percent of our business, but we knew we needed to make a fresh start."

With that, the friends got back to their roots, and began designing shorts based on their passion: the beach. "In Australia, we know the beach and take leisure seriously," he said.

"We wanted to build our brand around leisure and how we grew up in the summertime — you spent the day and had lunch at the beach, then headed out to the bar at night in the same shorts — you just threw on a casual shirt," Venturi said. "Making this lifestyle available through a larger offering has had a strong reaction from customers."

In its quest to reach even more shoppers, Venturi and Smallbone set their sights on e-commerce and mobility to drive consumer purchases. Giving shoppers an instant way to access the brand allows them to have a small taste of the true Australian beach lifestyle.

"To us, we are a relevant digital brand, especially for mobile. Smart devices give a sense of escapism and so does our brand,"

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he said. "People have such crazy lives, so if they can even spend three minutes browsing the site while traveling the subway on the way into work, they have a way to plan for their next vacation that may be coming up."

To make this vision a reality, the pair adopted Magento 2.0, an open source digital commerce platform from Magento Commerce. The platform is flexible enough for pals to quickly and cost-effectively deliver engaging omnichannel shopping experiences, and the open source ecosystem provides scalability for new features when needed, as well as business agility. Specifically, the platform helped Venroy create a customized, mobile-optimized experience complete with all of the bells and whistles (from one-page checkout to customer reviews) of an engaging digital experience with very little adjustment to the core platform code — a factor that helped the sites launch within a two-month timeframe.

The e-commerce and mobile sites went live in October 2015. It was simultaneously incorporated within its Bondi Beach store, in Australia. "The goal was to build a simple experience that helps shoppers 'buy into the lifestyle,'" he said. "We needed to create

an experience that would not have any resistance when browsing product or making a purchase — whether on a desktop, laptop or mobile device."

In a short six months, results have been "Ace!" "As a whole, brand sales are up 38 percent, conversions are up 8 percent, and mobile conversion rates alone have increased 80 percent," according to Venturi. "We have also seen a 40 percent decrease in average page load times."

Web orders placed in-store are also strong, "and going forward, we see stores becoming a major piece of our distribution strategy," he said, adding that Venroy hopes to open between three and five more locations in Australia within the next 18 to 24 months.

Looking ahead, the pair hopes to create a more seamless omnichannel experience, one that enables shoppers to return online orders at store-level, as well as provide visibility into enterprise stock levels. "Having our logistics integrated with our web site is absolutely critical," Venturi said. "The customer is clearly in charge. Providing them with standard service is just not enough."

— Deena M. Amato-McCoy

Zobha

Los Angeles, Calif. | www.zobha.com

NOMINATED BY: WebLinc | www.weblinc.com

Yoga is a practice of quieting the mind, creating balance, and learning how to apply this mindset both inside and outside of the yoga studio. By adopting a new e-commerce platform, Zobha hopes to deliver its own version of Zen through a less cluttered, more balanced and engaging digital shopping experience.

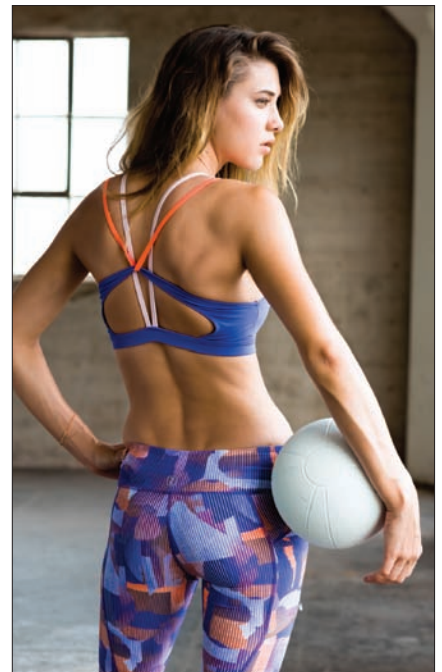
Catering to the needs of today's modern woman, one who is active in the worlds of both fitness and fashion, Zobha's line of "athleisure" apparel is inspired by yoga, pilates and fitness — and the active women who are immersed in these lifestyles. Defined as high-tech performance and runway-inspired fashion, Zobha's lines enable shoppers to transition from the gym to a night on the town in the blink of an eye. What makes their lines unique, however, is that they are based on customer feedback.

"Our designers travel the globe to understand trends in the marketplace, however, designs and performance are based on the needs of our shoppers," said Justin Zarabi, e-commerce team leader. "Our apparel has amazing silhouettes, and our designers balance innovation with performance."

The result is edgy, modern and overall contemporary pieces that effortlessly infuse fitness and fashion. But Zobha's previous e-commerce platform failed to show just how innovative and fashion-forward its lines really are. "Our platform was inflexible, an issue that made it difficult to change images, or adapt functionality on the fly," he said.

For example, Zobha's apparel features great symmetry and color, but the site failed to expertly illustrate the designs in a way that could drive customer engagement. "We have a lot of great imagery that shows what the brand is all about, but if you can't show it off, you lose customer engagement," he explained. "It also lacked the flexibility our customers needed to interact with our clothing and the buying process."

Eager for a change, the company wanted a clean, simple site design that could drive a seamless experience. "Reducing as much clutter as possible puts more attention on the vision of the designs," he said. "It also had to be feature-rich, enabling shoppers to easily interact with the brand and have a seamless, easy shopping experience."



The same rules needed to apply behind the scenes. The product needed to be the "hero" of the site, supported by colorful imagery "that shows what the brand is all about," he said. "That said, we needed the ability to update new images in a simple way."

Zobha also wanted to streamline the browsing and buying process for its mobile shoppers. This became a prerequisite once Zobha determined that mobile users were

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outpacing its traditional digital shoppers. With about 43 percent of users visiting Zobha via smart phones, 42 percent on desktop, and 14 percent through a tablet, the brand needed to ensure the site was mobile-optimized.

"It is paramount to cater to the mobile user, and making the experience feel as organic as possible as they browse and engage with our brand," Zarabi said. "Overall, we needed a site that was fully responsive, and that ensured shoppers who are on the go have a great experience no matter the device they're on."

Zobha found its ideal solution from WebLinc. Defined as a commerce platform for growing retailers, the WebLinc Commerce Platform features a user-friendly site management experience backed up by a technology stack engineered to scale with Zobha's current and increasing business needs. Working alongside WebLinc designers, Zobha designed a new e-commerce

site that features look books, video content and improved photography to highlight the brand's active wear designs. The platform's flexibility also enabled the brand to create a catalog of outfit pages that allows customers to shop individual pieces of an ensemble, or purchase the complete look, he said.

To drive even more customer engagement, the site also features a custom-built reviews engine that allows shoppers to rate merchandise on style, comfort and overall fit, as well as share details including location, product size purchased, body type, and preferred workout. Further, a custom Instagram plugin was developed to leverage user-generated content (UGC) which allows customers to participate as part of the brand and see their pics on the brand's homepage.

While the reviews engine is customer-facing, it benefits Zobha internally, as well. "We use this feedback to create better designs

based on shoppers' needs, he said. "We want as much information as we can get from our shoppers — it is a concept that enables us to take our designs to the next level, and keep them true-to-size."

Since going live in October, the platform has helped conversion rates double. Specifically, the new site is driving 60 percent conversions through desktop computers, 28 percent of sales through mobile, and 12 percent through tablets.

Engagement levels are also on the upswing, as shoppers' dwell time is increasing and they are browsing more pages. For example, shoppers who used to visit for an average of two minutes now browse for almost five minutes, Zarabi said, adding that shoppers who used to browse through four pages now visit almost eight. "This proves that they are enjoying looking at different product, and the imagery on the new site is encouraging that."

— Deena M. Amato-McCoy

Chinese Laundry

Los Angeles, Calif. | www.chineselaundry.com

NOMINATED BY: Celerant Technology | www.celerant.com

Chinese Laundry is a true success story. Coming from humble roots as a shoe manufacturer selling to mass merchants, the brand is now a major influence across the fashion footwear industry. However, between its rapid expansion and progressively high customer expectations, it's become increasingly difficult to deliver a seamless omnichannel experience. With the help of a new retail platform, Chinese Laundry is on its way to creating a truly integrated omnichannel experience rooted on an enterprise-wide view of inventory.

Los Angeles-based Chinese Laundry is defined by several distinct brands: its namesake Chinese Laundry; Kristin Cavallari by Chinese Laundry; the value-centric CL by Laundry brand; its urban Dirty Laundry line, and the edgy Elise line. It is also one of the few fashion brands to successfully sell its products to customers through established retail partners such as Nordstrom, as well as through its own omnichannel operation comprised of brick-and-mortar stores and an e-commerce site. The company's overall goal was to streamline the shopping experience through a more engaging, responsive omnichannel operation that

delivered a consistent shopping experience, regardless of whether customers accessed the brand through desktops, smart devices or in-store.

"Rapidly changing styles are a natural part of the fashion footwear sector, which really ups the ante on the importance of optimized inventory fulfillment and tracking," Scott Cohn, vice president of e-commerce said in a company statement. "Making sure customers can order and receive the merchandise they want, when they want it, is critical."

When Cohn joined Chinese Laundry in December 2012 however, this capability was not available, as each sales channel existed in a separate vacuum. While the company made efforts to support growing sales across its increasingly digitally-influenced channels, Chinese Laundry started deploying separate point solutions, including new point-of-sale (POS) technology for its stores, to manage operations. Over an 18-month timeframe, these disconnected systems managed inventory and store order information, and even tracked customer payments.

Operating disparate POS and e-commerce platforms also created inventory and reporting night-



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mares, such as allowing digital shoppers to order out-of-stock merchandise, and providing executives with murky visibility into what merchandise was selling across which channels. There is no doubt that without enterprise-wide visibility, the company's omnichannel endeavors were destined to fail.

It is a major reason why 36 percent of retailers already have real-time inventory visibility, and another 38 percent of companies either have upgrades underway or will begin one by the end of the year, according to "The 26th Annual Retail Technology Study," a report from *RIS News* and Gartner.

Knowing this process can make or break the company's future, Chinese Laundry began working on a plan. When the existing technology contracts expired, Cohn saw the window of opportunity he needed to implement a new, single, integrated e-commerce platform. By tapping an existing relationship with Staten Island, N.Y.-based Celerant, which already supported the company's POS solution, Cohn added the provider's integrated e-commerce platform as a means of creating end-to-end omnichannel inventory visibility connecting all sales channels.

By deploying the vendor's Command Retail platform in 2014, Chinese Laundry now had a platform that tied together order and inventory information from different sources, and featured a customer relationship management (CRM) solution that provides a "single view" of shoppers, regardless of the brand or channel they visit. It also gained the back-end support required to launch a brand new web site and mobile optimized site.

The transition quickly began driving strong returns on investment. Omnichannel integration has enabled the company to effectively fill its rapidly expanding online orders, while improving internal control and generating meaningful reports on the performance of its product lines and SKUs. Specifically, real-time omnichannel inventory visibility contributed to a 20 percent drop in canceled customer orders. Meanwhile, integrated web and mobile channels are driving a 31 percent lift in electronic conversions, 50 percent more productive search pages, a 54 percent increase in mobile commerce sales and even an 18 percent boost to page load times — which is critical to customer engagement.

And by gaining intelligence into what merchandise is selling in specific geographies and customers, Cohn and decision makers now have the information needed to optimize inventory levels and product selection. Most importantly, this unified operating platform allows Chinese Laundry to future-proof its business — a move that will allow it to more easily scale and streamline omnichannel operations, and better service shoppers.

"Continued growth in smart phone and tablet shopping is fueling a sharp increase to online sales," he added. "Real-time visibility into every order is key to scaling without jeopardizing satisfaction for any customer, whether online or in-store."

— Deena M. Amato-McCoy