



STRATEGIC RECOMMENDATION UNDER ARMOUR WOMEN'S CATEGORY

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OVERVIEW

Under Armour (UA) is rooted in a culture of innovation. Fabric technology like HeatGear® and ArmourVent™ became hallmarks of the brand and set a tone of unparalleled ingenuity in comfort and performance. UA proved to be a courageous new competitor in the athletic apparel and product industry, taking bold leaps in brand exposure and advertising. UA scored deals with professional sports leagues and several collegiate teams and continued to develop new gear including the wildly successful Curry Signature line of shoes. Capitalizing on their success, UA acquired several fitness apps collectively called Connected Fitness and a growing community of like-minded individuals emerged. UA did not focus on women's product development and advertising until 2010, nearly a decade after the brand's explosion into the market. However, early numbers revealed a growing demand for UA's women's line.

UA is in a critical time of growth that depends upon the careful and thoughtful execution of a strongly defined women's category. The unfavorably late arrival of UA's attention to the women's market and campaigns that challenge the ideologies of gender in sport may have hindered UA's advancement to the top of their category. A women's product line that homes in on UA's founding tenet of bold innovation and a multi-media presence that is diverse (both in reach and image), uses gender-inclusive language, and promotes community will be key to reaching the goal of a \$1.9 billion women's category.

ANALYSIS

Product Design

After UA's initial "shrink it and pink it" approach failed to move product in 2003, and UA had time to rethink their strategy, they made the smart decision to hire a female led creative team to

reboot their women's line in 2010. The designers were able to create a women's line that had the same technical features as the men's line of fabric but built for the female body. However, its focus on 'accentuating muscles' favors a design more focused on the objectivity of the female body rather than athletic performance, a clear diversion from one of UA's founding principles.

Advertising and Promotion

UA began to make serious efforts to promote its brand to women in 2010. They first released women-specific versions of their overall brand campaigns. This was a smart approach, as it provided viewers with a sense of familiarity while allowing some foresight into future directions for the brand. They later developed women-specific campaigns, such as I Will What I Want. These campaigns aired on ESPN and a variety of other networks. Diversifying the media landscape with channels such as The CW and MTV provided a greater opportunity for UA to reach its target female audience. However, the 2012 No Matter What, Sweat Every Day I Will campaign challenged everyday women to engage in exercise, yet it completely lacked diversity in its representation and featured only young, conventionally attractive, and very fit women. A major miss on UA's part.

In 2014, UA hired a consulting firm to provide deeper insight into women's aspirations. The firm revealed key insights into the mental and physical aspect of sport and athletics. These insights were used as the basis for the I Will What I Want campaign that showcased women's inner strength and ability to overcome barriers to achieve goals. While this concept of 'I Will' showcases women's grit, strength, and perseverance, it also promotes a sense of inferiority. Every one of the women-specific campaigns that aired from 2010 to 2014 incorporated words like 'overcome' and sayings like 'stronger than you think', emphasizing the social construct that falsely places women below men. Such language is problematic because it suggests that a

woman's success is dependent upon her escape of societal expectations and gendered assumptions. However, the multi-gender campaigns including It Comes from Below and Rule Yourself are a shift towards a more equitable framework as they position women's ability alongside men's ability, rather than below it. This seems to position UA as an equitable entity.

UA also implemented ongoing and periodic digital promotion and content. This dual promotional framework is a solid approach, as it provides a steady stream of visibility with the flexibility to incorporate new or exciting campaigns. When Protect this House I Will aired, UA added a Facebook fan page that was wildly popular. This sparked the expansion of their digital media presence with Facebook and Instagram becoming key players. UA's What's Beautiful promotions on social media were hugely successful and provided a space for all women to share progress, get inspiration and support, and engage in competition. Whether intentional or not, the What's Beautiful promotions rectify the somewhat narrow predictions of gender that played out in earlier UA advertising campaigns. The enthusiasm surrounding this promotion pointed towards a growing interest in togetherness, a clear shift from UA's self-directed campaigns from earlier years. UA tapped into something here that is worth holding onto.

RECOMMENDATION

UA has always been a brand focused on performance and ingenuity. Over the course of UA's 20+ year tenure, bold decision making has moved product, built partnerships, and elevated the brand's visibility. The above analysis reveals when UA began its women's reboot, it put emphasis on social construct over ability and performance, and self-interest over community. UA lost sight of its unique positioning and legacy, to some degree. Moving forward, I suggest the following three recommendations that will position the UA women's category as innovative and community-centered as a way to drive sales and revenue.

First, aside from an initial apparel reboot in 2010, UA's women's category has seen very few product releases and promotions. I suggest a new and innovative women's product release similar to the men's Curry One, as a way to continue UA's legacy of innovation. A collaboration at this scale for women has not been done by UA and it will reaffirm UA's commitment to performance and innovation. In addition, the timing is right, with hype still high after the 2016 Olympics.

Second, I recommend UA further develops its What's Beautiful app. The growing interest in community suggests that women believe reaching their goals doesn't have to be a solo effort. The What's Beautiful app provides a space for all women to elevate their performance and voice together and it has already proven successful, with 19 iterations. Since many of UA's earlier promotions have been focused on the individual, a community lens would be a big change. This bold leap would position UA as innovative beyond just apparel. In addition, the app has the potential to expand upon its functions and capabilities to fit in line with consumer preferences in the future.

Last, UA should expand on its accompanying What's Beautiful campaigns through ongoing and periodic multi-media promotion and advertising. UA is positioned well for use of social media, with high engagement on social sites already established. On-going promotion on such platforms keeps UA in the conversation. Periodic campaigns that utilize social media as well as channel networks for visibility provide the opportunity to showcase new product releases or promotions on a larger scale with a broader audience. This dual approach ensures that UA receives the most impactful attention. If done right, this type of product development and promotion has the potential to accomplish what all previous campaigns attempted to do; that is, to empower all women.