

In Focus: Leadership

BUSINESS

Where Fashion Meets Skin Care: Coolibar's Wearable Sun Protection

● Chief executive officer Kendra Reichenau shares the brand's "mission-driven" approach aimed at keeping its customers healthy.

BY WWD STAFF



Kendra Reichenau

For two decades, Coolibar has offered high-performance sun-protective apparel and accessories to consumers, and is the first clothing company to receive The Skin Cancer Foundation's Seal of Recommendation.

The company, based in Minneapolis, has a clear and powerful mission: "To keep the world safe from sun damage, to protect those who suffer from a sun-related medical condition and to prevent everyone else from developing one." Its mission is embraced, per Coolibar.com, by "innovating UPF 50+ fabrics and UPF clothing designed to block 98 percent of UV rays."

As part of an ongoing series of executive interviews, Tim Boerkoel, founder of global executive search and strategic consulting firm The Brownstone Group, talks with Coolibar's chief executive officer Kendra Reichenau – an industry veteran whose prior leadership roles have been at Gap Inc., Nordstrom and Oakley, among other fashion retail brands.

Tim Boerkoel: Kendra, you've now worked at both large and small companies, each with unique cultures and missions. Can you describe the Coolibar brand and why you decided to join?

Kendra Reichenau: When trying to grow a company, there's always a strong focus on increasing customers and profits. Today, it's clear that purpose, product and people are key ingredients to good growth. So, at Coolibar, we are growing our brand without compromise to our mission, values and long-term view.

It's definitely an exciting time, and we have very loyal customers who are so enthusiastic about Coolibar that they wear our brand at least once a week. In fact, roughly 44 percent of our customers own at least four pieces and they wear them on a regular basis. Our customers trust us, and we've learned that 66 percent of them buy Coolibar because of a sun sensitivity issue, a genetics-based concern, or another health concern related to the sun and their skin.

Our mission is to protect people's skin by preventing sunburn and sun damage, which puts us in a very unique space. Our customers value us and we give them the strength, courage and peace of mind so they can go outside and enjoy every day – even in the sun.

T.B.: Given changing consumer interests, as well as available research and development technologies, how has Coolibar's product assortment evolved?

K.R.: We've seen the shift in the last two years where our typically female customer is starting to buy more for her partner, children, grandchildren, etc. There is more gift-giving now, which is



Coolibar said sun protection for the entire family is the company's "sole purpose."

great for everybody. What a wonderful thing to be able to say, "I love and care about you. Let's take care of your skin. Don't get burned."

Our products also help people who are on medication that might have sun sensitivity as a side effect. Coolibar can really help these people. And in some cases, sunscreen can irritate these people's skin even more. To help, we've made additions to our "ultimate coverage" group. We now sell gloves, masks and full-coverage hats. We've extended all of the sleeves so that most of them are longer and with a thumb hole, effectively covering half of the fingers. People are rightfully concerned about sun exposure and they want more options for safe, quality coverage.

Our assortment today has grown 50 percent compared to when I joined Coolibar [in 2014]. We've also incorporated a lot more fashion and increased the number of products I would describe as "technically elegant" – clothing and accessories with high-performance fabrics that, in addition to having features such as being antimicrobial and cooling, protect people's skin while making them look great.

T.B.: It sounds like both the product and customer come first?

K.R.: Yes! In terms of fabric, we've instituted an extensive third-party testing protocol and tracking system to ensure the quality, durability and true protection. The importance of this commitment has been made clear by a recent study that found that two-thirds of all sunscreens are not quite as protective as we've been previously told. Additionally, some governments have or are looking into curbing sunscreen use due to its adverse effects on coral reefs.

At Coolibar, quality must be the top priority since the skin safety of the person wearing our product is the reason we do what we do. We aim to do the right thing every day and to live the core value of



The company said its designs are "technically elegant styles in flattering fits, with all-day UV protection."

helping our customer – a customer who trusts us. This means continually developing a diverse assortment of well-designed products created with quality materials that protect the skin – for the lifetime of the product.

T.B.: Community and relevant partnerships have also been an important part of the brand's story and strategy. Can you share more on the authenticity within this approach?

K.R.: Certainly. For instance, this past year we formed partnerships with the Melanoma Research Foundation and journalist Norah O'Donnell. We partner with people and causes that are making a difference in the space that we participate in. We're not just tagging onto a cause because it sounds good in the moment. Rather, we partner with organizations that are similarly authentic and connected to the Coolibar brand's truth. Aligned core values and a shared sense of purpose are must-have synergies for us.

This includes the wholesale business that works with and distributes through dermatologists across the country. It's

great to partner with doctors and nurses that have a trusted one-on-one connection with people. And these people may or may not be seeking treatment for an existing condition, but will have the opportunity, once educated, to take new preventative measures, including wearing Coolibar's protective apparel and accessories.

T.B.: How do you apply that truth and leverage such synergies inside the company?

K.R.: One way in which we rally the team is through a monthly "town hall." They have gotten a bit bigger as we've grown, and I now have to stand on a platform with a microphone while we gather in the warehouse to celebrate and talk shop. We discuss business, reflect on the past month, happenings, new accounts, the next quarter or two. And we engage with employees via a social media blitz each week. We share the most popular social media engagement between customers across channels such as Facebook, Instagram, the blog, Twitter and Pinterest. It allows the whole company to read and reflect on the kind of impact we are making. There are so many positive messages ranging from, "I can finally go outside during the day," to, "Wow, no sunburn after a full day of kayaking, beaching, etcetera!"

We focus on doing a good, effective job at communicating what is working in the building and, if we're having a tough month, what's not working. What do we need to do differently? How can we improve? The business is still small enough that we can get together and keep everyone aware and updated. It's a not-too-formal grassroots communication approach that works well given our size. But whenever we review the good or the bad, we always start off with: "What's our mission?"

T.B.: You and the brand are really making a difference in people's lives. How does that feel as a ceo, an employee and a person?

K.R.: It's a real pleasure to be tasked with doing the right thing. Every day, I feel that we get to make the right choices for our brand and our customers. Leading and working in alignment with a worthwhile mission is a luxury and a privilege.

A lot of my and many people's appreciation for Coolibar stem from the reality of a scary but helpable situation. One out of every five people will get skin cancer by the time they're 70. That's a terrifying statistic! It is the fastest growing cancer in the world, and it's clear we need to figure out how to prevent this, particularly since the majority of people diagnosed with cancer in their 40s and 50s actually suffered the initial damage when they were children or college age. How do we reverse this? How do we change the thinking? How can we educate and prevent this?

When I look at our social media, customer engagement, their comments and our company growth, it is clear we have a very engaged community. They are loyal and grateful because we deliver a quality product that they can count on, which can effectively decrease the worry and dangers of being in the sun. Coolibar lets people live now and later – it's easy to get excited and enthuse others about that.