

In Focus: Retailing

BUSINESS

Intermix Woos Shoppers With 'Anti-Endless Aisle'

● President Jyothi Rao shares insights on delivering the ultimate edit to customers.

BY WWD STAFF

In an apparel market overripe with choice, Intermix and its cadre of stylists are delivering highly personalized shopping experiences aimed at delighting fashion-forward consumers. The brand, acquired by Gap Inc. in 2012, is celebrating 25 years and company president Jyothi Rao said it operates more like a start-up than a traditional retailer.

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 Rao about the brand, its market position and how her experience informs her leadership style.

Tim Boerkoel: Jyothi, you have held leadership roles at Gap, Calvin Klein and Gilt, and for the past four years you've been president of Intermix. How do you approach getting to know new brands when taking on these diverse leadership roles?

Jyothi Rao: Irrespective of the brand, the first thing I've always done is get to know the customer. At Intermix, our personal stylists are an invaluable resource in understanding the needs and lifestyles of our customers whether they are celebrities, stylists, executives, stay-at-home mothers or young women in their first jobs. Being an omni retailer, we are able to combine these insights with data to help inform our assortment, inventory and staffing strategies by location and channel. I personally spend a lot of time in our boutiques meeting our customers, speaking to our team, and shopping on our website at intermixonline.com.

I also look at the competition to learn what can improve the experience for our customer and keep Intermix unique as a retailer. What differentiates us from our competitors is that we know our customers very intimately and know exactly how to buy for them, which is critical to being successful.

T.B.: And what did you bring with you and implement at Intermix from your earlier learnings?

J.R.: Having experience in both brick-and-mortar and digital was crucial. It allowed me to lead our efforts in building a digital business from the ground up and to use digital to drive our boutique business. One of my main goals was to bring the intimate shopping experience that defined our boutique business to web, and I'm so proud of the job we've done over the past few years in bridging that gap. Another goal of mine was around company culture, and how I wanted to lead and implement an entrepreneurial spirit at Intermix. To me, nothing is more important than fostering a work environment where everyone feels like they can share ideas, be curious and bold, test, learn and pivot quickly to

win. Our company feels more like a technology start-up than a traditional retailer.

T.B.: You are very passionate about the unique value that Intermix offers. Can you share more on this special approach that is succeeding in an ever-changing retail landscape?

J.R.: Intermix is the destination for the best fashion edit of the season that is highly personalized by location and customer. We are anti-endless aisle, in fact, we carry a much more edited selection than most multibrand retailers and a third of our assortment is produced exclusively for us. We do the hard work for our customers by carefully selecting the best and most relevant styles of the season, and then we show them how to pull it all together, either through our complementary styling services in our boutiques or online.

Today, there are too many options for the customer and it can be overwhelming when you get to a website and see 40 pages of dresses with no clear point of view. Our value is in making fashion fun and inspiring but also accessible and useful.

T.B.: The Intermix customer is enjoying the fruits of your team's labor, but how are the range of brands you carry responding to your approach?

J.R.: Intermix offers our brand partners something unique. Since we have 36 boutiques and a growing e-commerce business, we can write large enough orders to help scale designers' businesses while at the same time preserving integrity in the brands we represent. Our intimate boutique environment combined with our well-edited assortment allows us to educate and introduce these brands to a large customer base. We have supported hundreds of emerging brands by leveraging our omni-retail platform, featuring them prominently in our marketing vehicles. We work directly with our brands to design a strategic marketing program around a focus area.

For example, we hosted a digital pop-up shop on our site for Jonathan Simkhai, who was looking to expand his e-comm presence. And last year, A.L.C. wanted to explore sportswear, so we developed and launched an exclusive capsule collection called "On Duty" with Chrissy Teigen as the face of the campaign. Expect to see more of these partnerships from us in the upcoming months.

T.B.: How does Intermix find and cultivate new design talent? How do you promote emerging brands?

J.R.: From Day One, Intermix has been an incubator for emerging designers. We're constantly looking for new inspiration and talent: on the street, social media, on the runway, out in the market and in meetings. We send our buyers everywhere – not just the big four fashion capitals. Our team recently returned from Copenhagen where they spent time at small trade shows and showrooms, scouring to find things nobody else has. Then, we select designers and only certain pieces from their collections for us to style with the unique



Jyothi Rao



Western Boheme looks from Intermix.

Intermix point of view.

A few of the up-and-coming brands we're excited about are Monse, Rejina Pyo, Francesco Russo and Ganni. We spotlight these designers by telling their story and showcasing them across all of our platforms: in-store visuals, site content, e-mail features, social posts, our editorial hub The Mix and in our seasonal look books.

T.B.: It sounds like there are many exciting developments to keep an eye open for. Any predictions for Intermix, and fashion and retail in general?

J.R.: There are. It's our brand's 25th anniversary this year so be on the lookout for a month of celebrations starting

mid-October. At the moment, retailers are thinking about how to make their brand more personal and experiential, and that's what guided us in our initiatives and events for our anniversary. We'll be launching some exclusively developed product from our top designers and each of our stores will be stocked with gifts that are up for grabs.

I don't want to give away too much so you'll have to stay tuned to see. Also, expect to see us launch new technology tools that further integrate our boutique and digital experiences – I am particularly excited about innovating around our channels.