

Young consumers expect a lot from footwear brands.

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Young audience

Fashion-focused footwear firms have a good chance of success in coming years if they are able to develop a deep understanding of the millennial consumer. This is the opinion of Jayne Estève-Curé, founder of Paris-based Jayne Fashion Consultancy. She explains that this group, comprising people aged between 15 and 35 today, numbers approximately two billion globally. "Their purchasing power is huge," Ms Estève-Curé says. "Collectively, they spend \$10 trillion per year and \$2.45 trillion of that goes on fashion. And over the next five years, these amounts are going to double."

She describes these young consumers as "complex" because they expect a lot from consumer products, manufacturers and brands and are difficult to please. "This generation grew up with the internet and multi-channel shopping is all they have known; they don't know a world without the web," she explains. "They are careful shoppers too. They spend a lot of time researching but they are brand addicts and if you can seduce them, they can become good ambassadors for your brand."

Blogs' big influence

For this reason, social platforms and online communities are important. Among these, though, she says Facebook is not the "top influencer" in fashion, although it's important. Blogs have a big influence, she says, and there are lots of blogs devoted to footwear. Image-based social media platforms can also be

Paris-based fashion consultant Jayne Estève-Curé has clear ideas about the questions footwear companies need to address if they are to reach out successfully to millennial consumers.

a good way to inspire consumers, she says, mentioning by name Pinterest and Instagram, which have 100 million and 400 million active users respectively. Of course, instant direct access to brands' latest products and messages is one of the results of this and this represents another way in which the world of fashion has changed for this generation of shoppers, making it easier for them to dream of couture and of finding it at affordable prices in "accessible" outlets. Everyone has their own idea of what this might actually mean in terms of a shoe's colour, style and heel height and this is pushing young consumers towards an insistence on "a unique and individualised online-offline shopping experience".

Belief in a better future

Ms Estève-Curé also points out that this is a generation that has grown up with environmental awareness and they know all about organic materials and fair wages for factory workers.



All eyes on the catwalk. Blogs have a big influence on millennial consumers, and there are lots of blogs devoted to footwear.

CREDIT: MESSE DÜSSELDORF, CONSTANCE TILLMANN

They want manufacturers who create “no waste and no greenwashing”. They are “emotion-driven”, she says, and they want to believe in a better future.

For this reason, she insists that younger consumers are becoming more and more interested in materials and craftsmanship, which is good news for higher-end shoe companies. To offer them an artisan product is to help them feel “privileged and unique”, she says, and brands that find a way to become “successful story-telling experts” will “definitely attract consumers”.

Be prepared

According to *World Footwear* contributor Sergio Dulio, these insights from Jayne Estève-Curé present five main challenges to footwear companies. Head of ATOMLab, the research and innovation business unit at cutting technology provider ATOM Group, Mr Dulio says that if millennial consumers insist on customised product, manufacturers have to be prepared to produce what their customers “generate” by using customisation features on shoe companies’ websites, for example. “This is an excellent way to tackle sustainability,” he says. “If you only produce exactly what consumers want, you tackle waste.”

Another challenge is to turn footwear factories into “experiences” for consumers, allowing people to spend time, not just money, with the company supplying their shoes. “Consumers used to be kept out of factories,” he points out, “but now we have facilities like the Louis Vuitton footwear factory in Fiesco d’Artico in Veneto in northern Italy, which is like a factory and an outlet store at the same time. It’s worth seeing.”

People not robots should have the best jobs

Third, Mr Dulio believes producers everywhere are going to have to use robot-assisted manufacturing well. Robots are appearing in factories in almost all parts of the world now, but the role of robots will change, he insists. Factories have to be attractive places to work if companies are to keep key workers on board; therefore, the clever thing to do will be to have robots do repetitive and dangerous jobs and keep the more fulfilling jobs for people to do.

Still on the subject of workers, he says footwear brands

should take advantage of the amount of information you can put onto a radio frequency identification (RFID) tag to tell buyers a little bit about the person who made their shoes for them. “It would be high-tech but high touch,” he explains, “a human digital fingerprint. Telling consumers about the contribution workers make carries value.”

Finally, Mr Dulio thinks there is “lots of enthusiasm” for technologies such as 3D printing that he says can “democratise” manufacturing and that consumers of shoes are going to become “pro-sumers”, buyers backed with lots of professional knowledge, and “con-workers” a new class of consumer that knows so much they could almost do the job themselves. “It’s not going to happen tomorrow, but it may be that in the future people really will just download a design they like from a brand website and print their own shoes,” he says. 

Portuguese casual footwear brand Shoes Your Mood attracted attention at the GDS exhibition in Düsseldorf in February 2016 by offering visitors the chance to customise designs and take away a personalised pair.

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