

“WE WANTED TO BYPASS THE MIDDLEMEN” SAID NEIL BLUMENTHAL AND DAVE GILBOA, CO-FOUNDERS OF WARBY PARKER, IN LAST MONTH’S VANITY FAIR. AND SO THEY CHANGED THE LONG-ESTABLISHED BUSINESS MODEL OF THE EYEWEAR BUSINESS

Warby Parker: A new way of looking at eyewear

By Daniel Scheffler (@danielscheffler)

CHANNELLING THE great wordsmith Jack Kerouac, the eyewear company Warby Parker instituted their name from two of his earliest characters, Zagg Parker and Warby Pepper. Add to the commingle a social cause that truly gives back and inventiveness with upheaval is endemic. A mutineer approach to eyewear, for sure.

OUT OF FRUSTRATION

“We wanted to bypass the middlemen” said Neil Blumenthal and Dave Gilboa, co-founders of Warby Parker, in last month’s *Vanity Fair*. And so they changed the long-established business model of the eyewear business. The company was formed out of a frustration that prices for glasses were tremendous and completely unfounded and so a simple idea to riot the industry produced the extra conscious brand. The basis of Warby Parker is ‘customer satisfaction’ and that is where the co-founders with the other partners, Jeffrey Raider and Andrew Hunt, gushed all their energy. Customers can try on with the online option for uploading a photo, go into the showroom loft in Soho (Manhattan) that feels like you’re visiting a friend or do a home try on where your choice of five glasses will get delivered to your door. And for five days you can wear them and parade them all over town as you make your decision on what you will end up wearing – the order process then happens online with complete ease and with free shipping.

A NECESSARY UNITY

So the business is set up with the ‘American customer centric approach’ where customers are always the potentates. And then there is the other factor that in a post-recession deems exceptionally valid; it’s \$95 for a pair (technically for two as one will be given to a person in need). The owners did some research and realised that not only do the designer brand name glasses and spectacles not truly get made by the designers

themselves (licensed out) and opticians mark their stock up but also marketing budgets are so high for designer glasses that the prices are driven to an almost extortion level that has nothing to do with quality *per se*.

What makes Warby Parker unique is not the ‘buy a pair, give a pair’ programme as Toms shoes did that last year but the cohesiveness that the brand exudes. Although, they have distributed over 250 000 pair of glasses within the global community via non-profit partners like VisionSpring. The name, the temperament, product selection, distribution and the pricing all seem to be the same thing – a unity that is so gravely necessary in a marketplace that is boiling, never easy and completely teeming. The entire experience rings true within the ‘brand synergy’ or ‘brand truth’ so often mentioned by ad execs, brand strategists and ill-tempered lecturers. The business has grown exponentially since 20110 when it launched, 500% to be precise and now 60 employees strong. The majority of the growth appears to be from a new word-of-mouth strategy that is as old as time, yet has a new revival of course with the spew of social media. But instead of spam and over barging the channels Warby Parker selects its allies and its enemies. Two light advertorials, in *GQ* and then in *Vogue*, gave them the platform to attract curiosity and critique. Curiosity has led the brand to some celebrity followers (key in the US marketplace), the trend covetous cruising in and the bargain hunters following.

And then the critique has given the brand an opportunity to show their true spirit of ‘giving back’ and although the criticism is mostly about ‘creating dependencies’ in third world countries as another form of colonialism and seemingly not addressing real issues countries face, the



benefits outweigh this social concern as glasses, whether you are from the first or the third world, essentially is a dependency as your eyes get used to working in a certain way. So Warby Parker is giving all it can. And it is infinitely better than buying ‘cheap in China’ with no favourable reverberations.

In terms of design, Warby Parker took inspiration from retro styling (and name their glasses a sexy ‘Huxley’ or smart-ass ‘Monroe’). Every pair is custom fit with anti-reflective, polycarbonate prescription lenses at no extra cost and is made from custom acetates. The brand has given ‘retro’ a new meaning as it brings boutique style glasses to an accessible level for seekers of style not dripping in hipster groove.

The brand, with much dexterity, moves with the times with for instance ‘Inspiration Friday’ where employees bring moments of muse into the office to act as a catalyst for new ideas. Then there is Warby Barker where dogs can also find glasses and of course the Wes Anderson inspired glasses created for *Vogue* complete with tennis ball (as from ‘*The Royal Tenenbaums*’).

Social ‘do good’ businesses are on the rise, contemporary customers are more than ever interested in what they can offer the market and how they can in their own way contribute to the world. It may not be saving the world but it will aid in creating a slightly better place, and definitely more stylish if that’s worth anything.

Coming to SA soon, stay in touch at <http://www.warbyparker.com/>.

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