Showtime!

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5 Questions for...

Julia Clark Day

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Julia Clark Day knows her numbers: She has more than 20 years of experience analyzing sports and outdoor recreation trends with Leisure Trends and the NPD Group (which acquired Leisure Trends in 2013). NPD collects sales data from retail shops across the country, and Day, along with her colleagues, digs for the stories behind the fluctuating numbers. We can learn a lot from asking questions about odd trends, Day says—like how an uptick in tent sales just might have foreshadowed the Great Recession.

1. WHAT’S THE MOST UNTAPPED MARKET IN THE OUTDOOR INDUSTRY?
   › Travel, for sure. Airport traffic, music festival attendance, and visits to national parks are all on the rise. Consumers today are placing less emphasis on the accumulation of stuff, and greater attention toward pursuing memorable experiences. The travel bug is a huge opportunity for outdoor companies. Outdoor companies should not take this for granted. The performance that’s already built into their products, providing longevity and multi-usages, is what every traveler wants.

2. HOW DO YOU KNOW WHEN YOU’VE STUMBLED UPON A MEANINGFUL TREND?
   › In January 2008, eight months before the stock market crash, we detected an increase in tent sales from our data, in what has traditionally been a tiny month for sales. Though relatively small, we asked ourselves if it was an anomaly. We started to investigate the bigger picture, and found that national park reservations sold at a record high in the first days of January 2008. The growth in tent sales continued through February and March, suggesting the beginnings of a trend. Putting it in context at the macro level, it became clear that consumers were already feeling the economic crunch, even before the market crashed. Camping became an alternative option to a more expensive vacation. While I’m not suggesting we predicted the market crash, we saw the signs leading up to what was to come, because consumers began making different choices.

3. AS SOMEBODY WITH SO MUCH EXPERIENCE ANALYZING TRENDS, WHAT DOES IT TAKE TO TRULY SURPRISE YOU?
   › There are products that simply grab the consumer imagination that nobody can predict, but they manage to strike all the right chords. Two examples of brands that have surprised me are Crocs and Vibram. At one point in time, each captured one-third of all multisport shoe sales in the outdoor industry. That’s a lot of shoes! I think Crocs has been successful because of the footwear’s combined simplicity, comfort, and practicality. The uniqueness of Vibram’s FiveFingers and its timely release around the barefoot trend jived with consumers. The learning from this is, no matter how much one knows and analyzes, no one is right 100 percent of the time.

4. NPD RECENTLY PUBLISHED A BLOG POST ABOUT THE LACK OF CONSUMER KNOWLEDGE AROUND SUSTAINABILITY ISSUES IN APPAREL. WHAT CAN YOU TELL US ABOUT THE SUSTAINABILITY MOVEMENT AND WHAT CUSTOMERS DO—OR DON’T—UNDERSTAND ABOUT THESE ISSUES?
   › Outdoor brands have been investing in and moving toward sustainability for years. They have been at the forefront of this initiative because the outdoor industry and its brands believe it’s the right and necessary thing to do. At this moment in time, many consumers have expressed interest in purchasing “green” or sustainable products, but few are willing to spend more money. In a recent survey NPD conducted, seven out of 10 U.S. consumers reported they would not pay more for “sustainable,” “eco-friendly,” “organic,” or “ethical” apparel products. Nearly one-third were unsure if they ever purchased these types of clothing at all. Brands and retailers need to develop clear messaging and educate consumers, and they must also be transparent in explaining how and why their sustainability efforts are important. Consumers are not up to speed just yet, but once they learn, they are never going to forget it.

5. GIVEN THE DISCONNECT WITH CUSTOMERS, WHY IS IT WORTHWHILE FOR BRANDS TO CONTINUE PUSHING SUSTAINABILITY?
   › Down the road—whether it’s through legislation, because we’ve tapped out our finite resources, or due to consumer demand forcing changes on the marketplace—sustainable business practices will be the norm. Many outdoor brands will already be ahead, having made the necessary investments and changes over many years. Lagging companies will need to catch up quickly, and will have to invest significant dollars and resources simultaneously, which will leave many to fall by the wayside. Right now, companies are not fully reaping the consumer reward, but they are pursuing sustainability for its own sake—or because they want to sell products well into the future.

—Kassondra Cloos