

5 top women transforming retail

[Kaarin Vembar](#) | Oct. 25, 2018

From Sephora to Away, these female executives are spurring the industry to higher levels of innovation and performance.

Some of the biggest pushes in retail innovation are coming from female executives. Yet leadership in the retail sector, like many other industries, is not always diverse. The number of female chief executives within Fortune 500 companies fell by 25% within the past year, according to a May 2018 article [by The New York Times](#). This goes contrary to the commonly held belief that the number of women in high-powered positions would slowly increase over time.

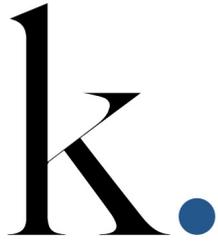
A recent study entitled "[Women in the Workplace 2018](#)" by LeanIn.Org and McKinsey reinforced those findings. Now in the fourth year of research, the partners examined 279 companies and surveyed over 64,000 employees and found that there is a significant gap in gender diversity within the American workplace. "The proportion of women at every level in corporate America has hardly changed," the survey stated. "Progress isn't just slow. It's stalled."

The gap in retail leadership is specifically apparent when it comes to executive turnover rates. This past spring the Network of Executive Women reported that turnover rates in [leadership positions within retail](#) are higher for women (31%) than for men (24%). Women are also leaving those C-suite jobs nearly four times as often as their male peers.

The below list represents women who have risen to leadership positions within the retail industry and are executing on their vision in ways tangible to consumers. These executives are approaching business with new methodologies when it comes to selling, marketing, technology and merchandising. They are successfully challenging the industry to move into new ways of doing business.

1. Deborah Yeh, Sephora

Deborah Yeh is the current senior vice president of marketing and brand at Sephora, but came to the position with a depth of experience in the retail industry. She once served as the vice president of marketing at Old Navy and also as the group manager of market planning at Target. Yeh is focused on innovation, especially when it comes to how the company is experimenting with different pop-up formats and in-store experiences. This merging of technology with customer service is intentional. She wants all skill levels — from beauty mavens to newbies — to feel inspired.



There's a reason why Sephora won Retail Dive's award for [Store Concept of the Year](#) in 2017. The beauty retailer was ahead of the curve when it launched the education-driven Beauty TIP Workshop concept. Additionally, the opening of Sephora Studio stores reinforces its commitment to the customer experience. While these stand-alone spaces are small in square footage (a mere 2,000 compared to the usual 5,500), they also sport highly trained employees and advanced technology in order to cater to clientele.

2. Jennifer Hyman, Rent the Runway

Jennifer Hyman made the concept of clothing rental widely accepted. Her company, Rent the Runway, saved women money by allowing them to borrow designer clothing instead of purchasing items that would only be worn once. Since founding the company nine years ago, her business has expanded from the notion of renting special occasion clothing to the radical idea that consumers may not need to own a wardrobe anymore. Instead, there may be a future where consumers can continually replace and return apparel and clothing can live "in the cloud."

That notion may become more of a reality. The company [recently announced a partnership](#) with WeWork where the coworking spaces will act as clothing drop-off locations in six cities throughout the U.S.

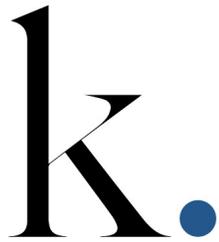
Rent the Runway is the original disrupter, placing all other companies on notice that the old way of conducting retail was over. The business hit on the concept of sharing clothing at a time when the term "sharing economy" was entering into the collective consciousness. Consumers suddenly realized that they wanted to own fewer things while not compromising on experiences. Hyman taught a generation of shoppers that they could think about the entire category of apparel in a different way.

3. Steph Korey and Jen Rubio, Away

Less than three years ago Steph Korey and Jen Rubio launched digitally-native brand Away. They first met and became friends as employees at Warby Parker and spun their e-commerce and supply chain skills into a luggage company for a new era. Their products have been disrupting the industry by focusing on lifestyle and supplying consumers with answers for pain points when they travel — most famously the ability to charge a phone via a suitcase. Away was [named a potential unicorn](#) on Forbes' Next Billion-Dollar Startups for 2018 list.

Away is only one company in a wave of businesses that have decided to go the direct-to-consumer route. What Away understands is that the company is selling both a product and a lifestyle. Luggage is their foundation, but the company is quickly expanding into personalization via monograms, interior organizers and even a [travel magazine](#) — all in an effort to influence the entire travel lifecycle.

4. Monica Arnaudo, Ulta



Ulta recently made the Fortune 500 list, thanks in part to the work of Monica Arnaudo, senior vice president of merchandising at the retailer. She focused on bringing both mass and prestige beauty products into the same store while delivering an elevated shopping experience. Customers are encouraged to try, touch and experiment with brands or to make an appointment for in-house beauty services. The retailer is also at the top of their game due to the efforts of CEO Mary Dillon, who was recently placed on [Fortune's most powerful women list](#).

Ulta's smart expansion and strategic decision not to rely on mall foot traffic sets it apart from other retailers. The company's strong earnings, rapid growth and beloved loyalty program have forced its competitors to sharpen their offerings. And Ulta isn't slowing down. The beauty retailer currently has plans to open 100 stores per year and has deepened its product assortment for consumers.

5. Maggie Winter, AYR

In 2014 Maggie Winter helped launch women's apparel company AYR, or All Year Round, with the backing of retailer Bonobos. By the following year, the company had become its own self-sufficient brand with both a brick-and-mortar and digital presence.

Winter's background at J. Crew helped set the stage for the next iteration of retail. The company currently has two locations — one in SoHo, New York, and one in Venice, California — while its direct to consumer operations continue to grow.

One thing that sets AYR apart is its determination to grow at its own rate on its own terms. It's similar to the company's approach to apparel — curated and focused. All of AYR's products are seasonless, with the objective of giving consumers a collection of foundational basics that are meant to last. While the retailer is digitally native, it's slowly expanding into pop-up shops, with one in New York and the other in California.