



Why Fashion Needs Chief Brand Officers

More than just an updated title for marketing executives, chief brand officers are tasked with navigating a climate where everything from advertising campaigns to holiday policies and suppliers can shape a company's image.

By Sheena Butler-Young

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Two years ago, few shoppers knew or cared what paid holidays their favourite brands offered employees. But earlier this month, how companies observed Juneteenth — a date commemorating the emancipation of enslaved African Americans — served as a litmus test for many consumers. In the wake of last year's civil rights protests, brands that did not pay attention to the signals they sent by simply doling out paid time off risked a swift and severe public backlash.

The upheaval of the past year — from Covid-19 to heightened focus on social issues such as racism and climate impact — opened nearly everything a company does to scrutiny. Corporate culture and once-obscure human resources policies had the ability to influence consumers' purchasing decisions just like the latest ad campaign. Well before 2020, marketing was already becoming an increasingly complex exercise for companies as digital expansion and rising consumer interest in companies' social responsibility signalled that brands must be much more than products.

Many companies now designate an executive to serve as the architect who ensures that every message they send — from holiday policies and supply chain partnerships to creative design and paid ads — is consistently shaped by clearly defined ethics and values that resonates with a core customer base.

While that job often falls to the marketing team, a growing number of companies are creating a new position to address these complexities: the chief brand officer.

This month, Moncler tapped Nike veteran Gino Fisanotti as its first-ever CBO. In a press release, the Italian luxury fashion brand said it had become “increasingly critical to be able to maintain a relevant brand identity that resonates with the spirit of the times.”



The appointment followed Valentino, which in January named former Gucci marketing executive Alessio Vannetti to a similar role. (Vannetti started the position in March.) One month later, Banana Republic hired Ana Andjelic, who had served as a chief marketing officer at Mansur Gavriel, as its CBO. Last July, Versace hired Jenny Pham as its CBO, and in September 2019 Theory named Siddhartha Shukla to fill the then-newly-created role.

Interest in the CBO role is “spiking” across fashion as companies feel the need to be “much more strategic and holistic” when it comes to branding, said Lisa Butkus, partner and head of the retail and luxury goods practice at executive search firm Hanold Associates.

“[As a CBO], I need to think about what role does a brand have in the world? What does it give back? What does it contribute to culture? How does it contribute to culture? What kind of cultural dialogue does it want to elicit?” Andjelic said.

What a CBO Does

Some brands will simply add the responsibilities of a CBO onto those of their existing CMOs, said Butkus. Others, like Moncler, will dissolve the CMO title and fold those responsibilities into that of a CBO.

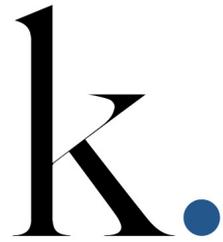
Banana Republic’s Andjelic is hoping to get the brand back to its ’80s and ’90s heyday at a time when the stakes are exceptionally high — significant revenue gains have been hard to come by at the label for several years.

To aid the transformation, Andjelic will rely on projects like the launch of BR Vintage, which features more than 200 vintage products from the brand’s glory days and most of which sold out on day one. Campaign images will embrace body positivity, and the brand is partnering with minority-focused groups such as Harlem’s Fashion Row and collaborating with Black designers. A campaign with Charles Harbison launches in September.

Those efforts will be developed and executed with a belief that “brands are more than an economic entity — they’re social and their cultural entities,” Andjelic said.

Although some companies have used the terms “chief marketing officer” and “chief brand officer” interchangeably, there are important distinctions, she said.

“The chief marketing officer role is a very economic business role in corporations in that you do marketing in a very structured way,” she said. “And when you start moving that towards brand strategy and brand creative, then the role becomes more responsible but also way more fun because you’re basically participating in culture and in society.”



Banana Republic's marketing and product design teams report to Andjelic. If she had to boil her dominant responsibility down to a single task, it would be to "enforce clarity on the direction and vision."

"All successful brands tell a consistent story from the brand's purpose and role in the world to the execution of that purpose to products," she said. "So there is a very clean line and very consistent narrative in terms of brand communication, brand actions, how the stores look like and who we partner with."

How to Be Successful

Even a well-crafted message can get lost in the digital age when consumers might encounter a brand in any number of ways. A good CBO can "see around the corner" and anticipate how cultural shifts affect a brand's image, whether the customer is reading a profile in a magazine or stumbling upon a sponsored influencer post in their Instagram feed, said Kyle Rudy, partner at executive placement firm Kirk Palmer Associates.

"A lot of CBOs come from marketing and strategy — but strategy is critical here, they just can't be a marketer," said Rudy. "They are playing this key strategic function in trying to bring together an increasingly complex mix of product, marketing, creative and [employee] culture under a unifying vision and that's really difficult."

To do this, CBOs work across their company, connecting with departments ranging from corporate communications to human resources and customer service to ensure the way they operate is consistent with the company's values, said Butkus. She described the appropriate hire as a "chameleon."

Meanwhile, the formalization of CBO role in and of itself can play a crucial part in how effectively a brand communicates that it's serious about its social responsibility and playing a larger role in political and cultural dialogues.

"It sends the message both internally and externally that there is an investment from the highest level of the organization to their commitment to culture, people and how your brand shows up for them," said Butkus.