Fashion for
Teenagers

Management consultant Harminder Sahni analyses the highs and lows of the fashion retail industry. Covering a spectrum of topics, each month he looks at the need of the hour for India.

Recently, I read a joke in Khushwant Singh's weekly column. He talks about a family shopping in a mall for clothing for all its members. Searching for a shirt for their 14-year old son, they realised that the biggest size in kids' stores was too small for him and the smallest size in men's store was too big for him. The father was amused and told his son that he has fallen into the generation gap.

But I wasn't amused at all. This scene is played out almost every time during our shopping trips. I hope that I am not wrong in assuming that this must be the case for millions of families around India. It is a fact that we have one of the youngest populations in India and around 15 per cent of our fellow citizens are teenagers, that is, between ages of 13 - 19 years. In other words, currently there are around 180 million teenagers and it is expected to grow to 210 million by 2020 – taken independently they could be the fifth largest country [consumer base] in the world!

Certainly, going by the sheer size this must be one of the most attractive markets in the world. Another fact is that, this segment is much more fashion conscious than people younger or older to them. This is an important juncture in life when these consumers make choices about their looks, apparel and also the brands they like or associate with. If one has to consider all these elements, it would be safe to assume that hordes of fashion brands should be chasing this age group with attractive offers and merchandise.

However, it is surprising that there are hardly any serious fashion brands or retailers who are focusing on this market. It is literally true that this consumer segment has fallen into the generation gap. The fashion companies are either targeting kids for whom the doting parents are willing to spend significant money or are waiting for these kids to grow up and start making money to be able to afford branded clothing.

We are classified as a developing country for some good reason and that's the only excuse I can accept for the neglect of such an attractive consumer segment. There are so many opportunities in India that are unattended or are only partially tapped that most of the businesses are busy attending to those.

For example, where is the time for Madura Garments to go after the teenage market, when there is so much growth to capture in the core men's wardrobe itself? On top of it, we all know how hard

it is to understand the teen mind or to figure out what they really need or like? Hence, why would a company want to put their limited resources on to something that is on the face of itself so complicated? True, but that does not make it right.

While it may look like a complex segment the experience from developed markets, such as Europe, the U.S. and significantly from Japan, is that this segment is very attractive and lucrative. The fickleness of fashion may be intimidating for a brand manufacturing men's shirts but someone with a passion for edgy and real fashion may consider it the holy grail and will be able to create and sell it to teenagers.

How is this segment different from others? It needs to be fundamentally very different from almost all other segments of fashion business in terms of approach towards design, merchandising, retail environment and pricing. A little less of the adults' fashion quotient and slightly ahead of the children's fashion quotient will not be the magic formula. A dramatic shift in the designing process itself will be required, starting from the process of gathering consumer insights   to engagement with the opinion leaders of the population to conversion of these inputs to product ideas.

One of the path-breaking concepts that have been catching up over the last couple of years is crowdsourcing. The idea of crowdsourcing originated from collaborative buying wherein many customers of the same item combine their orders to drive a hard bargain with the suppliers to get the best possible price for all buyers.

The idea of cooperative buying is quiet ancient but powered by the internet, it has reached new heights and the impact has been tremendous in many industry sectors. This same idea has been extended by some design companies to source ideas for designs from consumers directly and also to take feedback from consumers on the design ideas before the product is visualised or prototyped. The premise is

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that if the actual end consumers are involved in the design process then there is a far better chance of the products' success at retail. Sounds like a great idea and it actually is.

Facebook and Twitter generations are always online and are happy to offer opinion on all kinds of stuff all the time. May be crowdsourcing is probably the best answer to bypass the complexity of trying to read teenagers' mind, and instead let them share what's in their mind and also let their friends say whether they too like it or not.

On the retail front as well, it may not be far-fetched to say that not only the fashion be designed by the consumers online, it may also be sold initially only online. I have stated this earlier too that success of the online retailer Fashion and You has clearly shown that given an attractive offer (not only discounts), consumers are willing to buy fashion items online. And if any consumer segment is the most comfortable with the online interactions as well as transactions, it is the teenage segment.

My suggestion of only online retailing initially is to accommodate for the fact that the cost of retail, whether own or the margin to be shared with retailers, is just too high for entering a new segment such as teenage fashion. However, I do reckon that for the scalability and for deeper penetration, the brand will have to be physically available in the malls as well as department stores where the teenagers hang out and shop.

The last point that I would like to make is that while there is merit in creating a brand from scratch for our domestic market, the homogeneity of teenager (at least urban) consumers across markets and cultures offers an easier opportunity to bring successful international brands to the Indian market. The success of such international brands in India could possibly be a good provocation for many other Indian fashion companies to at least look at this market and hopefully seriously. **BoF**