

APPAREL AND ACCESSORIES

Nicole Miller talks strategy for fashion brand as lifestyle focus expands

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Sultry look: Nicole Miller's sequin collection 2018. Image credit: Nicole Miller

By [Daniel Hodges](#)

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Nicole Miller was born in Fort Worth, TX. Her father was an engineer at General Electric and her Parisian-born mother met her father in World War II. Ms. Miller attended the Rhode Island School of Design, graduating with a BFA in apparel design. She studied in Paris where she was trained to drape fabric and study the classical techniques of couture.

Ms. Miller described her Parisian training as "intense," but explained that it gave her training in fabric manipulation, which became a signature of her designs.

The executive's first shop opened in 1986 on Madison Avenue in New York and [Nicole Miller](#) the company was launched in 1992. It rapidly grew and now comprises the collection and her atelier as well as numerous other categories including footwear, jewelry, activewear, home, kitchen and bath.

Of her style, the designer has said, "I've always been downtown and uptown. I've had a lot of artist friends and I was always a little bit of a renegade."

Indeed, her modern design aesthetic is known for its bright prints and patterns. Ms. Miller sat down at the sidelines of the ReMode conference earlier this month in Los Angeles to discuss the outlook for fashion, consumer expectations of sustainability, changes in shopping behavior, and opportunities and challenges ahead for the Nicole Miller brand. Please read on:

What do you think is the outlook for the fashion business in the year ahead? What opportunities do you see, and what challenges?

Things are changing all the time and they're changing at a very rapid pace.

Clearly, the department stores are suffering greatly through all this. I think a lot of these high-end retail Web sites have taken a lot of their business away. I think that's one big thing that's happened.

The focus has switched from celebrities to influencers. Influencers are now the new celebrities.

The thing is, it's got to be a very crowded room wherever you go. Instagram is crowded. There are hundreds of, probably thousands of, influencers coming into play every day. The ones that probably started the whole wave are probably in a better position than the ones starting now.

Everybody's always looking for a new creative voice.



Fashion designer Nicole Miller. Image credit: Nicole Miller

How big a role is sustainability playing in terms of your consumers?

Well, I think it's a very important message. I think that when you get that message out to your customers, they really respond.

I started an anti-plastic blog and I've put about nine chapters out. In my last blog, I mentioned that the sea is more impacted by cigarette butts than by plastic.

We've switched out of plastic wherever we could. We have filtered water. We re-use any garbage bags we have. Everybody used to shred these and throw them in the trash. Now they're either recycled or reused.

People used to just throw their hangers out. Nobody throws anything away anymore.

We have really good practices here at the office. It's your personal responsibility and you do the best you can.

I find that the younger generation is very anti-plastic, too. I think they'll have better habits than we do, but for years nobody even thought about it.

I think the message is getting around, so I think it's really important in a company to have good practices in things that you can. Then also, we're doing some up-cycling of clothing which will be good. I save all the T-shirts. We try to redo things with them. I try to do whatever we can here.

The thing is, whatever we do is honest because I think a lot of people get away with a reputation for being sustainable when they're really not.

Eileen Fisher is doing some innovative work with people who send their clothes back. She has people sending their clothes back. I mean, that is quite a big effort, but I think for the most part, clothes do not end up in landfill.

I don't see people throwing their clothes in the trash. They might give them to the Goodwill [store] or give them to a friend, but I don't see clothing going into landfill. Right. I think it's a mindset really, more so than anything else.

What are the opportunities and challenges you see ahead for next year? Are you working on certain initiatives that you're focused on for next year?

I think more in the direction I've been taking. I like doing more up-cycling.

I took my whole staff to a vintage store. We've been up-cycling old pleated kilts. I think they're going to look really cool. We are working on that. It's easier to do something that you can get a lot of. You could get a lot of a pleated skirts and you can get a lot of plaid shirts say, for example.

If you're going to be up-cycling something, you need to find something that you can get multiples of. Otherwise, it's just a one-of-a-kind thing.

You were saying before about how is fashion being disrupted by technology. How are things changing?

Well, I mean every day we're trying to come up with a new game plan to get people interested.

We do contests with influencers, or we do events with influencers.

I'm going to LA, we're doing a dinner with influencers. And then, we've had special events where they'll post things on Instagram for us and for about certain items.

Everybody's doing that, and it is a really crowded room. But you still have to do it at this point and certainly if it's the right thing, it certainly does fit.



Nicole Miller holiday 2018 collection. Image credit: Nicole Miller

What do you find that consumers want now from the fashion experience when they're shopping? Is it something different from how it was a couple years ago?

Well, they want an experience.

So many people have told me they're spending their money on experiences and less money on jewelry and clothing. Or if they're shopping, they want it to be an experience.

So, you have to make everything very interesting for the consumer to go there.

How has your role, sort of in leading the company, evolved over the past couple years?

Well, actually, I don't feel like it really has. I mean I feel like I'm always involved in every level from the design to the technical part to the promotion and you know, certainly the photo shoots.

So, I'm really pretty much hands-on in every aspect of the business here.

The pace change requires involvement. I don't know how you could lead a company without being so involved, because it's just everything's so nuanced from supply chain to reaching influencers. It's just so intricate.

It's one of these businesses, you really have to have eyes in the back of your head. Because you have to know what's going on at all times at every level. And when you delegate out authority, it's nice, but you still have like to micromanage the details.

What's is next for you Nicole Miller?

We've always had handbags out there, but we're doing a higher-level handbag line, which I'm excited about. So, that should be coming out this year. And our shoe line is expanding and doing well and so is our denim line.

That's three categories that we're developing and that are getting much stronger for us.

I'm excited about cooking wear and that's coming out in 2019.

Actually, this year we've had a lot of lifestyle categories. Everything from rugs to furniture to tabletop and the cook wear is the latest thing, which I think is going to be really exciting.



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