

APPAREL AND ACCESSORIES

Fashion: We have reached peak collaboration

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Cold on throwaway collaborations

By **Brendon Duvall**

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From the soaring popularity of serial collaborators such as Virgil Abloh to the embrace of collaboration by global brands as diverse as adidas and KFC, "collaboration" has evolved to take center stage within the commercial creativity dialogue.

It is an exciting time where brands have more freedom than ever to enter new territory, and audiences appear to have an insatiable appetite for the output. But what happens next?

License to shill

The new-found freedom and excitement that yielded brand collaborations ranges from the sensible to the sensational, a new paradigm of brand behavior where mass-market fast food chains such as White Castle can collaborate successfully with niche streetwear brands such as Telfar.

We have entered a brave new world where nothing is off limits, punctuated perhaps most clearly by former Louis Vuitton menswear creative director Kim Jones' landmark collection with Supreme.

The downside is that this has given brands the license to produce a litany of collaborative products that pollute the world with the same voracity as single-use plastics.

The current status quo seems to tolerate a continuous flow of throwaway collaborations that champion novelty over substance.

As a result, it is more challenging now than ever to create meaningful collaborations that cut through and create lasting value for brands. In other words, collaborations that contribute something to culture versus just contributing to the noise.

Collaboration is a fundamental tool that can be used help brands behave in new and unexpected ways, reach new audiences, and yield impactful results.

But like any tool within the marketing playbook, collaboration risks becoming relegated to the best-practice checklist

alongside greatest hits such as "being digital first," "doing social," "working with influencers."

Doing it right is about thinking more deeply about contributing something of value.

Brands have the power to make meaningful contributions to culture through collaboration, sharing their audience as a platform to allow for a variety of eclectic collaboration partners to shine.

Take the Moncler Genius project as an example, an endeavor by Moncler that disregards the traditional fashion cycle to collaborate with multiple creative directors over the course of the year for a series of product drops.

Each collaborator is given the freedom to interpret the brand as they see fit and create their own individual collections that are released on a rolling calendar.

The result is a widening appeal for the brand and a steady content calendar rooted in interesting product.

Collaborations like this can help brands hold a regular conversation with customers beyond the confines of autumn/winter and spring/summer. For Moncler, it has been a smashing success.

Supreme effort

Like human relationships, every collaboration is different. Some collaborations are exploitative, and some are mutually rewarding.

Like the distinction between love versus prostitution, the most valuable brand collaborations are born from mutual benefit. A non-commercial value exchange oriented around achieving a common goal.

Brands often appear drawn to the thought of collaborating with other brands without taking a moment to understand why, skipping the step of establishing a clear point of view on what they are seeking to accomplish by working with other brands or creative entities.

While every collaboration is different, the success stories are not accidental. They often begin with a clear objective that provides clarity to how to strategically align with other brands, and how to shape a collaboration.

As bizarre as it sounds, the White Castle collaboration with Telfar served a purpose: For White Castle, the streetwear-credible uniforms were made exclusive to employees, serving as a recruitment tool for new staff. For Telfar it was given a large platform to share their point of view on streetwear to new audiences. There is a clear value exchange happening that benefits both brands involved.

Brand collaboration can also be used to express a brand's core purpose and identity.

Looking more closely at the collaborative behavior of a brand such as Supreme reveals more about what the brand stands for and appreciates. Each collaboration they partake in is an expression of the brand's personality, humanizing its interests in a way that makes the brand resonate better with a diverse audience.

Just like how individuals form their identity by the things they consume, brands can shape their identity through collaborations.

Supreme collaborates with big brands, but also works with esoteric entities such as science-fiction illustrator H.R. Giger, New York Hip Hop-era photographer Martha Cooper, filmmaker Larry Clark and graphic designer Peter Saville. Each "drop" becomes like a magazine article, making the retail experience more than a place to discover clothing. It becomes a place to discover culture.

MOVING FORWARD, brands need to challenge themselves to form a clear point of view as to why they collaborate if they hope to make an impact. This means reaching beyond the most basic co-branding exercises and being open to trying things that have not been done before.

Collaboration frees brands to exist in new contexts, widening their appeal to new audiences, but only if the collaboration contributes something of value.

By thinking more selflessly, and loosening one's grip ever so slightly, it makes it possible to create things that otherwise could not be accomplished without a collaboration. It is OK if the results are imperfect or unexpected. Ultimately that is what makes things interesting.

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