

Case Study

RIDING THE PLUS-SIZE WAVE

For years, Hollywood and the advertising media perpetuated a stereotypical image of women. As a result many consumers have the unrealistic expectation that many women are (or should be) poreless, hipless, silken-haired, high-cheekboned, size 0, 20-year-old goddesses. But is this beauty myth finally changing? Companies like Ascena Retail Group, parent to plus-size retailer Lane Bryant, are doing their darnedest to see that it does.

Lane Bryant was founded in 1900 in New York as the first women's apparel retailer devoted exclusively to plus sizes. In 2012 it was acquired by Ascena Retail Group, which believes that Lane Bryant's iconic brand and market leadership help to contribute to Ascena's strategic plan for ongoing growth and profitability.

The future looks bright. The apparel industry defines plus size as 14 and up—today that includes 67 percent of U.S. women and plus-size apparel sales amount to close to \$18 billion a year. According to one industry executive, "People are more accepting of their bodies today, and I think there has been a positive influence with role models. Years ago, manufacturers were only interested in making low-end plus-size merchandise because they thought customers were always in transition. Now no longer."

With a flagship store in New York City and more than 800 stores throughout the United States, Lane Bryant sends the message that it's not only OK to be a plus size, but that women in this category can be as stylish as anyone. Lane Bryant focuses on *en vogue* styles previously available only to more modestly sized shoppers. Its strategy also includes marketing the Cacique brand of plus-size lingerie and the Livi brand of active wear, both of which are known for their appealing fit and fashion styling. A recent spring campaign for Cacique featured TV ads with plus-size models and social media focused around "#ImNoAngel" referring to the angels often used in Victoria's Secret ads.

Lane Bryant's sales were slightly more than \$1 billion in 2014; other retailers are taking notice. One of these companies, online retailer ModCloth, reports that its plus-size customers tend to spend 25 percent more per order and they buy 17 percent more items per order than non plus-size customers.

Plus-size bloggers and other plus-size consumers who use social media to make their opinions known, are grabbing stores' attention. H&M, Gap/Old Navy, Target, Lands' End, Saks Fifth Avenue, and Macy's are among national retailers offering or expanding their assortments of plus apparel sizes and increasing promotional efforts for this category. In fact, H&M gained media attention by casting a size 12 model for a swimwear photo without labeling the photo with the term *plus* size and *Vogue* magazine shot a lingerie spread using plus-size models. These kinds of industry changes should help to improve the images of women in the media and signal to plus-size women that they are valued consumers.

However, plus size brands face challenges, too. Consumers who fit the apparel industry's definition of plus size may not be willing to identify themselves in that way and will avoid brands positioned to appeal exclusively to large women. And some shoppers may believe that their body shape and weight is only temporary, potentially changing as they diet or work out more, making it hard for them to justify investing significant money in clothing in the short term.

Despite these challenges, with the more positive media attitudes toward plus-size women and the more balanced ways in which plus size consumers view themselves, the apparel industry should feel a real motivation to pursue new and better ways to meet the needs of this fast-growing segment.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- CS 6-1** Explain the success that Lane Bryant has experienced in relation to self-concept, self-esteem, and self-consciousness. How can the plus-size industry leverage what we know about consumer behavior to address self-esteem issues? Be sure to address the unique challenges facing plus-size brands in today's marketplace.
- CS 6-2** Discuss the real-world changes that appear to be occurring with respect to media images of women. What are the reasons for this? Find two recent articles or examples that illustrate these changes.
- CS 6-3** How do you reconcile the greater degree of acceptance of plus-size women with the parallel emphasis our society continues to place on thinness (as evidenced by the billions we spend on diet products, exercise, and so on)? Given the health problems associated with obesity (heart disease, diabetes, etc.) should the industry continue to encourage this acceptance? What role is social media playing in this issue?

Sources: Tamara Abraham, "The Huge Potential of Plus-Size Clothes: How Fashion Brands Are Waking Up to the Spending Power of Larger Women," <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-2341742/>, accessed July 26, 2013; Ascena Retail Group, 2012 Annual Report, July 28, 2012, p. 2. From <http://www.ascenaretail.com/investors.jsp>; accessed July 28, 2013; www.spoke.com, accessed May 23, 2009; "Plus Size Teens and Women—US—November 2008," Mintel Oxygen, accessed May 23, 2009; Leigh Grogan, "Looking Good: Plus-Size Styles Are All About the Fashion," *McClatchy Tribune Business News* (March 26, 2008); Keiko Morris, "Finding Both Fashion and Fit: Plus-Size Retailing Is Becoming Hot as Demand Grows for Trendy Clothing in Size 14 and Up," *Knight Ridder Tribune Business News* (May 28, 2007): 1; Marisa Meltzer, "Plus-Size Fashion Moves Beyond the Muumuu (December 1, 2014)," http://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/01/fashion/plus-size-fashion-moves-beyond-the-muumuu.html?_r=0, accessed May 22, 2015; Ashley Rodriguez, "Lane Bryant Throws Lingerie Ads a Curve," *Advertising Age* (April 13, 2015), 86, no. 7; Ascena Retail Group, Inc. 2014 10K, accessed May 28, 2015; Tyler McCall, "Are Plus-Size Women the Problem With Plus-Size Fashion?" (August 8, 2014), <http://fashionista.com/2014/08/plus-size-women-problems>, accessed May 25, 2015.