

Away moves from startup to mature marketer

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Away, the direct-to-consumer luggage brand, has developed various ways of engaging its target audience beyond pure e-commerce.

- Physical retail, both with permanent stores and pop-up activations, have enabled the brand to connect with shoppers in appealing ways.
- Celebrity partnerships were initially used as an awareness-generating strategy, but have evolved into a customer retention opportunity.
- As the cost of digital advertising rises at certain times of year, so Away has explored channels like direct mail to reach consumers.

Away, a fledgling luggage and lifestyle “direct” brand, is looking for new ways to extend its engagement with consumers.

The New York-based enterprise has sold more than 500,000 suitcases to date, and generated sales topping \$125 million, all while extending its portfolio to incorporate items like carry-on “everywhere bags”, garment sleeves and “packing cubes” that help keep items neatly organized while in transit.

Coupled with an expansion in its product range and customers, the company has finessed its brand-building strategy in various ways, according to Mark Chou, Away’s vp/growth marketing and e-commerce. And they include:

Retail

As a “digitally-native brand,” delivering an impeccable online experience is the cornerstone of Away’s appeal.

But the brand continues to expand its physical retail ambitions, too. Its first ever pop-up shop – located in New York City – ran for four months in 2016.

Final boarding call.

Don't miss your last chance to visit Terminal A. We'll be open until 8pm today.

<https://t.co/ywiOYIEixF> pic.twitter.com/xzrnOMwtua

— Away (@away) 5 August 2018

During 2017 Fashion Week in Paris, a “Chez Away” pop-up hotel featured manicurists and tattoo artists, as well as offering beauty goods from other brands like Glossier and Diptyque. A Grey Goose bar provided the necessary libations, and Nike was among the partners that took part in a series of workshops and wellness sessions.



And, in 2018, a “Terminal A” experience in Manhattan traded from 27 July to 5 August, offering visitors the opportunity to create their ideal “travel uniform” by picking items from Away’s burgeoning selection.

Indeed, as Away has matured, so has it realized that bricks and mortar represent more than a simple storefront. “Customers actually really love to be able to come in and touch and feel these products, really engage with the people behind the brand,” Chou told delegates at the 2018 CommerceNext Conference in New York.

“And, as it turns out, people actually really love purchasing luggage in person as well, not just online.”

Away now boasts permanent brick-and-mortar outlets in New York, San Francisco, Austin, and Los Angeles, with further expansion planned in the future. “We’ve gotten to a point where, across our four primary stores, each of them is actually standalone profitable. And we’re going to continue investing in this additional arm of distribution,” Chou stated.

“We look at e-commerce and brick-and-mortar retail as two more or less equivalent channels. I don’t think we have run into the issue of retail wholesale, where you have to do deal with different sorts of margins,” Chou

said. “From our perspective, buying from one place is as good as another.”

Targeting

When Away was starting its brand journey, it chose to engage with “a few handpicked folks” and targeted them with an online promotional code that provided not a discount, but access to a “gated VIP experience.”

Today, its targeting efforts, assisted by partners like data platform Simon Data, have extended right through to email marketing – an often unappreciated element in the consumer-engagement playbook. “I think we realized that there's so much more that we could do with it,” Chou said.

“And we found that's a pretty powerful way to be able to actually segment [consumers] and then have trigger flows run off that in a very robust way – and a very data-centric way.”

Partnerships

Celebrity tie-ups assisted Away in generating awareness early on.

Its big-name collaborators to date have included actor Rashida Jones, model Karlie Kloss, basketball star Dwyane Wade, and photographer Gray Malin, as well as tie-ins with the “Star Wars” and “Despicable Me” movie franchises, plus affiliations with brands like Madewell, a female apparel manufacturer, and Pop & Suki, the accessories expert.

“From very early on, [we] recognized the importance of aligning with like-minded brands, like-minded celebrities, etc., to help tell our story. When you're starting off as a much smaller brand, you're always trying to find ways to be able to expand your reach, to be able to reach new people, reach new, audiences. So that's been a very core part of the strategy since day one,” Chou said.

“Over time, we have also started emphasizing much more the importance of retaining our customers. While I think it is very exciting that we are able to sell customers their first suitcase, we're definitely not content with just that.”

To that end, he suggested that partnerships are not solely a tool for attracting a new Away customer, but a means of driving repeat business – whether that's through extending its product mix or introducing desirable limited-edition products.

“Having additional partnerships ... provides us an opportunity to sell someone an additional everywhere bag, an additional, bigger carry on,” Chou told the New York audience. “We're able to take luggage from [being] a very functionally-oriented product into a much more of a fashion item. And I think we definitely see a lot of success with our repeat purchase in that way.”

Media

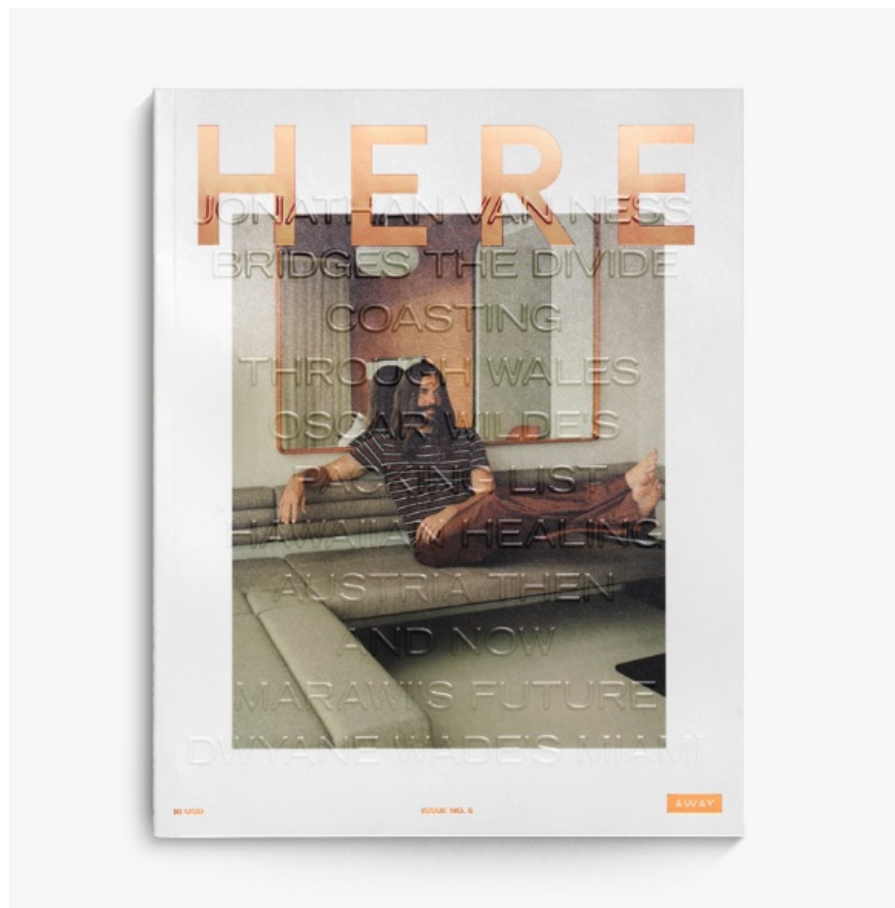
Like many scrappy startups, Away relied heavily on digital media to initially spread the word about its brands.

But as Facebook tweaked its algorithm to reduce the organic reach of brand posts, and the cost per thousand (CPM) on this platform “continually increasing,” Away has broadened its media planning to include other channels.

“I think one of the things that we’ve been thinking about generally to do with strategy is stressing portfolio diversification,” Chou said. “We definitely want to always be in a situation where we don’t find ourselves overly dependent on any single channel.”

A case in point: In “offsetting rising CPMs on the digital-side,” Away has made greater use of direct mail during the holiday season, as the legacy medium does not depend on the real-time auction process that often inflates the price for online search keywords and display ads.

In 2016, the brand also introduced Here, a glossy magazine with a high premium on sophisticated design, that features travel diaries, photo essays, city guides, and interviews. Alongside its everyday availability in stores, the title is packed inside every suitcase that a customer purchases.



A “hybrid” area between old and new media that Away wants to explore, according to Chou, involves over-the-top streaming, which, he said, mixes a premium TV experience with online flexibility.

Measurement

As with most brands, Away is not at the end of its path towards holistic measurement.

“I think we’ve made a lot of progress at Away but by no means have we perfected the discipline of attribution as

of yet,” Chou said.

Initially, it relied on Google Analytics, which enabled the brand to tap into reasonably “robust” attribution models. But as Away’s media mix expanded into areas like digital radio, television, and podcasts, this offering becomes a “much more imperfect tool” when it comes to parsing out the sources of revenue.

“The first thing that we’ve done is to really focus on actually aggregating our data in a very consolidated way,” Chou said. “I think one of the issues with attribution traditionally is you have all of these various vendors, different marketing channels, doing their own reporting. And that’s fine for within-channel optimization, but if you’re talking about portfolio allocation decisions it’s much less helpful.”

Using tools like Amazon’s Redshift, a data-warehouse product, and modeling solutions from software company Looker has helped Away enhance its ability to leverage data in new ways. “For us, by being able to aggregate data and be able to join impression-level data, order-level data, etc. into one master-data warehouse is super-helpful,” said Chou.

Although data is important, the brand also emphasizes traditional market research, as demonstrated by an online community featuring members of its target audience.

“This group we find to be so valuable, not just because they’re able to provide us insights via quantitative surveys or qualitative focus groups, but also because the very nature of actually being able to engage with these people ... ultimately increases loyalty on their end as well.”

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