

KIDS SWAG: BUILDING AN OPPORTUNITY AROUND DIVERSITY

Vania Sakelaris and Janice Byrne wrote this case solely to provide material for class discussion. The authors do not intend to illustrate either effective or ineffective handling of a managerial situation. The authors may have disguised certain names and other identifying information to protect confidentiality.

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As she watched the large shipment of goods for a local school board being offloaded at her warehouse in Ajax, Ontario, in the greater Toronto area, Kimberlee West pondered her next steps. She knew she wanted to develop and grow Kids Swag, the small business she had launched four years earlier, but she was not quite sure where to start. Market demand for her products was growing and online sales were exploding. Was this the right time to step back from her marketing career and devote herself to the business full-time? What about the physical presence of her venture? Should she open the retail store she dreamed of?

West had founded her company, Kids Swag, in 2016, after the birth of her second daughter Khloe. As a Black mother shopping for children's products such as toys, books, clothing, and accessories, West routinely sought items that reflected her daughters and gave them a positive self-image. Whenever she found interesting new products—a backpack with a cute Black girl, Black dolls with naturally curly dark hair, a jewellery box with a Black ballerina—she would proudly share them on her Facebook social media account. She would then quickly receive messages from friends with comments such as “Where did you find that? I want one!”

West realized that she had stumbled upon a gap in the market: a lack of children's products that represented and catered to the Black community (see Exhibit 1). Uncertain as to just how strong the demand for these products would be, she started small, selling at local community events and pop-up stores. She then set up business accounts on the social media networks Instagram and Facebook, as well as launching a basic e-commerce website to sell directly to consumers. West embarked on her entrepreneurial venture journey affirming that her intention was more than just profit:

It is not about selling products. It is about ensuring children see that they belong, that they are special and that their type of beauty exists. I am on a mission to make representation the norm online and in our physical spaces. The feedback I have received online and in person confirms that I am on the right path.

In four short years, West exceeded her initial goals and targets. She was finding it difficult to keep up with growing product demand. Her clientele rapidly grew from Facebook groups and word of mouth through local communities and business clients including schools and retailers, and extending as far as the United States. West dreamed of someday opening her own bricks and mortar retail outlet. She also wondered about expanding her brand to include her own-branded goods, pursuing a more strategic e-commerce strategy, and targeting more business clients. With her current warehouse space becoming more limited, and with growing interest for her products steadily increasing, West knew she had some difficult and important decisions to make.

LEADER PROFILE

West was born in Canada. The daughter of two Jamaican immigrants, West had a happy childhood with the love and support of a large extended family. The neighbourhood where West lived was often referred to as an “at risk” location in the greater Toronto area. But West felt that this categorization was a negative and unfair characterization. West found that the term “at risk” was often applied in neighbourhoods with a high concentration of Black people, which only denigrated the residents. She had actually found that her community nurtured her and her sense of self, exposing West to positive Black musical influences and cultural events.

West was a bright student who excelled at high school, where she was one of the only Black students in her classes. She went on to complete an undergraduate degree in public policy, economics, and international studies at the University of Toronto. Growing up, she sometimes worried that being Black would limit her potential, but an opportunity to study abroad changed her perspective definitively. For her educational exchange placement, West chose the University of the West Indies in Jamaica, where West was no longer a minority as a Black girl. For the first time, she was simply Kimberlee, and was able to experience “what it was like to be judged on my character and on the merits of my work, not what I looked like.”

West learned about Caribbean history and became aware of “the Black story as one of resilience and excellence, as opposed to a story of struggle, anchored in slavery.” The immersion in this environment altered the way West viewed herself and how she wanted to be seen in the world. Black success was the norm, not the exception. After her experience in Jamaica, she relished the opportunity to move further afield and went on to complete a master of business strategy, marketing, and finance at the prestigious ESCP Business School in Europe. She returned to Canada and commenced her professional career as a business consultant, later transitioning to the technology industry as a product marketer.

Early in her marketing career, West married and started a family. She wanted to ensure that her daughters grew up with a positive self-image but was soon reminded that most children’s toys and clothes in Canada were not designed for or marketed to them. West was especially confronted with this reality when Kiera, her two-year-old daughter, told her she wanted to have blue eyes and blond hair. West was devastated. She looked around her daughters’ room and realized that most items—from backpacks to toys, curtains, and bedspreads—featured popular television and movie characters, making Kiera’s desire to resemble a fair-skinned Disney princess not surprising.

Her daughter’s image of beauty had been moulded by the personas and imagery that she had been exposed to from an early age at school, at home, in her books, and even in her own room. And none of the people in these images looked like her. In fact, the message seemed to be that the image of a “beautiful” girl was overwhelmingly embodied by a fair-skinned blonde and blue-eyed princess, rather than a dark-skinned brown-eyed girl. West also recalled going to her favourite bookstore to buy children’s books and returning home empty handed. She sought positive Black imagery and stories, but only found books about slavery or oppression. This reinforced the negative narrative of the Black experience that West had fought so hard to overcome.

She acknowledged that regardless of her efforts to reinforce her daughters’ sense of self-worth, there was more to be done. West sought to redress this imbalance and press the reset button on the concept of beauty and self-love that her daughters had been given. She reflected on her own journey, and recalled her experience of Jamaica, where she had felt welcome and included. She acknowledged the power of media, television, movies, cartoons, and toys in the representation of diverse forms of beauty. West was determined to inspire and positively influence her children, as well as other parents, saying, “It hurts my heart when a parent shares a story about their child not loving their unique personal beauty. They want to be like the images they see on television, online, or in books, and unfortunately those images are subtly stating that they do not measure up or do not belong.”

West knew that many parents struggled to find items featuring Black characters and culture. She was determined to help ease that struggle.

COMPANY PROFILE AND ETHOS

West embarked on a mission to identify alternative products and items that represented the Black community. Her search started online, where she found books, dolls, and accessories that met her objectives. West initially bootstrapped her new venture to source and purchase a variety of goods featuring Black characters, including toys, plates, lunch bags, clothes, and backpacks (see Exhibit 2). Her motivation was clear. She would increase parents' access to inspirational and impactful images to help them raise more confident kids that could appreciate difference. She was excited about the opportunity to share her finds with others and bring such products a little closer to them. West defined her new venture as "a destination for swag (our products) to inspire swag (a slang term referring to self-confidence)." Kids Swag offered customers the convenience of an integrated shopping experience with access to multiple brands through one shipping cost, no import fees, and a facilitated discovery process.

West based her venture on the philosophy she was using to raise her girls, which she referred to as "mindful representation."¹ Her philosophy intentionally used images to evoke and promote positive experiences for children, allowing them to see themselves and to value being different. As part of her marketing plan for Kids Swag, West began promoting her mindful representation philosophy through public speaking engagements.² Her messaging reinforced the broad applicability of this concept beyond her target audience of Black parents. As a marketer, West knew how important it was for companies to use marketing images and messages, and to incorporate inclusive lenses into the marketing campaign. West was conscious of the fact that a successful campaign reflected not only the products sold, but also effective stories and images about the users of the products.

THE NUTS AND BOLTS OF KIDS SWAG

West's marketing training and experience was largely focused on the business-to-business market. However, she decided to launch Kids Swag as a business directed at the end consumer and started testing for the initial demand in that market. She began with Facebook groups,³ word-of-mouth promotion, and family gatherings. Her new venture was soon generating interest. Her marketing strategy evolved to include paid advertisements and social media influencers. West was committed to understanding the client's needs and began building compelling messages based on that information. Having only limited experience using social media as a marketing tool, West decided that Kids Swag would be her opportunity to more thoroughly understand and exploit this marketing channel. With networks such as Instagram helping her grow her consumer base, social media quickly became the predominant driver of Kids Swag's sales.⁴

To source the right products, West contacted suppliers located nearby and across the globe, as well as both specialized and generalist retailers. She sourced superhero, ballerina, and princess blankets featuring images of Black children and hoped Black youth could see themselves in these products. These items, which supported the notion of empowerment for both girls and boys, included puzzles, backpacks, apparel, and costumes (see Exhibit 3).

¹ "Mindful Representation," Kids Swag, accessed October 20, 2021, <https://kidsswag.ca/blogs/kids-swag-guides/mindful-representation>.

² "She Does the City," July 24, 2018, <https://www.shedoes.thecity.com/kids-swag-mother-entrepreneur-kimberlee-west-building-company-puts-black-children-front-centre>.

³ Kids Swag (@kidsswagco), KIDS SWAG Community (Raising Confident Kids That Appreciate Difference), Facebook, accessed December 7, 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/kidsswagcommunity>.

⁴ The Conscious Kid (@theconsciouskid), "Are your Kids Too Young to Talk About Race?", Instagram, accessed December 7, 2021, https://www.instagram.com/p/CAvmPPspkyd/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link.

Many products depicted action heroes from a variety of cultures, races, and ethnic groups with a common aim of normalizing and celebrating differences. West wanted Black children to understand that ability was not linked to skin colour and that they too could be princesses or superheroes. She also sourced products such as Swimma Cap, produced by a South African swim cap company, that was both inclusive and diverse in its branding by featuring a Black woman with an afro (see Exhibit 4). The swimming caps tackled a major problem Black girls faced in finding swimming caps that fit their naturally large volume of hair. In total, West stocked over fifty product variations that catered to her clients.

Through customer feedback she learned how excited children were to receive her products, and how impactful these were in inspiring dreams of the future. One client shared how her Black son had felt his skin was unclean, which had led to a low sense of self-worth. After finding and using her products, he started feeling more positive about himself. The top selling items in West's portfolio were accompanied by the company's new slogan: "Different Is Good." West felt that this phrase embodied the message she wanted her venture to project. One popular offering was a t-shirt with a heart icon and the company logo on the sleeve (see Exhibit 5). West's intention was to deliberately promote the notion of kids confidently wearing their heart on their sleeve and to encourage them sharing emotions and being themselves. Kids Swag expanded its product line to reach customers beyond Black kids and include children from different cultures and children with disabilities (see Exhibit 6).

West experimented with various innovative marketing techniques to attract new customers, including search engine marketing; Google Ads; and advertisements on Facebook, Pinterest, and Instagram. Initially, to promote her company and its products, West had relied on word-of-mouth promotion. Loyal customers had built a personal connection with the brand and seemed pleased to share their discoveries with friends and family members. In the third year of operation, West hired a social media marketer and community manager to oversee e-mail communication and influencer relationship management. West found that holding sales and discount promotions did not necessarily lead to higher customer activity. Most Kids Swag customers seemed to prefer paying full price for the products as a means of supporting the Kids Swag community and the company's mission and impact, with only approximately 10 per cent of clients opting for discounts. West attributed this sense of loyalty to her highly engaged customer base, comprising people who generally prioritized impact over cost savings.

West soon expanded her customer base from the initial target of the end consumer to the wholesale channel. She decided to "build relationships with larger chain stores to make sure it was no longer a rarity to see products that reflect the diverse beauty of our country. Everyone should feel represented." West partnered with various brands by incorporating their products into her offerings as she expanded her brand and product line. The wholesale business channel allowed Kids Swag to sell products through bulk orders to other businesses, who in turn sold to their end consumers. West also engaged a consignment retail arrangement for the sale of her products.

In both the wholesale and consignment channels, West sold her product at 25 per cent of the retail price, which earned her an average of 5 per cent profit. West also negotiated contracts to become the exclusive distributor within Canada, which quickly made her company an attractive supplier to school boards, which had been actively seeking educational products that were more representative of their diverse student populations. Approximately 60 per cent of Kids Swag's client base was Canadian consumers. The rest of her customer base consisted mainly of US shoppers.

As her venture grew and product demand increased, West decided to rent a warehouse near her home in Ajax, Ontario, to store her inventory and help facilitate receipt and shipment of Kids Swag products. Shipping services for her products were provided by Canada Post, Chit Chats, and United Parcel Service. One part-time staff member was hired to fulfill orders and manage back-end operations. West

found cost effective ways to import products and facilitated quality control and product testing before sending goods to her clients.

Before 2020, approximately 60 per cent of Kids Swag sales had consisted of purchases made in person through community events and pop-up stores. However, after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, Kids Swag operations followed the same route as most small businesses across the world and quickly adopted a new business model. West quickly moved her business completely online during the pandemic, with e-commerce services provided by the popular Canadian technology services company Shopify, which included all necessary online store services in one monthly fee. West was thus able to resume sales and customer service for her clients from her new online operation, without having to hire her own technology staff.

COMPETITIVE LANDSCAPE

In recent years, increasing demands for equity and inclusion had prompted retailers to expand their offerings to include products with a wider representation. Major US and multinational retailers had been increasingly adding to their shelves books, puzzles, and toys that celebrated all skin colours from leading toy companies such as Mattel Inc. and Crayola LLC, among others. West noted that a large crop of new suppliers, such as Bright Bean Toys,⁵ WeBuyBlack, and Izzy & Liv, were sourcing products that supported child development and promoted diversity. As well, the US not-for-profit group The Toy Association, which represented toy businesses in the US market, identified the phrase “socially conscious play” as an emerging toy trend.⁶

West was encouraged by the fact that more toymakers were responding to consumer preferences and fostering social responsibility and awareness. She also noted that products were increasingly promoting diversity and cultural awareness. Environmentally conscious design and packaging was also being used to reinforce the importance of sustainability. West was inspired by the many artists that had started promoting diversity, which society and communities seemed to be demanding in kids’ educational resources. Schools and workplace environments were increasingly implementing equity, diversity, and inclusion initiatives and adding support for meaningful and positive discussions.

MORE THAN JUST PRODUCTS

From the outset, West’s objective was to help inspire confidence through representation and help parents raise confident kids who appreciated being different. Reflecting this goal, Kids Swag provided online resources for parents that encompassed both Black and non-Black families who wanted to diversify their book and toy collections. West believed that it was important for all parents to be socially conscious. She recommended that parents assess how much of their child’s environment included television shows, movies, books, and toys that were representative of the world around their kids. West believed that “a Black child needs to see themselves; non-Black children need to be exposed to other races beyond their own. It starts with everyday items in your home.”

West hoped to spread her “mindful representation” philosophy, and provided educational resources to help parents learn more about this concept. Increasing access to information on this topic was aligned with her company’s mission to help raise confident children that appreciate differences.⁷ West believed that this informational resource was a necessary living document that would be constantly updated and evolving, so she engaged an external collaborator to support the management of this important resource. She also invited her community to share resources and inquire about items they would like to see incorporated into the guide.

⁵ Bright Bean, “Kid Toys That Develop Curiosity & Discovery,” accessed December 10, 2021, <https://brightbeantoys.com/collections/kids-toys-curiosity-discovery>.

⁶ “Socially Conscious Toys: Member News,” The Toy Association, August 19, 2021, <https://www.toyassociation.org/PressRoom2/News/2021-news/socially-conscious-toys-member-news.aspx>.

⁷ “Mindful Representation,” Kids Swag.

By promoting “mindful representation,” West believed that Kids Swag could help reinforce the importance of increasing awareness about the impact that imagery had on children and the importance of being more intentional about purchasing choices. In the summer of 2020, after protestors around the world took to the streets in protest of the killing of George Floyd, reigniting the Black Lives Matter movement,⁸ many non-Black parents reached out to West and to Kids Swag for guidance on making a change. People wanted to make a difference by ensuring that their children were conscious and respectful of diversity. One suggestion West provided was to revisit the stock of images and items that their children were exposed to daily.

As the Kids Swag customer base grew, so did West’s profile. She was invited to speak at events on diversity and entrepreneurship, sharing her start-up experience as a Black woman entrepreneur. West had a clear communication style and charisma, which made her an engaging public speaker. She was often called upon by journalists to describe her venture’s objectives as well as the progress of her business. West used these public relations opportunities as a platform to communicate the importance of “mindful representation.” She encouraged open conversation about race and the impact of visual representation. West felt that avoiding discussions about race reinforced racial prejudice in children. She acknowledged research supporting the notion of the importance of speaking openly about racial inequity to prevent racial biases from developing.⁹ She found studies indicating that as early as age three, children classified people based on their appearance.¹⁰ From an early age, children linked patterns in what they saw to their identification of desirable traits, and they began to identify with visible inequities that contributed to racial biases.¹¹

CONCLUSION

Kids Swag witnessed an increase in product demand for its representative toys and accessories from consumers, businesses, and schools. West also noted an increase in support for her company’s mission to nurture inclusive and respectful learning environments. With the number of orders increasing steadily, West wondered if she should expand her e-commerce business. As she completed a new order for a local school board, she also wondered if it was time to consider opening a physical retail store. Consumer interest and demand were growing considerably, which would make a physical store a nice complement to Kids Swag’s online presence. West believed that the prospect of opening such a store was consistent with her goal to enhance the customer’s experience and have a positive societal impact.

West’s vision for Kids Swag included providing children with access to more than just products. She envisioned physical spaces where children could be surrounded and inspired by diversity. She knew that expanding her current model would require additional investment of both time and resources. She was also well aware of the influx of contenders in the retail market, with offerings that were increasingly similar to those she had been distributing from the start. West appreciated that she had to reassess the cost structure and revenue streams of her business to identify how best to grow while remaining true to her company’s objectives. She also had to determine if she was ready to leave her full-time job and take Kids Swag to the next level.

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⁸ Audra D. S. Burch, Amy Harmon, Sabrina Tavernise, and Emily Badger, “The Death of George Floyd Reignited a Movement. What Happens Now?” The New York Times, October 5, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/20/us/george-floyd-protests-police-reform.html>

⁹ “How to Practice Mindful Representation,” June 29, 2020, <https://thebabyspot.ca/how-to-practice-mindful-representation/>.

¹⁰ “How to Talk to Kids About Race,” YouTube, October 16, 2018, https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=QNEKbVq_ou4&feature=emb_title

¹¹ The Conscious Kid (@theconsciouskid), “Are your Kids Too Young to Talk About Race?”, Instagram, accessed December 7, 2021, https://www.instagram.com/p/CAvmPPspkyd/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link.

EXHIBIT 1: REPRESENTATION GAP IN THE CHILDREN'S TOY MARKET



Source: With permission, "Get the Cartoon That Parents & Teachers Are Using to Educate Children about Africa. Multi-Cultural, Diverse, Afrocentric and Perfect for Children of the African Diaspora and Beyond," *Bino & Fino* (blog), accessed October 20, 2021, <https://binoandfino.com/blog/2015/5/21/lets-create-a-new-Black-doll-for-kids-this-year>; Masuma Ahuja, "These Photos Are Meant to Turn Our Racial Assumptions on Their Head," CNN, May 19, 2017, <https://www.cnn.com/2017/05/19/us/race-photo-series-o-magazine-trnd/index.html> <https://www.cnn.com/2017/05/19/us/race-photo-series-o-magazine-trnd/index.html>.

EXHIBIT 2: KIDS SWAG BACKPACKS



Source: With permission, "Kids Swag: Mother and Entrepreneur Kimberlee West on Building a Company That Puts Black Children Front and Centre," SheDoesTheCity, July 24, 2018, <https://www.shedoesthecity.com/kids-swag-mother-entrepreneur-kimberlee-west-building-company-puts-Black-children-front-centre>.

EXHIBIT 3: KIDS SWAG TOYS, ACCESSORIES, CLOTHES, AND BACKPACKS



Source: Company documents. Images used with permission.

EXHIBIT 4: SWIMMA CAPS SOLD BY KIDS SWAG



Source: Company documents. Images used with permission.

EXHIBIT 5: KIDS SWAG “DIFFERENT IS GOOD” CLOTHING



Source: Company documents. Images used with permission.

EXHIBIT 6: KIDS SWAG PRODUCTS FOR CHILDREN WITH A DISABILITY



Source: "Ara Ballerina Dinner Plate," Kids Swag, accessed October 20, 2021, <https://KidsSwag.ca/collections/plates/products/ara-ballerina-dinner-plate>. Image used with permission.