

20 IDEAS WORTH STEALING

Feeling a day late and a dollar short for the retail innovation party?

Not to worry; STORES has you covered. This year's roster of the top 20 "ideas worth stealing" offers copious opportunities for catching up. Retailers small and large have had a banner season of creatively making things work in this increasingly demanding industry — and many of their inspired concepts can be scaled up or down to fit other companies. Here we celebrate their successes while broadening the guest list of possibility. Cheers!

COALESCE PRODUCT, LIFESTYLE AND EXPERIENCE

Consider it looking at marketing through a different lens. Warby Parker's #seesummer-better campaign encouraged consumers to "enjoy the ride" of the season by downloading a map of must-see destinations across the United States, along with a Spotify playlist. Woven throughout, naturally, were the hottest styles in sunglasses.

The free offerings were the perfect fit for a



company founded on the premise that eye-glasses are too expensive; the fun, quirky graphics were aligned with the creative energy the company has become known for. Destinations included Cadillac Ranch in Amarillo, Texas; Stax Museum of American Soul Music in Memphis; and the world's largest ketchup bottle in Collinsville, Ill., among others (including the company's stores).

Warby Parker, incidentally, was named *Fast Company's* Most Innovative Company of 2015, lauded for being the first great made-on-the-Internet brand. Warby Parker continues to expand its bricks-and-mortar presence with great success — so a road trip or two may well be in order. — **Fiona Soltes**

BRING CONCIERGE SERVICE TO ONLINE SHOPPING

We've all been there: We purchase a new smartphone and realize that it may be too smart. Enter Enjoy.com, an online retailer that hand-delivers a product, sets it up and gives a tutorial; the entire visit may last up to an hour. Enjoy, founded by a team led by former Apple retail head Ron Johnson, currently has partner technology manufacturers ranging from Sonos to GoPro.

Don't think this service is just for your favorite Luddite. With the latest products in home automation, turbo bikes and camera drones, even more tech-experienced consumers may have difficulty figuring out how to use their new toys. The service is currently limited to the San Francisco Bay area and



New York City, where it also is a shipping option for partners like AT&T.

Enjoy experts contact the purchaser ahead of time so that they understand exactly what the shopper is looking for. It's the perfect marriage of online shopping's convenience and the hands-on experience with a trusted tech expert an in-store experience would provide.

— Sandy Smith

EMPOWER SUCCESS FOR OTHERS

A sizable part of business is competition — but not all. Rent the Runway and global financial services provider UBS teamed up in 2015 to help women entrepreneurs across the country build high-growth, high-impact businesses through Project Entrepreneur.



Launched in September as the first initiative of the nonprofit Rent the Runway Foundation, Project Entrepreneur is a venture competition open to those beyond ideation and intending to build a high-growth company using an existing prototype or beta technology. The top 200 finalists will attend an April workshop in New York, with three winning teams awarded \$10,000 each and given a spot in a five-week accelerator program. A series of free educational summits was also planned for last fall.

Rent the Runway CEO Jennifer Hyman notes that despite the many entrepreneurial women founding businesses, only 4 percent generate \$500,000 or more in annual revenue. There's still space on the far side of the glass ceiling, and efforts like this can help lead to breakthrough. — F.S.

GIVE CUSTOMERS AN INSIDER'S VIEW

New York's Fashion Week is the place where trendsetters come together. Now a fashionista in Iowa or Indiana can do the

same — without leaving the couch.

When Lauren Conrad's collection for Kohl's made its debut at last September's Fashion Week, the actor-turned-designer's company wanted to bring along a few thousand friends. Using Conrad's active and robust social media presence (nearly 11 million followers among several social media sites) to issue invites, Kohl's hosted the fashion show on the video streaming site Periscope. Those watching could chat and comment live — or shop: The fashion items were instantly available for online purchase.

Traffic to Kohl's website increased 600 percent during the show, and viewers even got a backstage peek before show time. It is just further proof that today's consumers want to feel personally connected to a brand — and to feel that the brand likes them back. — S.S.



SHOW APPRECIATION

Never forget: Little gestures can go a long way in helping employees feel valued and appreciated. Barbara Bradley Baekgaard, co-founder and chief creative officer of Vera Bradley, has maintained a personal touch throughout the handbag, luggage and accessories retailer's impressive growth to \$509 million in annual sales.

She recently told *Fortune*: "My father always said, 'In business, you sell yourself first, your company second and the product third,' and he was right. Business is all about forming relationships and having a company that reflects your values."

So how does that play out? Baekgaard told the magazine that when the company first started, the leadership would put \$50 in employees' birthday cards and instructed, "This has to be spent on you." As the company has expanded to 3,000 employees, there's still a \$50 bill in each card. "Finance asks every year if we can just put the money in people's paychecks, and I say no," she said. "When you have found money in cash, it's just more meaningful." — F.S.



JONATHAN WEISS / SHUTTERSTOCK.COM

GIVE ASSOCIATES AN INSIDER'S VIEW

Kohl's gets another mention here, hosting a question-and-answer session with designer Vera Wang, who visited the retailer's new Innovation Center near headquarters in Menomonee Falls, Wis. Associates in IT, store design, purchasing and supply chain operations, who began moving into the new center in the summer, had the chance to interact with Wang and Kevin Mansell, Kohl's chairman, president and CEO.

The event, which Kohl's called an opportunity to learn from the industry's top talent, is part of Kohl's multiyear Greatness Agenda strategy, which has

"Winning Teams" as one of the core components. It is a realization that the retailer of the future will rely more heavily on associates than ever. Investing in developing their skills — and giving them access to top-notch experts — develops a lot more commitment than comes with just a steady paycheck. — S.S.

BUILD LASTING RELATIONSHIPS THROUGH INNOVATIVE MEMBERSHIPS

At their best, neighborhood coffee shops are all about community, the chance to see familiar faces over a steaming hot cup o' joe. One New York City coffee shop, however, has expanded that idea — forgive us — quite a latte. Greenwich Village's Fair Folks & a Goat

is based on a subscription model: \$25 a month gets members as many coffees, teas and lemonades as they desire.

The shop, which opened in 2012, also features clothing, art, home design pieces and other items that consumers don't have to be members to purchase. Members do receive discounts on select merchandise, as well as invitations to various events and "access to a community and a home away from home." A second location has been added in the East Village, and the community continues to expand; referred friends receive a free month's membership. We can raise a mug to that. — F.S.

RELEARN TO SELL COMMODITIES

It's been said that we live in a disruptive environment. Who knew that a bra needed disrupting? Fashion label Chromat and designer Becca McCharen have been doing just that.

McCharen's background in architecture and urban design is focused on the human



body, specifically in making architecturally structured foundations for garments like bras, swimwear, sportswear and lingerie. Sure, it may be the more outlandish designs — such as architectural cages — that get the attention, especially when they appear on Beyoncé during a Super Bowl performance or at the Video Music Awards. But it's the functional aspects of some pieces that deserve notice.

In 2015, Chromat teamed with Intel to create two pieces using the technology company's



Curie Module: a bra that opens vents to cool down the body when it senses heat and sweat, and a 3D printed dress that measures adrenaline levels and expands to mimic the “fight or flight” mode. It is proof that, in this disruptive age, even the most basic products are going high-tech and retailers will need to rethink sales strategies. —S.S.

FOSTER COMMUNITY WITH SHARED MEMORIES AND STORIES

A long time ago, in a boardroom far, far away, a Target leader must have fondly remembered space adventures gone by. In addition to hosting a “Shop the Force” event to promote Lucasfilm’s “Star Wars: Episode VII — The Force Awakens,” with toys, apparel and other items related to the film starting at midnight on September 4, the retailer offered a “Share the Force” experience both online and in stores.

In stores, consumers were given the opportunity to enjoy photo ops, giveaways and demos of Star Wars toys on September 5. Online at SharetheForce.com, those consumers were able to turn memories into “holograms” among the stars. The collected memories will eventually be archived at Lucasfilm. It is a place, as Darth Vader might say, we can all meet again, at last. The circle is now complete. —F.S.



FIGHT UNFAIRLY FOR SHELF SPACE

There is no doubt that getting onto a store’s shelves is the most daunting task for a new product. Without proper placement, the product simply won’t succeed. But barkTHINS, a chocolate snack, did anything but play fair: It used samples of its product to sweet talk its way onto the store shelves.

Working with brand growth strategists at Switch, barkTHINS hired area brand managers, typically health-conscious chocolate lovers, in select markets. The company not only stocked the area brand managers with samples of the product, brand managers were allowed to negotiate with retailers when necessary.

BarkTHINS was able to keep an eye on the progress of the area brand managers, using a dashboard to monitor account visits, demos performed and incremental retail sales. In today’s competitive environment, different strategies are required. —S.S.

CONFRONT GENDER STEREOTYPES AND SEXISM

Nearly two-thirds of Brazilian women don’t agree with the way they are portrayed in advertising, according to creative activism group 65 | 10. That’s likely impacted by the fact that only 10 percent of the country’s advertising creatives are women.

So what do you do with a product like beer? It depends: Is it Cerveja Feminista?

This “feminist beer,” introduced last year by 65 | 10 in conjunction with Beauvoir Brewing, is as much a conversation starter as it is

a beverage. It's a red ale, somewhere between the darker beers typically associated with men and the blonder brews associated with women. The label is in no way gender-specific. But the conversation is rich.

Cerveja Feminista has been covered by *Fast Company*, *The Independent*, PSFK and others, in stories that speak as much of the treatment of women as the beer. In Brazil, a woman is killed every 90 minutes due to domestic violence. 65 | 10 asserts that when women are objectified, they are considered possessions — which eventually leads to brutality. — F.S.

SHAKE UP PERCEPTIONS

As an upscale retailer well entrenched in successful marketing initiatives, Nordstrom would be forgiven for playing it safe, especially where new technology is concerned. That relationship with the tried and true became, well, complicated in 2015: To promote its summer sale, Nordstrom took to the roof with a 3D installation, mimicking its Leith



leopard-print body dress as part of one giant Instagram post.

A 55-foot version of the dress — including a 25-foot-long wooden hanger — was installed on the roof of Nordstrom's Seattle flagship location. The entire installation — which included a woman walking across the roof wearing the leopard dress — was filmed by drones and posted live on social media accounts. A time-lapse video of the installation was also created and shared via Instagram.

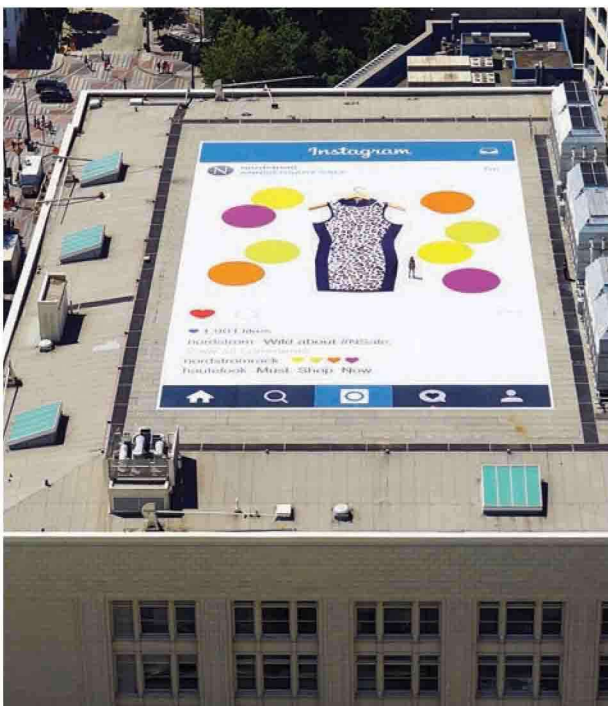
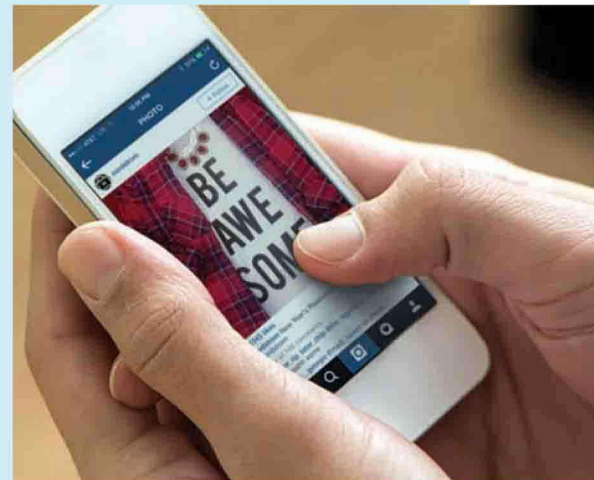
This type of comprehensive social media campaign may not have resonated with its typical affluent customer, but Nordstrom is laying the groundwork to develop the next generation of shoppers. — S.S.

MAKE THE MOST OF INSTAGRAM

A picture is worth a thousand ... sales? Visual commerce platform Curalate has joined forces with eBay Enterprise to launch Like2Buy, which allows users to click directly from Instagram photos to e-commerce product pages.

The best part? The easy-to-deploy system works for publishers of all sizes, so the partnership gives users fast access to more than 100,000 publishers in the eBay Enterprise Affiliate Network. One publisher, according to Curalate, found that 60 percent of visitors clicked through to relevant content, as well as spent 37 percent more time on the site than that publisher's average mobile visitor.

eBay Enterprise considers the effort a “huge opportunity” to remove barriers from the buying experience, since 30 percent of total e-commerce spending is driven by smartphones and tabletsmobile devices. It's exactly what we all need: More reasons to spend time perusing photos. — F.S.



EXPAND YOUR VIEW OF SOCIAL

If your social media program consists of just monitoring Twitter for mentions of your brand or tossing out the occasional Facebook question, White House Black Market is here to school you on how it's done.

The retailer built a whole campaign around the song “Drums

Make You Happy” by Marissa Jack (aka “the Golden Hippie”). Since the song aligned with White House Black Market’s branding of individuality, the campaign made perfect sense. Jack was featured in a video interview and the song was offered for free download.

The campaign extended to a YouTube video, a shortened version of which was used in a TV spot. There was Twitter content, with users uploading a photo there or on Instagram detailing how they move to the beat of their own drums. Photographer Bill Gentle photographed women on the streets of New York City detailing what #BeatofYourDrum meant to them. Fashion influencers like Louise Roe and Damsel in Dior participated on Twitter and Instagram, and the hashtag was prominent in fall TV spots and digital advertising.

While the song urges “live your life 100,” it easily could apply to

investment in social media campaigns. — S.S.



CRAFT AN EXPERIENCE — AND LISTEN FOR CUES

Step into an Alton Lane showroom and you might find yourself casually having a drink and an engaging conversation about your hobbies.

The premium tailored apparel retailer is creating a bit of a revolution in custom menswear, attempting to know its customers well enough to create “the best experience possible,” according to CEO and co-founder Colin Hunter. “We want our team to be observant hosts and hostesses, so we try to pick up on the small cues that naturally come up in conversation.”

Style preferences, clothing needs and personal interests all help determine the best offerings. As for the customer data, that’s taken care of through NetSuite’s integrated customer relationship management, financials, inventory and order management software. Hunter considers the partnership a “game-changer,” allowing Alton Lane to track and access data as effortlessly as striking up a chat. — F.S.

TAKE ADVANTAGE OF CUTTING-EDGE TECHNOLOGY

Maybe it's time for the Internet of Things to move to the storefront. London's The Dandy Lab has done just that, using Cisco's IoT technology and third-party software. The storefront was originally designed as a home for small independent British fashion designers, and while that is still at the base of the products, technology is used to drive sales.

Because people like a good story with their purchases, a customer can pick up a product, place it on a near-field communication terminal and see more about the brand on a large flat screen. Tablet-sized screens are embedded into the walls, displaying price, product details and stock levels when an item is held in front of the screen. Another area allows a customer to show a product, color or pattern and receive advice on other items that might match — or clash — with it. In today's increasingly wired world, The Dandy Lab serves as something of a playground for retail's next big wave. — S.S.



CREATE A NEW DEFINITION OF "SHOWROOMING"

Beijing-based Li Ning Company Limited, named for its founder, famed Chinese Olympic gymnast Li Ning, recently upped its game with a new model: physical showrooms where sporting goods customers can touch and feel products, but not buy.

The shift to online-only purchasing, as part of a strategy to overcome losses in recent years, has allowed the popular brand to keep thousands of locations open but distribute goods from a single warehouse, according to Bloomberg. That means reductions in costs plus improvements in inventory management: During the first month the strategy garnered the equivalent of \$3.5 million in sales.

Li Ning is not alone in its approach; according to Bloomberg, Haier Electronics also planned to feature display-only inventory in a number of its stores across China by the end of 2015, and Hong Kong-based online clothing retailer Grana plans to open showrooms in Singapore, Australia and the United States in 2016. — F.S.



GET EXPOSURE IN NEW WAYS

When HGTV wanted to furnish its 2015 Urban Oasis, it turned to Overstock. com's shelves. Overstock provided furniture, home décor, sporting goods, clothing and accessories for the 1,300-square-foot bungalow in Asheville, N.C.

It wasn't just the contest winner who came out on top. The Urban Oasis giveaway received Overstock contributions for its \$500,000 grand prize package awarded to one lucky viewer, and Overstock got additional exposure from the heavily promoted giveaway.

An added bonus: Since it provided more than furnishings (including a kayak), Overstock

got to show its extensive lifestyle products. In addition to the television show, which offered a tour of the bungalow, and advertising, a dedicated web page featured copious images of the products used to pull the look together.

This is just one step in a blossoming relationship between Overstock and HGTV. The two also paired up on the TV shows

"Vacation House for Free" and "Holiday House 2015." The retailer took full advantage, creating dedicated web pages that allowed viewers to shop the looks used on the programs. —S.S.

STRATEGIZE TRADITIONAL STANDBYS

With the ever-increasing customization of retail, traditional ad circulars can seem a bit too one-size-fits-all. But personalized digital media company Catalina has introduced My Favorite Deals, allowing those circulars to be tailored for individual shoppers based on past purchases.

Delivered in-store, online, through email and on mobile, My Favorite Deals brings five or more of the most relevant offers to shoppers, increasing sales, driving retail trips and building loyalty. Catalina found that 66 percent or more of weekly shoppers don't buy a single item from a typical circular; with My Favorite Deals, retailers have seen an increase of up to



1.5 percent in sales to targeted shoppers and an incremental lift of 1.5 to 5 percent in sales of promoted items.

Better yet, Catalina touts, My Favorite Deals requires no hardware or system changes for retailers, and the company's network already includes more than 28,000 U.S. grocery, drug and mass merchandise stores. —F.S.

TAKE ADVANTAGE OF "X" MONTH

It seems like every day, week and month offers some special theme. When it came time for Family Meals Month, Midwestern grocer Hy-Vee was ready to provide a solution to one of the greatest barriers to family meals: someone to plan and cook them.

The Dinner Crasher promotion selected a family shopping in selected stores to have a Hy-Vee chef and dietician "crash" their dinner and create a custom weeknight dinner experience.



After the family was selected in the store, dietary needs and preferences were discussed with the crash taking place later that week. The takeaway for savvy retailers here is the notion of capitalizing on a themed day/week/month with a promotion that both offers customer appreciation and solves issues.

—S.S. **STORES**

