

In Focus: Leadership



Ned Munroe

BUSINESS

A Champion of Collaboration

● The chief global design officer at Hanesbrands shares key leadership insights.

BY WWD STAFF

As part of an ongoing series of interviews between Tim Boerkoel, founder of The Brownstone Group, a global executive search and consulting firm, and industry leaders, Ned Munroe is in the spotlight with this installment.

The Hanesbrands' chief global design officer shares his insights into the activewear market, the evolution of the Champion brand and what it takes to launch successful products.

Tim Boerkoel: You've been a leader of creative and cross-functional teams in fashion, retail and wholesale, and currently serve as chief global design officer for activewear at Hanesbrands. Can you describe and share a bit of your career path? After attending Pratt Institute and working for several men's wear designers, what came next?

Ned Munroe: I love men's wear, but I knew if I wanted to keep growing I had to expand into retail or find a specialty brand that would give me more volume and breadth of categories to work on. I've always been incredibly interested in the outdoor market, and Eddie Bauer approached me to be the vice president of men's design. After some due diligence, I was pretty impressed by the heritage of Eddie Bauer and how powerful the brand was through its history of innovation – so I jumped right on it. I had a great time out in Seattle developing a broad range of product, and also learning about new categories. It was incredible exposure, learning how to drive both the catalog

and the retail businesses.

Five years later, J. Crew recruited me back to New York. I brought my learnings from Eddie Bauer and turned the J. Crew men's business around, modernizing it by tapping into the essence of the brand.

T.B.: And then it was off to Hanesbrands (Sara Lee Apparel at the time), which has an impressive portfolio of lifestyle brands. How did your previous roles prepare you for that?

N.M.: Throughout my career I've found one of my greatest strengths is putting a new spin on existing brands. I thought the Hanesbrands portfolio – Champion, Duofold, Hanes, Just My Size and Outerbanks – would make amazing lifestyle brands. During my first 90 days, I realized that we needed to make Hanes cool, revamp Champion and evolve these awesome active lifestyle brands that have elements of performance and innovation. My first two priorities were elevating the Champion brand and building a new channel of business, C9 by Champion at Target. We asked, "How far can we go when reinventing a brand to drive business, and pushing it out as a lifestyle?" That was 14 years ago, and it's been an amazing journey.

T.B.: In that time there's been a lot of change in the market, as well as with the Champion brand, correct?

N.M.: Absolutely. Champion was really hot in the 1980s. I mean, everyone had – and many still have – their favorite Champion sweatshirt, right? But the trend in active apparel at the time was shifting to performance products and our competition was already there. They owned the training category that Champion was not playing in. We realized we needed to be multidimensional – we couldn't just go back to the fabric platforms or the styling

and remain what we were.

We reestablished Champion as a truly authentic athletic lifestyle brand, while still innovating workout gear as we have been since 1919. For example, the much-loved reverse weave sweatshirt had us asking, "How was it engineered? Why did it fit the way it did? Why was the fabric woven on the cross grain?" In summary: How did this come into existence, and how can we recreate it to be relevant today?

My job was to embrace our heritage and make products that are right for the brand – not just to mimic the competition with a "me too" approach. So now, I'm able to do that amazing heritage reverse weave that's true to what it was back in the Seventies, Eighties, but I'm also able to apply technology onto that reverse weave and make it a more modern and relevant product for today's wearer.

T.B.: Over your impressive career, what are some of the biggest lessons you've learned that have helped you both as a creative and a leader?

N.M.: First and foremost is, unless you own your own business, you are there to understand and embrace the brand that hired you. You must understand everything about the brand, its DNA, the design aesthetics, the people buying and wearing it....Then you apply your skill set to create and engineer products that are right for both the brand and the consumer. It is a very formative experience to be brought into a brand, set aside your ego, and admit what you don't know.

My creative design team today is phenomenal, some of whom I have been collaborating with for a very long time. We very much embrace creative feedback and I encourage input from every level of the team. Everyone on our design team shops the market in order to identify trends and

understand where they are in terms of life cycle. This enables us to have more productive and impactful conversations. That collaborative team dynamic is essential for creating the best product as well as developing and retaining talent.

T.B.: You predicted a trend correctly several years ago in activewear, well before the term ath-leisure became part of the vernacular. The timing of your heading into lifestyle brands that focus on the intersection of comfort and performance was spot on, would you agree?

N.M.: Yes, and I am glad I did. Launching the C9 by Champion brand, our activewear brand at Target for men, women and children, was an amazing experience that challenged our team and the activewear market in general. We were able to deliver running gear, training products and active lifestyle products well before ath-leisure became dominant in the marketplace. But we did and continue to do so in ways that are trend-right and brand-right. The product is engineered at a quality level, but with lower retail price points and no critical feature overlooked. In addition to fashion, we are designing and creating for performance, which is still a huge part of the business. Our partners at Target are amazing and we have an amazingly collaborative relationship with the team there.

T.B.: What is the product development process like when collaborating with other brands?

N.M.: It's really all about understanding your target consumer, how the consumer is evolving, their needs and priorities. When I look at the consumer base 10 years ago compared to today, it's obviously very different – as we all are. Our priorities are different in terms of what we're looking for in a brand and a product, and how we shop and connect to retail has changed as well. As a creative design team, we've had to be open to all of the different influences and influencers out there.

We are always doing market research and identifying trends across cultures, far beyond just apparel. We look at everything our consumers engage with to stay ahead of the trend curve – while of course remaining true to our own brand identity. Our recent collaborations with groups such as Supreme, Todd Snyder and Vetements have been great exercises in making exceptional product for a particular brand and its customer, while staying true to the Champion DNA. I'm really excited about some new projects generated from the collaborative momentum.

T.B.: Knowing you for a long time, you are a very conceptual, innovative and a resourceful executive. What is it like to be on your team?

N.M.: I hope it's great. Though I am sure there are some folks that may think that I am too much of a perfectionist. Others would focus on the fact that I approach product design in a very authentic and honest manner. I've been told that I am an investor's dream because I want an amazing business plan where they can make money, and I can engineer a product into that business plan. I'm also a brander and a creative guy that will paint a picture and a story, creating the brand in a way that lets the business partner say, "Wow, that's a big idea – and it will work."

Creative design is so important, but understanding the needs of the business, respecting the heritage of the brand, and knowing your customer...this combination makes for great teams, desirable product and successful brands.