

In Focus: Market Insights



Yi Zhou and
Erin Cavanaugh

BUSINESS

At Plus-Size Start-up See Rose Go, Hearing the Customer Is Key

- The new retailer is using “smart listening” and smart design to create a fashionable midmarket brand.

BY WWD STAFF

For plus-size retailer See Rose Go, the brand believes “all women are beautiful, and they all deserve the feeling of empowerment clothing can award.”

“The woman who follows her ambitions and is passionate about what she does, it’s about her story and what makes her go,” the fashion brand’s web site touts. “Her size label doesn’t determine who she is or what she is capable of. We are inspired by the creative dreamer and the determined doer.”

On that last note, cofounders Erin Cavanaugh and Yi Zhou are creative dreamers and determined doers themselves, having coupled their fashion experience with an entrepreneurial spirit to bring the brand to life. As part of an ongoing series of executive interviews, Tim Boerkoel, founder of global executive search and consulting firm The Brownstone Group, talks with the founding duo about their thoughts on the sector and the new fashion brand.

Tim Boerkoel: See Rose Go is a new women’s fashion brand created to serve an underserved and often ignored consumer. Why launch your own brand in this category? And as it becomes more popular for brands to enter the segment, how do you differentiate?

Erin Cavanaugh: Yi and I each have an entrepreneurial spirit at heart. We met at Converse, part of Nike Inc. where we

were leading the Global Apparel business in design and merchandising, respectively. Those years of collectively driving business growth built a trust and respect for each other’s professionalism and vision, and we knew we wanted to take that collaborative energy to the next level.

Yi Zhou: Erin and I approach product creation as providing a solution to a problem or need. We were having a casual afternoon conversation about fashion when a friend stated, “You have no idea what it’s like to shop for my body.” She then shared how wearing a size 16 came with myriad challenges, including the emotional effects of getting dressed in the morning, which, for instance, could often result in being late or setting a negative vibe for the day.

Quite affected by the conversation, Erin and I stepped back and we asked ourselves, “Why are there not more well-made, stylish clothes for modern women who happen to wear plus sizes?”

With backgrounds in design, merchandising and marketing, we know the importance of understanding the mind-set of the customer and her true needs. From the beginning, we wanted to connect with women wearing plus sizes and provide a real solution to what they felt was missing. After that initial and quite affecting conversation, we began talking with other friends, family and acquaintances with similar experiences. Those intensive consumer insight efforts took place through intimate coffee dates, Skype calls, focus groups, fitting sessions and wear tests. We were able to gather hundreds of insights that we keep at the core of everything we do at See Rose Go. The result is that rather

than offering the same old fit issues, poor material qualities and uninspired designs so common in the plus-size category, See Rose Go offers modern wardrobe staples with best fit, material and design innovation. And we do this at a sharp price point, a unique position in a category otherwise filled by lower- and high-end designer options.

T.B.: Being a start-up, the business must require most of your waking hours. What drives your commitment to growing the brand and serving this consumer?

E.C.: The women inspire us! Through all our discussions, we realized that modern, multidimensional women have so much in common, independent of the size on tags and labels. We all want quality, fit and style, and See Rose Go is committed to offering this underserved consumer a modern wardrobe in which she can go out and achieve with confidence. Creating clothing is a humbling endeavor, and when you can create a piece that helps a woman feel her best, so she can then go out and change the world, the potential effect is incredible and certainly a driving factor.

Y.Z.: Intentionally, we launched with a curated line called the “Signature Collection” which highlights our quality, fit and style at an accessible price. We wanted to ensure that every piece is just right. Our line will always be about a thoughtful range of great choices, making every piece count.

T.B.: What have been some early learnings and responses from the industry and consumers so far?

E.C.: When we started, we knew it was important to hear her story, to understand what she is doing, where she is going and what makes her go. The consumer insight studies informed us when establishing our quality standard, fit concept and defining innovation. A pivotal early learning was recognizing how we could combine our knowledge in activewear and fashion to create solutions for what we were hearing. For instance, many women shared, “I get hot a lot.” Our designs are informed by function and movement, and these authentic insights even led us to develop our own cooling knit fabric. We are using this brand-new material not for performance but cut into everyday fashion silhouettes.

Y.Z.: We also learned we needed to connect with our community in-person on a regular basis. We sell predominantly online, and though we live in a digital world, our designs and fabrics are best experienced in real life; they need to be touched and worn to experience all that goes into each and every piece. From our very first customer activations, we gained

immediate feedback. While women felt and tried on the clothes, you could literally hear the “oohs and aahs” over the material and fit. That was an early validation that we translated what we heard into clothing she wants.

T.B.: There are a lot of design elements in the clothing you’re making, likely a result of combining your fashion and retail backgrounds with new research. As an experienced designer and merchant, were there any discoveries or surprises?

E.C.: From each of our backgrounds in this business, we understand you need to get to know her, hear her – we need to invest in our consumer, understand her needs and connect with her world. She is ready for more and she is asking for better quality and options. This is a \$24 billion market space and she is worth the attention of authentic design.

So, at the outset, we were surprised to discover just how underserved this market is. The current plus-size industry tends to group all curvy women into one box, underserving their needs with limited style choices, typically poor quality and low price-point options. The longtime notion that these women “look a certain way,” is shortsighted. And when we asked one woman where she shops, her response floored us: “Where do I shop? Or, where do I want to shop?” We think about this all the time. This is not an issue straight-size shoppers deal with, and it can be easily overlooked if it is not “your problem.”

T.B.: You are giving lot of attention to making sure you’re conveying the true identity of the brand through its imagery. How are you doing this? Can you elaborate on your method, goal and next steps?

Y.Z.: We want to open up the conversation and shift the dialogue of how women, especially women wearing a plus size, are viewed. This is more than clothing – our goal is to create an experience where women can connect, support and elevate each other even further.

Our brand imagery focuses on the woman, her natural beauty, her femininity and her strength. We believe in authenticity, championing the story of each woman, and continually collaborate with guest editors and bloggers to provide a platform to feature their stories. One of the first things we did, even before we had proper samples, was create a fashion film centered on showcasing a real woman and her narrative. We felt it was imperative to establish a visual language for our brand and portray the attitude, tone and voice.

T.B.: What can we expect from See Rose Go in the future?

Y.Z.: We will continue to be intuitive with our consumer and provide smart, innovative solutions for her needs. We are excited to announce the first knit pieces from See Rose Go – this month – made with our own technical-knit fabric that combines a cooling fiber and cotton jersey. A year in the making, and based on the feedback from many conversations, fittings and wear tests, we have created the perfect, effortless Short Sleeve T and T Dress. The campaign around the knit will again leverage real consumers, depict the origin of design and showcase women’s voices.

E.C.: We also have our eyes on taking See Rose Go global. While we are looking to invest more deeply into our digital and global DTC strategy, we are also committed to maintaining that essential personal connection. We’ll be creating elevated pop-ups around the globe to cultivate that luxurious, in-person shopping experience in a fun, very approachable See Rose Go way.



See Rose Go’s
“My Go-to Dress.”