

Q&A: Rethinking sustainability with outdoor gear brand Cotopaxi

Article

Stacey Howe

Vice President of ecommerce at Cotopaxi



Insider Intelligence spoke with Stacey Howe, vice president of eCommerce at Cotopaxi, about running an outdoor gear brand with human sustainability and its approach to retail expansion.

Insider Intelligence: What does being sustainable mean?

Stacey Howe: We think about it in terms of human sustainability. Often the term is used to speak exclusively to the environment, but we consider ourselves a human sustainability company, meaning that we prioritize allowing communities to thrive. Our mission is about fighting extreme poverty, curbing climate change impacts, improving education access and health resources, and more for the communities that help our product get made.

In addition, we look at how to help support sustainable business models. For example, we've made some partnerships with coffee growing because we've identified that as an opportunity to drive sustainable economic growth for smaller communities.

II: How do you make that mission of human sustainability relevant to consumers?

SH: From a US perspective, consumers don't tend to experience extreme poverty. For many Americans, the idea of fighting extreme poverty is more of an intellectual value and might not be something that impacts them on a day-to-day basis.

In contrast, we do see the consumers' care toward environmental issues, and they gravitate toward that area because it's relevant to them and they see how it impacts them on a day-to-day basis. Our opportunity is to invite people to draw the connection of the environment to some of the other elements that also drive human sustainability and make that equally as relevant to them.

We're trying to help customers draw those connections through the lens of encouraging exploration, curiosity, and adventure. We believe that when people get out and explore, it gets them to notice things and think about them differently. We're exploring how our product is helping people have great adventures, and how we can use that activity to naturally ladder up to having a social impact through the curiosity that comes with exploration.

II: As a digitally native brand, how do you approach expansion with large retailers?

SH: We have taken a scalpel as opposed to a shotgun approach to our wholesale distribution. Using our ecommerce data, we look at markets where our customers are and craft a retail footprint to complement and expand the customer's journey. In some cases, we look to partners that have good footprints in the markets that we want to be in such as REI.

Once we're fairly well-developed from an ecommerce standpoint, we may decide to have our own store in those areas so that we can deliver a rich brand experience.