

# How Universal Standard Is Disrupting the Multibillion-Dollar Fashion Industry

Co-founder Alexandra Waldman talks size inclusivity and the power of showrooms

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**F**or Alexandra Waldman, launching Universal Standard was a no-brainer. She struggled to find clothes that fit her size-20 frame—even something as simple as a T-shirt that didn't have a puppy or a "live, laugh, love" affirmation on it.

"It was either completely infantilized or highly perceptual, like a leopard print with cold shoulders," she said. "That's all fine, there are customers for that, and everyone should have what they want. But I couldn't find what I wanted, which was quality clothes that were modern and made me look like my peers."

Waldman, formerly a fashion journalist, said she wrote about the industry while feeling as though she would never be able to participate in it. "It was always in the back of my mind to do something that allowed me to wear the things I actually wanted to wear," she said. "But I'm not an entrepreneur by nature. So it wasn't until I met my business partner and friend Polina [Veksler] that we put all our tools together. With her experience in building businesses and my experience in terms of both fashion in general and understanding there was this lack of

fashion for women with bigger bodies, we decided to create something unique.”

Fast forward to a few years later, and Universal Standard supplies a vast range of sizes—from 00 to 40. In the past year, the company has also launched a new program geared toward expectant mothers and additional showrooms to offer one-on-one styling to customers, among other in-store experiences. We recently spoke with Waldman about the brand’s consumer outreach and how Universal Standard is changing the retail industry.

**Universal Standard is all about inclusivity, which is illustrated across your marketing. And through word-of-mouth, I’ve heard your customers are excited that they can finally turn away unfitting garments, instead of buying an item and hoping it’ll work out one day.**

I do these interviews all the time, and I've never heard somebody say that. The privilege of saying, "No, I'm not going to take that, I think I've found enough things today that I want to buy," that is a privilege that people forget when they live in a world where everything is accessible to them. Half of the time, people are so grateful that they managed to pour themselves into an item that they get it as quickly as possible.

I would like to be able to go to SoHo, step into various stores and buy more than a scented candle. I want to have access to the clothes, not just to the perfume or a bag. This is one of the things that we wanted to change about the fashion industry in general, and we were willing to put ourselves up as the litmus test to show that it can be done and it should be done. It is to the benefit of absolutely everyone involved, including the market, the fashion industry and, obviously, the consumer.

**When you first launched, there was a demand for extended sizes, but companies weren't necessarily filling that void. Now you have Rebecca Minkoff teaming up with Stitch Fix on an expanded size capsule and Loft offering extended sizes. Did you anticipate such growth back then?**

I think that a lot of people are a little bit risk-averse because there's a very strong prejudice against bigger bodies. People don't want to risk their brand cache by being associated with bigger bodies. So there's always been this hesitation when you think about how strong that idea would have to be for American business people to leave billions of dollars on the table and say, "You know what? No, I just don't want to associate myself with that." I knew that as brands evolved and ripened, and as some of them were pushed by demand, that growth would happen.

However, the apparel industry is not doing great. Certainly not brick-and-mortars. So a lot of companies have taken a new approach and started broadening their understanding of what is beautiful and what is acceptable and who deserves to have access. I was hoping that would happen, and I think that there was always going to be a time when the penny would drop. We were fearless and happy to be the people saying, "We're going to do this, and you guys can watch and see that it works."

But there are things that still rile me up a little bit, like the performative side of fashion inclusivity where you have brands that are doing extended sizes, but it's a completely separate collection. They have it in a separate category on their website, and it's not always very well thought through. There is no reason for that to be the case. Why don't you as the company offer things that make people feel part of the norm, and let me as a consumer decide what I'm going to buy?

It won't be a success until brands come out and say they now offer all of their products in an extended size range. It doesn't have to be up to a size 40, but it would be nice to have more women have access and options.

**Can you walk me through Fit Liberty and Fit Liberty Mom, which you recently launched. What was the thought behind it?**

We created the brand as a direct-to-consumer [D2C], and the way we interact with our customers is primarily through screens. We also opened a few showrooms because we wanted to get feedback. One thing we kept seeing was what was going on with the customer when

she looked at herself in the mirror. There was a raging monologue written all over her face and a bully in her head who's constantly there telling her what she sees is not the best version—that it could be, should be and will be better. And the "better" version is the one that deserves nice things and deserves to be taken care of.

So people are either buying sizes that are too small because they think they're going to be that better or smaller version, or they're not buying because they don't think they deserve it. And we thought, "Wow, can we do something about this? How do we solve this problem?"

So we say buy for exactly the woman in the mirror right now. And if you should go up in size, down in size, if your shape changes over the course of the year, send back those core items, and we will send you a new size for free. It eliminates that worry that the customer will have to re-buy an item later—which is prohibitive for a lot of people—or that they should shame themselves because they no longer fit into it.

We also wanted to give these clothes a second life. We started working with Dress for Success and First Step, which is part of the Coalition for the Homeless. And we have these two pipes through which we are constantly sending all the returns that are exchanged through the Fit Liberty program to the benefit of a lot of women and to the benefit of the landfills.

When it came to Fit Liberty Mom, we kept thinking, "Why do you have to change your style and buy clothes that are specifically made for maternity?" Let's face it, you're not even showing until your fourth or fifth month, so you're really wearing [maternity clothes] for only five months, and you may never wear those clothes again. They don't feel like you, they don't look like you. Why not just buy clothes that are great quality and that grow with you.

**Many D2C brands that have made a name for themselves online are launching physical locations, like showrooms. You've done the same. What have you learned so far?**

We have five locations across the US so far, and more that we plan to launch soon. We recently moved our SoHo showroom to another location, and the concept is completely different from the store that

most people know. When you walk in, there's a kitchen, and you can have a glass of champagne or a coffee—or even some cereal. You can sit down and relax, have a personal one-on-one appointment with a stylist. Or you can come in as a group if it's pre-wedding or a bunch of girlfriends getting together.

It's quite different from an experience with a salesperson because the stylist is on your side. They're there to say, "You know what, that's a little bit too long on you" or "That's not your color." They will be completely honest and help you find a new style, an outfit for a special occasion or clothes to wear on vacation, whatever it is.

We're also using the space to host various events, and we will be inviting our customers and our VIP customers with various degrees of access, allowing them to participate in really interesting things like roundtables, panel discussions, book readings and parties.

What's more, we're making this space available to all of our customers for free for their own events. They can come in and work on their computer for an hour or just drop in. Maybe they have 45 minutes before their next appointment around the corner. Or it's their grandmother's 80th birthday and they want to host a dinner for 20 people. Whatever it is, we will have our own roster of events, and we welcome our customers to also use the space for theirs.

### **Sounds like you're building and creating a community.**

That's exactly what it is. But it came about through very organic discovery. We periodically go around the country and have dinners for our VIPs. We meet groups of women at a lovely restaurant and begin the conversation with, "Hey, it's great to have you. Thanks for your patronage. What are we doing right? What are we doing wrong?" We get very candid feedback.

We also saw a kind of magic that was happening around the table. All these women were so delighted to be in each other's company and exchanging cards and emails. We thought it would be lovely to have a place where people can come together and just see each other, enjoy an event, and feel completely at ease without the burden of any costs or demands on them. It made sense to us.

## **What are you working on in 2020?**

There's a lot coming up. We are constantly looking at the apparel industry and thinking about what's missing. We want to be able to unify fashion to make it more about women exercising their style and taste. We're going to make sure we expand throughout the apparel industry categories in a way that makes people feel included and part of the new normal.