

# Brand execs from Forever 21, Abercrombie & Fitch, and more talk AI, Gen Z, and D2C

Article

Leaning into festival culture helps Forever 21 connect with Gen Z consumers. Abercrombie & Fitch uses generative AI to speed up the product design process. And Solo Brands embraces

the changing definition of the D2C model.

Here are five insights into retail's hottest topics from last week's CommerceNext event in New York City.

## 1. Brands need to meet Gen Z shoppers where they are

“How do you become a natural part of [the Gen Z] ecosystem?” asked Winnie Park, CEO of Forever 21. “Instead of talking at them, listen to them, engage with them, and be present with them,” she said.

Music festivals are one arena where Forever 21 appeals to Gen Z.

“You dress for the stage, everyone there [at the festival] is a star, and the way you step into your festival personality is important,” she said.

This year, Forever 21 launched its “festival umbrella,” which includes a 2000s-inspired collection in collaboration with TikTok influencer Alix Earle, a live activation at the Rolling Loud music festival, and a collaboration with musician Frankie Clarke of Frankie and the Studs.

“[Music festivals] are a cultural phenomenon,” said Park. “For us, we don't want to just be there and sponsor a stage and do the usual thing [brands do]. We want to be there and engage.”

## 2. CTV presents opportunities for brands

As a vaginal wellness brand, The Honey Pot Company has struggled to find channels where it doesn't have to censor its brand message or its product offerings, said Giovanna Alfieri, vice president of marketing and ecommerce.

But it also doesn't have an unlimited amount of money to spend on advertising.

“We had to get really thoughtful of supporting our retail business in a way that isn't bound to aggressive [ad spend],” said Alfieri.

Connected TV (CTV) gives Honey Pot the creative license to promote its brand in an honest and educational way, while also giving it a way to better target its audience, which is getting harder to do online as cookies head toward deprecation and privacy laws come into effect.

The brand's CTV strategy has been successful, matching the return on ad spend of other channels where Honey Pot is advertising, said Alfieri. But short-term wins aren't her only goal. "We're trying to build a legacy brand, and sometimes that's slower," she said. "And where you place the bets can take a longer time to justify. I know that long term [we're] building toward something and not just trying to make a quick buck."

### 3. D2C is about relationships, not where customers buy products

The D2C model exploded several years ago as brands across categories attempted to disrupt the traditional retail model. As the number of potential customer touchpoints increases, brands need to rethink what it means to be D2C.

"When we think about D2C, we think about it from a relationship standpoint," said John Merris, CEO of Solo Brands. "We want to own the relationships, but we also want to be available to our customers where they are and [where it's] convenient [for] them."

Though the majority of Solo's business is still generated through its ecommerce site, wholesale distribution is making up an increasing part of the pie, said Merris.

"We've gone from 92% of our business [being D2C] to 80% over the last year and a half," he said, noting the brand's move into retail spaces is directly related to calls from customers wanting quicker, easier access to Solo brand products.

### 4. Generative AI is transforming retail

The use cases for generative AI are mounting: It can write product descriptions, create marketing copy, help answer customer questions—and its abilities are only going to continue to grow.

"[Generative AI] is going to change the way we do business for the rest of our lives," said Jenna Flateman Posner, chief digital officer of streetwear company Snipes.

Snipes was an early adopter of generative AI, using the technology **to create copy for its product detail pages** about seven months ago.

"It's been unbelievable. We've been doing two weeks' worth of work in 2 hours," said Posner, noting it has helped Snipes speed up the time it takes to get products online, which is essential

when you're "competing against brands like Nike and Finish Line."

Generative AI can even help in the product design process, according to Samir Desai, executive vice president and chief digital and technology officer at Abercrombie & Fitch.

"We feed [the tech] historical images of products that have sold really well and use prompts to iterate and refine and base a new line off of that," he said. "It's driving inspiration, it's driving velocity and how quickly [the team] can produce product images."

## 5. Marketers prepare for a post-cookie future

In order to get a full picture of the customer journey in a more privacy-compliant way, the Estée Lauder Companies use a multistage approach, combining upper-funnel data like Google Search, middle-funnel data like site traffic, and bottom-of-funnel data like sales.

"It's an ecosystem where all the models talk to each other," said Doug Jensen, senior vice president of go-to-market analytics and activation, Learning Center of Excellence at the Estée Lauder Companies. "Looking at each part of the funnel allowed us to attribute influencer and creator factors, as well as other factors like non-brand search, branded search, paid social, and in a granular way."

With this framework, the company can do away with its multitouch attribution approach and prepare for a cookieless future.

"This approach looks at aggregated data and so individual consumers aren't examined, and because of that, the deprecation of cookies won't affect this approach," said Jensen.

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