Alumni Newsmakers

Denim Generation

By Leah Ingram
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As a film-studies major, Hilary Novelle Hahn ’07GS spent most of her time behind the camera. But late last year, she was center stage on the ABC hit TV show *Shark Tank*, seeking a $500,000 investment in her teen fashion line, the Style Club.

“The Style Club is a fashion-apparel brand for the social-media generation,” Hahn told the panel of “sharks,” business leaders who would decide whether to invest based on her pitch. “The shopping behavior of the younger consumer has changed. It’s all about the experience.”

Hahn’s interest in fashion started as a hobby: like many other teenage girls, she expressed herself by bedazzling and shredding her jeans. But Hahn had a bigger
audience and more raw material than most nascent designers. As a teen, she
toured with Destiny’s Child and ’N Sync as a singer and dancer, and Levi’s was the
sponsor. Hahn started wearing her denim creations on stage, and soon others on
the tour wanted her designs. Levi’s took notice, inviting her to create a capsule
collection and perform in its stores.

Hahn thought that her fashion career was just a phase, but after college and a brief
stint in Los Angeles, where she produced videos for a digital style network, she
realized that she could combine her interests.

The Style Club has thrived on social media, where its thirteen-to-thirty-year-old
customers hang out. It uses music videos featuring prominent fashion bloggers and
social media “influencers” to showcase the clothes. Hahn has also built the brand
by encouraging customers to apply to be “brand ambassadors”: in exchange for
Style Club swag, the ambassadors promote the line on their own social-media
accounts, extending the company’s digital reach into the millions.

It’s important to Hahn that her clothes have an empowering message. During the
2016 presidential election, she introduced a “Babes Who Vote” line, which is
emblazoned with political slogans. “I think that in the current political climate, it is
impossible for anyone of any gender, age, or political or sexual preference to be
apolitical,” she says. And while some might take issue with the term “babe,” Hahn
feels her generation is reclaiming it. “Before, it was derogatory, but today, it’s all
about female empowerment,” Hahn says. “A babe is smart and strong and a little
pushy.”

Clearly, being a little pushy has served Hahn well. On Shark Tank, she ended up
making a $500,000 deal with fellow Pittsburgh native Mark Cuban. Since then, the
company has settled into new Manhattan offices and recruited more staff. There are
now exclusive Style Club collections at Urban Outfitters, Nordstrom, and others,
with more coming soon to Macy’s and Forever 21. “We’re tripling our orders from
retailers,” Hahn says. “It’s all pretty exciting and overwhelming.”

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