Alumni

Denim Generation

By
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Hilary Hahn on the set of the ABC show "Shark Tank"

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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