

Yogawear company Lululemon lives and breathes by its core values, and by nurturing graduates and emerging designers it hopes to gain a fresh perspective on the world.

Build inner strength with the talent of tomorrow

For any rapidly growing company that depends on a connection with its customers, keeping relevant is key. New ideas and philosophies filter up through staff members, helping brands to evolve and expand. That is one of the reasons Canadian yoga apparel company Lululemon has offered placements to two winners of a design competition – flying the graduates from the UK for three months to learn about the brand and to add their creative input.

"First, we'll focus on foundation," says Lululemon's executive vice-president and chief product officer, Sheree Waterson, who is keen for the graduates to immerse themselves in the experience. "Lululemon is a company centered on yoga and leadership development. So, in addition to practicing yoga, they are also going to be learning yogic principles: values, who we are, the energy we bring into the room and so forth."

These philosophies seem fairly radical to apply to a business model, but they are working – Lululemon was recently named Canada's fastest growing company, and the most productive retailer in the US, behind only software giant Apple and jewellery company Tiffany. Productive in this sense means sales per square foot – which averages out at $1,936 across Lululemon's 100-plus stores. The figure is achieved by the comparatively high prices of its clothing; its yoga pants retail at upwards of $80. But its products are well made and stylish, and the strength of the brand means women and, increasingly, men are willing to splash out. The company adds value by offering free yoga classes and a relaxed in-store environment, and practises what it preaches in the workplace, with employees also encouraged take part in yoga sessions.

As Ms Waterson points out, leadership is important – Lululemon organises annual conferences to bring hundreds of managers

The rise in popularity of Lululemon's apparel means the company's revenues were up 42% for the first half of this year, at $568.3 million.

Lululemon Athletica

COPYRIGHT

together to share ideas and best-practice. She continues, "In terms of leadership, the interns are going to be immersed in our culture of vision, goal setting and personal accountability. Additionally, they will learn our design principles at Lululemon; combining fashion and function, West Coast lifestyle with European styling and creating their designs through those filters."

An eye on the future

She chose the graduates from 24 new textile designers who are taking part in the career development programme of Texprint, a not-for-profit organisation that aims to nurture the talent of UK-trained textile graduates, arranging placements, introducing them to key people and helping them to develop and promote their work. Manri Kishimoto, who studied at Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design in London, and Sophie Reeves, from the University of Brighton, were deemed to have work that was the freshest and most relevant to Lululemon, and will travel to Canada at the start of this year.

Ms Kishimoto, originally from Yokohama, Japan, has recently graduated with a fashion print design degree. Her bold, expressive and graphic shapes of her story-telling designs are inspired by nature, particularly bird motifs, and Ms Waterson described them as "outrageous, mind-blowing. Her illustrations are awesome". Ms Kishimoto says she is looking forward to seeing some of the Lululemon enthusiasm first hand. "This will be my first time working with sportswear and will be a new challenge. I'm looking forward to learning new skills and finding out about new materials."

For Ms Reeves, too, a weaver who focuses on colour, working at the yogawear company will bring the opportunity to work with more technical fabrics – something she hopes to pursue. "I am looking forward to seeing how designing for sportswear is different to designing for fashion," she says. "I hope to learn a lot more about sports fabrics as it is something I hope to start working on within my own work."

Know your industry

"The UK is known for producing some of the greatest design talent in the world, such as Alexander McQueen, Stella McCartney, Phoebe Philo and Christopher Kane, to name a few," adds Ms Waterson, on the decision to bring the graduates in from overseas. "They produce great designers for many reasons, primarily because of their rigorous curriculum in the colleges such as Central Saint Martins and The Royal College of Art."

She believes that having the right training at an early stage in their careers can help tomorrow's designers to flourish, with developing their creativity top of the agenda. "I believe that function in the future is going to inform the way that people dress and the focus will be on making that function beautiful," she says. "I believe academic institutions should start by focusing on business. The most valuable area is understanding vertical retail, which is being fully accountable for a guest experience. And leadership and goal setting is vital, so that when these students go from being in the classroom to actually being in the real world, they have the confidence, direction and true North that will guide them throughout their life and career."

With Lululemon rapidly expanding its store base, opening about 30 each year, Ms Waterson is keen that the company does not grow stale, or see a disconnect with core customers. "It is so important to infuse the organisation with new talent that sees the world in new ways. Essentially, we will be gaining a new access point together with our design team to develop a fresh perspective on the world," she adds.



Lululemon's chief product officer Sheree Waterson browses the graduates' work. "The talent at Texprint is the best of the best - and it's international," she says.

James McCauley

COPYRIGHT