BRAND PROFILE: WALLAROO

Colorado-based hat brand Wallaroo has added colour to its range of UPF 50+ activewear hats. Founder Stephanie Carter believes this will be one way to get the sun protection message into the heads of image-conscious young women who love the outdoors.

Colours encourage the young to cover up



Stephanie Carter is one among the many outdoor enthusiasts who have made their passion their work by setting up their own clothing brands; Colorado, where she comes from, can offer many examples of people who have made the same move. Inspired by the Rockies, the Centennial State is awash with outdoor brands.

In her case, she practised law for eight years before she gave it all up to found her own apparel company, in this case with a focus on hats that look good, can withstand most environments and, most importantly of all, can protect wearers from harmful exposure to ultraviolet (UV) radiation from sun. As the name suggests, however, the inspiration for Ms Carter's brand, Wallaroo, came from much further afield.

With family connections in Australia, she has been a frequent visitor for many years. During one trip at the end of the '90s, she discovered why that country was so far ahead of her own, and most others, in convincing young people of the need to wear protective headgear during prolonged periods of exposure to the sun. Many of the hats available there were crushable, washable and had a UPF rating for sun protection of 50+ (see panel). Her recollection is that they also came in "ultra-fashionable and colourful styles and patterns".

She returned to Colorado and, with business partner Lenya Shore, set up Wallaroo in April 1999. Ten years on, their own range of attractive and colourful, but protective and practical (the days of expecting people to include a hat-box in their luggage are long gone) headgear is available in more than 2,000 outdoor and sports retail outlets across the US, as well as in catalogues and online. Sports figures who wear the hats include Michelle McGann, a frequent winner on the Ladies Professional Golf Association tour, and professional freestyle skier

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LPGA star Michelle McGann is a Wallaroo hat lover. Increasing the range of colours to more than 20 is helping the brand appeal to young women.

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Alison Gannett. Endorsements from film stars Cameron Diaz, Kim Basinger and Brooke Shields have done no harm either.

Slip, slop, slap

There are hats for the whole family because, the Wallaroo founders point out, we never outgrow the need for protection from the UV radiation in the sun's rays. Yet, Stephanie Carter believes strongly that it's important to put the protection message across to children at the earliest possible age. This is something Australia takes extremely seriously because it has the highest incidence of skin cancer in the world. She particularly likes the simplicity of a slogan the Victoria Cancer Council came up with in 1981: 'Slip, slop, slap'. Its aim is to remind even the youngest outdoor enthusiast of the need to wear, or slip on, a shirt when they come out of the water, to slop plenty of sunscreen onto exposed skin, and, finally, to slap on a hat with a nice, wide brim. Scientific studies have shown that since its introduction, the incidence of the two most common forms of skin cancer (basal-cell carcinoma and squamous cell carcinoma) in Australia has decreased. New Zealand has copied the idea, as have some Canadian cities.

But, according to Stephanie Carter, the US has largely missed the message. She explains: "The scary thing is that, in the US now, the highest incidence of skin cancer is occurring among young women aged between 25 and 29. And the saddest part of all is that the exposure that caused the cancer probably began when those girls were under 12. They have grown up with the knowledge that too much exposure to the sun is dangerous. They knew. Of course we need vitamin D, and of course a little bit of sun is good. But there's this obsession young women seem to have with achieving the perfect body, and a lot of them have ignored all the advice."

Anniversary effort

To mark the tenth anniversary of the foundation of the brand, Wallaroo launched its own, formal, 'Sun Protection Commitment', under which it will donate 1% of all proceeds to a variety of charities devoted to skin cancer prevention. The company is determined to give something back, to help drive the message home.

Going beyond beige is a big part of this. Neutral-coloured hats still sell well. The men's collection of UPF 50+ hats, the Jasper, the Havana and the Explorer, come in tones such as camel or brown check, and these options are also available in the women's range. They are popular, Ms Carter explains, but it's helpful in trying to attract a younger female following also to have alternatives such as hydrangea and hot pink for the Casual Traveler UF 50+ model, pale pink and seafoam for the Hampton hat, and rose and pale yellow for the Sonoma.

"We've found our niche with this," she goes on. "People were only selling hats in neutral colours, but we could see that everything in the women's outdoor market is moving towards colour and we figured that people would want colour in hats too. We now have well over 20 colours in the range and we thing this is good; we think it will help encourage sun protection from a very early age. And all the styles are designed for outdoor—they're lightweight, and



UPF 50+ protection is on offer from many hats in the company's range, including the Reversible Resort.

Wallaroo

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As the York hat proves, neutral colours still sell well.
Wallaroo

you can crush them, pack them and wash them without having any adverse effect on their sun-protection properties."

She goes on to explain that the secret behind the UPF 50+ ratings is no secret, magic ingredient or proprietary technology. The materials Wallaroo uses are all familiar, including polyester and cotton. "It just has to do with the intensity of the weave," she says. "The material is tested in Australia because their system for rating products is much more standardised than ours. A spectrometer shoots ultraviolet light at the material and the test consists of seeing how much UV gets through.

"Standardisation is an issue. We just don't have the standardisation in the US. You see UPF ratings on tank-tops and products like that. I think it's also interesting that people have brought onto the market products with UPF ratings of 25+ and 30+. I don't think there's any point in 25; certainly not in a hat."

Ratings debate

Ultraviolet Protection Factor (UPF) ratings measure the level of protection from ultraviolet (UV) radiation in the sun's rays that clothing and textiles can offer. A fabric rated UPF 30 means that if 30 units of UV fall on the fabric only one unit will pass through. A UPF 30 fabric that blocks or absorbs 29 out of 30 units of UV is therefore blocking 96.7% UV.

The standard came in in the US in 1998, after earlier work in Australia. Clothing and fabric manufacturers regulate themselves on this question. Consumer bodies in the US have established after tests that factors that affect the level of sun protection provided by a fabric, in approximate order of importance, include weave, colour, weight, stretch, and wetness. In addition, UV absorbers may be added at various points in the manufacturing process to enhance UV protection levels.

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