GAME CHANGERS: JANICE WANG, ALVANON

Alvanon first brought its sizing and fit technology to the global apparel market in 2001 and is now famous for high-tech mannequins. Chief executive, Janice Wang, is proud of being (with her brothers) a third-generation representative of a hands-on garment-making family. She is equally proud of leading Alvanon's wider efforts to help its clients in 89 countries use data to improve their businesses internally and engage more effectively externally with existing and new customers.

A fitting tribute

Where are you from and what is the path that led you to the job you do now?

My family is from Hong Kong. My father, Dr Kenneth Wang [who died in 2010], was a great tinker and innovator. He tinkered with everything. He was a medical doctor working in London but was pulled back to Hong Kong in the 1970s to run the family business, which was manufacturing childrenswear. He looked at every problem and came up with 10,000 ideas. The idea for Alvanon, which he founded in 2001, came about because he wanted to help clothing companies sell apparel online. Online was working brilliantly for books and electronics, but no one was able to work out how you could sell fashion online because all the sizes were different. We've come a long way, but my dad's vision of being able to help people buy clothes in the size they want online is still not fulfilled. We still have consumers returning 30% of the garments they buy and 90% of them saying they will not buy again from a brand after a bad fit experience.

What does your job involve?

I work with my brothers Jason, chief operating officer, and John, head of research and development. Having started out by using fit models, we now have AlvaForm fit mannequins that can be customised or bought to suit the core body standard in different regions around the world. We started out with Marks & Spencer and Target and they have opened other doors for us. We help bring efficiency to clothing companies. We allow them to work better with designers and



Alvanon chief executive, Janice Wang, with AlvaForm fit mannequins.

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manufacturing partners so that they can make clothes in the sizes customers need. And because denim, sportswear and so on are all different, we tailor our product to each area. We are always looking at what we can do in niche areas. I've worked in design and I've witnessed everybody there arguing all the time because companies' measurements are different. I've seen people try to make their own models using papier-mâché. So many big clothing companies have concentrated almost all their efficiency efforts on logistics, manufacturing and so on. There is no way now to squeeze more out of manufacturing, so it's time to make the creative functions more efficient.

Why do we buy clothes that don't fit us properly?

Because we think they do fit. They looked good in the store, after all. They are fashion items and everyone's perception of what looks good is different. We can help improve the fit of clothes, and we want to. Alvanon was a spin-off company for my father and he allowed my brothers and me to build it up and run it, which is a phenomenal gesture of 'letting go' in an Asian family, let me assure you. We have to try to give back to the industry now. One specific idea is that we want to mentor young brands and try to show them a better way of doing things. With the support of the Dr Kenneth Wang Foundation, we are going to back three brands for two years, starting with US-based womenswear brands Rosie Assoulin and Ellie Kai. We'll announce the third in mid-2016. We have also worked pro bono on a two-year project at the Paris Opera House, scanning the body shapes of dancers and producing fit mannequins for the designers, pattern makers and sewers to create or adjust the costumes for performances.

What is 'Zarification' and what are the good points and bad points that strike you about this phenomenon?

The phrase isn't mine; I read it in an article. Zara is the real game-changer. There's one on 59th Street in New York City, opposite Bloomingdales, and I used to love going there. In college, it was where we all went to buy our first suits. When you run everything on your own, including your logistics, you develop a deep understanding of what you can and cannot do. Zara's merchandising team sits next to its design team and does a great job. The great merchants like [former Gap chief executive] Mickey Drexler seem almost to have a sixth sense for this, something you can't teach.



A night at the opera. Alvanon helped the Paris Opera improve the fit of its costumes as part of its commitment to giving back.

Alvanon

What would you say in response to complaints from companies that end consumers often only pay lip-service when they say they support sustainable business but balk at any increase in price?

Things have got cheaper and cheaper over the last 20 years. That's the issue with the industry. I suppose this will continue until consumers decide not to pay £1.99 for a T-shirt, until they see that, in fact, we really don't need so many possessions; we don't need five T-shirts, one will do. Because children don't learn to sew any more, they know little about how garments are made, although that's starting to come back a little, thanks to the craft movement. Also, there's no scarcity in the market any more; it's hard to see anything that is special. I know companies target millennials with cheap prices and that there is a belief that if brands can grab a girl at 15 she will be a customer for life, but I don't share it. By the time she is 30, her body will be different and her tastes won't be the same. But I know it's hard for a brand to change its supply chain thought process. It's hard to know the answer.

If you could show our readers one place in the world, where would you take us ? How would we get there? What would we see? What would we need to wear?

To Inle Lake, Myanmar. My friend runs a training academy for hotel staff there with the whole idea being to elevate the community, to help make sure local people have the skills to cope with the tourism boom there. It's a spectacularly beautiful place, where people still weave silk and lotus fibre in their homes using old, artisan methods. You have to travel by canoe to get there.

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