

BRAND PROFILE: KANGAROOS



KangaROOS shoes have suffered mixed fortunes - from leaping off the shelves in the early 1980s to heading towards a crash a decade later. But true to the name, it is on the way back up, and its managing director Julia Hummel tells *WSA* about its giant leaps in Northern Europe.

Bouncing back

Bouncing back' is a phrase that suits KangaROOS. The brand went from being one of the top five US sports apparel companies in the early 1980s to a massive slump in sales at the end of the decade, followed by a revival in the late 1990s. And it seems again, after a lull, the shoes are gaining ground – there has been a surge in sales in Northern Europe and Scandinavia where the shoes have been 'repositioned' to appeal to teens and skaters. "Today's customers don't just buy shoes, they buy

into stories, values and credibility," KangaROOS managing director for Europe Julia Hummel tells *WSA*. "KangaROOS has all of this, with its great story and wonderful heritage."

In the beginning

Like many of the best ideas, the first KangaROOS were borne from a need to solve a problem – that American Bob Gamm, whose family was in the shoe business, didn't like leaving his keys and money on the floor while he went running. A shoe with pockets seemed

The Heritage Roos from its Red collection. The majority of ranges still feature the signature pocket – some large enough to hold a small wallet.

 KangaROO

a fitting solution, and the public agreed. Within five years of launching in 1979, sales grew to more than 700,000 per month.

Mr Gamm was keen that the shoes weren't merely a fad or a fashion item, however – he wanted them to be taken seriously as performance footwear and in 1986 invested in a 10,000 square-metre testing facility, the KangaROOS Laboratory & Gymnasium, in Illinois. Former Nike designer Ray Tonkel created the Dynacoil for KangaROOS, a system approved by NASA that reduced impact shock, provided lateral stability and was said to increase athletic efficiency. Athletes, basketballers, footballers and ice-hockey teams wore the shoes, and KangaROOS became one of the first companies to use sports stars for endorsements.

By the end of the 1980s, however, sales began to slip, caused by a number of factors including strong growth of its competitors. In 1988, company sales dipped to \$50 million from a high of \$114 million four years earlier and Mr Gamm took the decision to sell the business.

European stronghold

But fashion moves in cycles, and it was this cyclical motion that saw a second wave of sales in the late 1990s. Retro styles, particularly in sportswear, saw a surge in popularity, were worn by indie and rock bands and filtered into street fashion. KangaROOS, like many heritage sports brands, took on a cult-like status, and the demand for old-school meant the company saw a growth in sales and it reacted with new apparel lines to complement the footwear.

It is this same demand for retro or heritage looks that has seen the company take another leap forward in Scandinavia and Northern Europe recently. Its base in Northern Europe is particularly strong, partly due to the strength of its distributor, Germany-based Bernd Hummel. It is the largest licensee of KangaROOS worldwide and distributes the brand in 20 European countries.

Ms Hummel, daughter of the company's founder, says the experience gained from continuity is essential: Bernd Hummel has been a distributor since 1981 and it appears to be going from strength to strength.



Julia Hummel, KangaROOS managing director of Europe, looks after the brand in more than 20 countries.

 KangaROOS

"A good indicator is the fact that we are in the best sneakerstores in Scandinavia and Germany, on their shelves as well as in their shop windows," says Ms Hummel, mentioning Amen in Munich, AFEW in Düsseldorf, Norse in Copenhagen and SNS Sneakerstuff in Stockholm among them. The shoes are also stocked at Colette in Paris, a well-known indicator of trends. "This shows popularity and forecasts the trend, as only a small selection of brands actually make it to this level of retail," says Ms Hummel.

Positioning the brand as a fashion shoe, rather than performance shoe, has been a key differentiator in Europe, and it has again been propelled by a resurgence in popularity of retro fashion in general. "However, you cannot survive for seasons just 'playing the retro game'," she adds. "You have to develop and update continuously, especially in terms of colour and material. We develop completely new styles and we update 'icon styles' that we find in our archives. It's not just a retro but also a sneaker resurgence going on in the market that we benefit from."

Appealing to a new generation

With a focus on its key European markets, KangaROOS has launched various limited editions and collaborations, most recently in August with Premium Supply Store in the Netherlands and Danish international footballer



Bright colours are a key feature, of the Invader Fluorite in purple.

 KangaROOS



The Premium Supply Store and Lasse Schöne collection is offered in green, red and black, the colours of NEC Nijmegen football team in the Netherlands. Designers Shane and Shawn in the US and Wemoto in Germany have also collaborated with the brand.

 KangaROOS

Lasse Schöne, and a design with German streetwear label Wemoto Clothing – a partnership formed at the Bright tradeshow in Frankfurt in 2010.

It is these alignments that the company hopes will resonate with the younger generation. Last year it launched the Flying KangaROOS, a competition to sponsor skate and bike stunt riders promoted through its German Facebook page, and offered design students at Deutsche Schuhfachschule, the German College of Footwear Design and Technology, the chance to design a limited edition shoe that was produced in time for DWF shoe fair in Düsseldorf in September. As well as seeing her design as a commercially available finished product, the winner, 23 year-old Tina Dauenhauer, has been offered a training place at KangaROOS' head office and "ideas factory" in Neuffer am Park in Pirmasens, in another example of the brand keeping itself relevant to youth tastes and talent.

"The competition was, of course, designed to unearth new talent. We can examine the potential of future designers and specifically select them for our brand – an opportunity for both sides," adds Ms Hummel.

Global picture

Looking at the brand on a global scale, Pentland Group, which owns the KangaROOS worldwide brand, is eyeing growth. James Wilson, vice-president of KangaROOS International, says: "While Europe continues to be our strongest market we have also focused in recent years on building strong local partners globally and we are now seeing new growth in Asia and the Americas. Our partners in Germany have distributed KangaROOS since the 1980s and this year we have seen higher-than-expected growth in Scandinavia."

The groundwork for the growth in Scandinavia was laid in Germany, according to Thomas Vangsgaard, product controller for

Viking Footwear, which distributes the brand in Norway. He said the growth is "the outcome of a segmentation that KangaROOS in Germany made some years ago, where the heritage styles were only offered to fashion retailers and high-profile stores". He added: "The timing for heritage styles is just right now."

Last year, KangaROOS relaunched its Nordic-facing website, featuring interactive sections and videos, and sponsored Team KangaROOS, a basketball team from Konsberg in Norway that gained popularity through a TV programme called Norwegian Talent. The marketing and message has resonated with a young Scandinavian client base.

"Scandinavia, in particular, has always been a leader in terms of style and open to new, fresh brands, looking for an alternative to what's worn by the masses," adds Ms Brummel.

Mass appeal

For the brand as a whole, sponsorships, astute collaborations and social media strategies are bringing the shoes to a new audience too young to remember them the first, or even second, time around. "For those who loved KangaROOS in the 1980s as children or in their teenage years, we love to bring back those memories of what they carried in their pockets," says Ms Hummel of the elder customers. And of the youth: "We like to make sneaker and heritage lovers happy and address them with a fantastic product, that not only stands for quality but also a very charming heritage."

It seems the duality of the focus is working. Trend predictor WGSN recently stated: "The retro runner is confirmed as a collection staple for spring/summer 2013. For silhouette, this trend is all about the 90s by way of the 70s, with seasonal colour and contrast laces bringing the look up to date."

Looks like the ROOS could be set for yet another leap. 