

THE GLOBE AND MAIL 

Lisa Will, founder and CEO of Stonz Wear Inc.

FOR THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Kids' outdoor gear maker needs to find memorable 'hook' for its brand

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Each week, we seek out expert advice to help a small or medium-sized company overcome a key issue.

For many entrepreneurs, imitation is not always the sincerest form of flattery.

Lisa Will, founder and chief executive officer of [Stonz Wear Inc.](#), a Vancouver-based infants' and childrens' outerwear company, has seen several competing products that bear a strong resemblance to the all-weather outdoor baby boots sold by her company. She has even seen ads for "fake stonz" pop up online.

Stonz booties were first developed in 2003, after Ms. Will couldn't find a good way to keep her infant son's feet warm while carrying him on her back during hiking trips.

After meeting another mother who'd experienced the same problem, the two recognized a business opportunity and founded Stonz Wear in 2004, offering boots featuring a dual-toggle design to help them stay on kids' feet. (The former partner is no longer with the company.)

Ms. Will believes her booties were the “originals,” but while the company has secured worldwide trademarks for the Stonz brand, it does not hold any patents on its bootie design or other products, she says.

“Even if I did,” she says, “now you’re all about litigating more than actually being a good business person.”

And it’s a good business person she’d rather focus on being, especially at a time of rapid growth.

Stonz, which has seven full-time employees, has expanded its product line to include hats, mitts and boot liners and, coming soon, rainboots and winter boots for older children. It is now selling its wares in more than 400 stores. Revenue grew 21 per cent in 2011 over the previous year, and she is expecting another 20 per cent this year.

Ms. Will now plans to expand geographically, too. Stonz is currently rolling out international versions of its website in German, French, and Norwegian.

“Canada’s been very good to us,” she says. “But now we’re going into America and Europe.”

As it moves into these new markets, Ms. Will sees branding as a primary concern.

The Challenge: How can Stonz best differentiate its products from competitors’ similar offerings?

THE EXPERTS WEIGH IN

Karina Nobbs, lecturer in fashion branding and retail strategy, [London College of Fashion](#)

Small brands like Stonz have a huge advantage over the larger brands that they are competing with with respect to their authenticity and the core values of their brand. If they don’t have the resources to patent or trademark their designs or take advice from an IP [intellectual property] lawyer, they should also consider protecting their brand through their communication strategy.

The story of how their brand began will resonate with other mothers and, through the use of videos like ‘our story,’ the photo contest and giving back sections on their website, they are building an emotional connection with consumers which is more valuable in the long term than fighting long legal battles.

If they are able to prove that they were the first to follow that specific design for their booties, then again they need to promote the originality of their flagship product. Perhaps an established date should be incorporated into the branding for the booties as this again enhances their value and builds the desirability for consumers to get the original.

Joyce Groote, president and CEO of [Holeys Canada](#) of Delta, B.C.

It is unfortunate that Stonz did not apply for patents as well as the trademarks that they currently hold. Although there may be significant costs for patent protection, competitors are often discouraged from offering a very similar product even without the need for a formal court challenge. Products where patents have been applied for also have an important marketing advantage.

In order to claim branding space, focus on a few key issues. These products are manufactured in Canada (or Vancouver, if that is an important regional sales strategy). These products are the ‘original.’ There is a great story behind the products.

Make your messages short, clear and concise. The message gets lost when it takes too much time to read or say. Talk to your customers to see if they are able to articulate why they do business with you. There may be some valuable messages that help you to further differentiate your brand.

Once you have come up with your branding identity and position, live it in everything you do. The key messages that exemplify your brand should be visible in all your marketing collateral.

Dennis Van Staaldin, president of Ottawa-based [Brandvelope Consulting](#)

Product innovation and pure marketing chutzpah have gotten this company very far indeed, and congratulations to them for that. But apparel products, promotions, supply chains, and social media campaigns are far too easy (and legal) to copy. What can't be copied is a strong, memorable brand "hook" that makes one product the brand all similar products are compared to. Think of the Canadian-invented footwear product "Foam Creations," which only became a global phenomenon and a billion-dollar public company when relaunched under the much stronger brand name, Crocs.

How do I know it's a more effective name? Because all last week I was telling my kids, 'Put your Crocs on. We're going to the beach!' But I can't even imagine saying to my toddler on a cold winter day: "Let's put your Stonz (Stones? Stons?) on and go outside.' I would just say "booties.'

I don't think it's too late for these smart, driven entrepreneurs to thoughtfully and strategically relaunch their core brand. But I do think it needs to happen. And soon.

THREE THINGS THE COMPANY CAN DO NOW

Incorporate the date into branding materials

A starting date speaks to its history.

Focus on the emotional connection

While designs can easily be copied, a personal connection with a company is not so easily reproduced. Work to make that connection.

Consider relaunching the brand

Research and develop possible alternative brand names that may have a stronger consumer hook.

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