

How Rick and Morty, Plus a Galaxy of Other Pop-Culture Stars, Made Wrangler Cool Again

Holly Wheeler has gotten used to calls like this by now.

On May 31, the relentless buzzing of her cellphone disturbed her otherwise relaxing Sunday. “I got a ton of text messages all of a sudden,” recalls Wheeler, the vp of global brand marketing for Wrangler. “I had all these people sending me texts with screen grabs of a little alien with the denim-on-denim look.”

The messages, she recalled, also pretty much all said the same thing: “Dude! You’re on Rick and Morty!”

Well, it wasn’t actually Wheeler who was on Adult Swim’s cult hit animated sci-fi series—it was Wrangler.

Without spoiling anything, the show’s Season 4 finale featured a mock piece of marketing in which a Gromflomite pitchman warmly thanks an evil clone version of Morty’s mother Beth for her latest purchase. “Congratulations to your government, business or terror cell on its acquisition of the NX-5 Planet Remover by Xamaxax in partnership with Wrangler Jeans!” said the alien insect, essentially suggesting that it’s easier to wipe out a planet than a pair of Wrangler denims.

Contrary to what some fans probably thought, Wrangler corporate hadn’t paid for the placement and, in fact, didn’t even know it was coming. But now that it was out in the world, Wheeler moved quickly to do something about it.

“We didn’t know Wrangler was going to be in the show,” she said, recalling her next thought: “We’ve got something here. We gotta do something with this.”

What Wrangler did about it makes its official debut today: the Wrangler x Rick and Morty Collection. It features a T-shirt and laser-etched denim jacket, both sporting a lavish illustration of the NX-5 Planet Remover. (There’s no word on what a galactic death ray might cost, but the items will run you between \$29 and \$79 on Wrangler’s website.)

Wrangler's Stranger Things collaboration features Hellfire Club jackets and Ts.

Wheeler's team moved at quantum speed to ink a deal with Adult Swim, produce an approved design for the clothes, and manufacture them in time. But it's a process for which Wheeler has had some practice. Last year, when Lil Nas X sang about Wranglers on his booty in his monster hit Old Town Road, Wheeler heard about it through a similar torrent of text messages and, within a few weeks, had worked to produce the Lil Nax X Collection.

Wrangler's collaborations are not only a lesson in the importance of moving quickly to be part of a cultural moment, they also demonstrate the rewards for an older brand that, by

sidling up to the popular kids, can introduce itself to a new generation of customers.

That was also the aim when Wrangler put its brand on another famous booty in January: the legendary buns belonging to retired NFL star Rob Gronkowski, who sported some custom Wrangler denim for Gronk Beach, the Polynesian luau he hosted just prior to Super Bowl LIV.

Still another example of Wrangler's ability to ride with younger partners was announced late last week. The Wrangler x Stranger Things Collection is another denim-jacket/T-shirt combo, this set emblazoned with the logo for the Hellfire Club, the title of the first episode of Season 4 of Netflix's hit series. Released on Nov. 6 (which, in case you missed it, was Stranger Things Day), the apparel featured a "heavy washdown" to make it look like it had been lying around since the 1980s, the decade in which the show is set.

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