How to Not Let ‘the Practical’ Drown out Your Dream

Universal Standard co-founder Alexandra Waldman shares how she built a brand marketing more and more style to America’s plus-size women.

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Editor’s Note: Inspire Me *is a series in which entrepreneurs and leaders share what motivates them through good times and bad, while also describing how they overcame challenges in hopes of inspiring others.*

We all know the frustration of going to the store and having the clothes on the rack just not fit. You’d think that when 68 percent of American women wear a size 14 or larger, retailers would stock accordingly, but this isn’t the case. Only 2.3 percent of the apparel options on offer are “plus size.”

Alexandra Waldman wants to change this.

In 2015, Waldman, with Polina Veksler, co-founded the clothing brand Universal Standard. The founders began by offering sizes 10 to 28, shifted to sizes 6 to 32 and as of fall 2018, with the opening of the company’s first brick-and-mortar shopping outlet in Manhattan, expanded their range even more — from 00 to size 40.

Offering a retail source for a sorely underserved customer base — despite the overall industry’s traditionally narrow confines — has always been both her top priority and her

biggest challenge,Waldman told *Entrepreneur,* “Being accessible to everyone is the ultimate goal,” she said.

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Part of that promise involved developing initiatives like Fit Liberty, an exchange policy that allows customers to return clothes that no longer fit, for free replacements, should their body size fluctuate over the course of the year.

“[It allows you to help] take that bully out of someone’s head and say ‘Look, shop for the woman you are right now,’” Waldman explained. “That [type] of initiative takes the emotional and psychological journey of the customer into account. I think that brands need to start caring much more than perhaps they have been, and provide these kinds of initiatives as examples for the entire apparel industry.”

For our *Inspire Me* series, Waldman shared her views about how to make a big impact even if your industry isn’t quite ready for change.

This interview was edited for length and clarity.

What was the last major challenge you had, and how did you motivate yourself to tackle it?

I firmly believe that we don’t need to have another “plus-size” brand. What we need is for brands to make all sizes. And it’s not just about size; it’s about style and variety. I think that larger women have simply not been allowed to look as wonderful as smaller women, and then they were judged for it. It’s time to change all that.

We are going to be the only brand in the world that sells 00 to 40. I think the biggest challenge is to convince everyone — the industry itself and the consumer — that this is how fashion should be; and these changes are going to have to take

place. We want to be entirely inclusive.

So, there was a huge learning curve to understanding how to do clothes in a broader range that we intended to do. And it's not just [we who had] to learn — it's the manufacturers, the people to make the fabric, the people who need to create a whole new infrastructure in order to support the sizes in the price range we wanted to pay.

For those women who are looking to start a business or have begun one but are feeling discouraged, what advice do you have?

Don't lose the beauty of your ideology. Don't just become about the practical. There should be heart in whatever it is that you want to do. It has to solve a problem, but don't create anything by algorithm or by this somewhat cynical sort of idea that is, "Oh, there's not enough of this, so I'm going to make it because I'm going to make money." That can never be your motivator. It's got to be a loftier thought and feeling — that is, what is going to carry you through the hard times? It's a very risky learning curve. You need a very strong belief and ideology to make something worth having in the world.

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Who is a woman that inspires you?

I'm most inspired by women who are curious about world, who are both interested and interesting. I really admire people who just want to learn all the time and who appreciate a diversity in options and the things that surround them.

How do you motivate and inspire your team?

Our team is motivated because they believe in what we're building. They realize how unique this is and what a moment in

culture this is. This is a moment when things are really changing and where people are standing up and saying, ‘This isn’t good enough.” I want to be a person who belongs to a group that is inclusive, is diverse, that says yes and protects people who have been marginalized. We’re playing a part in that. We’re kind of translating that through what we do.

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