



The future of fashion

Under the leadership of CEO Angela Spindler, fashion retailer N Brown has made a successful pivot to an online model.

WORDS DANIEL HERBORN • IMAGES N BROWN GROUP



Having accumulated a wealth of sales and marketing leadership experience at iconic brands such as Debenhams, Asda, Mars and Coca-Cola, Angela Spindler joined N Brown as CEO in 2013. She was drawn to the company because it offered a genuine point of difference in what is a crowded market.

“We are a fashion retailer that sets out to be the internationally loved expert in fashion that fits and flatters,” she explains. “We are size-agnostic, but our bias is towards creating styles and looks that are sympathetic to plus-sized shoppers. We’re making fashion fun and accessible to people whom the industry at best ignores, and at worst, actively alienates.”

N Brown was once known primarily for selling clothes through catalogues that spanned hundreds of pages and necessitated a long lead-in time. Under Angela’s leadership, the catalogue-led company has pivoted to an online retail model. “We’ve been busily transforming over the past five years,” says Angela, “We would now describe ourselves as an online fashion retailer.”

The new digital focus makes for a retailer that is far more agile and able to quickly respond to new trends. This change involved significant staff turnover

and the recruitment of around 300 staff with experience in the likes of design, merchandising and digital to enable the flexible supply chain.

Angela says careful recruitment was crucial to successfully managing the restructure. “You simply cannot deliver this kind of change without the right team to guide it. That is not about assembling a team of people who are all like me. I’ve worked

extremely hard to create a balanced team and now we have a gorgeous blend of people with 20 or 30 years of service and also those with two or three years of service, all working towards the same goal of making our customers look and feel amazing but going to market through channels that are really the future.”

Angela also says approaching such a major project was made easier by breaking it down into manageable tasks. She is a firm believer that execution beats

strategy every time. “There is no secret formula,” she opines. “It’s about grinding out change, being resilient and being determined. If you don’t make mistakes then you’re not exploring ... just don’t make the same mistake twice.”

During Angela’s tenure as CEO, the company has not been afraid to try new things and target neglected market sectors. It has relaunched one of its power brands, JD Williams, billed as the first »

“YOU SIMPLY CANNOT DELIVER THIS KIND OF CHANGE WITHOUT THE RIGHT TEAM TO GUIDE IT.”

**FAST FACT:**

N Brown has been operating in ***Manchester***, in ***one guise or another***, for ***around 140 years***.

online department store for women over the age of 45. “It’s just been fabulous, the way in which customers have responded to that.”

N Brown has also implemented new ways of accessing customers through partnerships with online retail giants Amazon, Zalando and Namshi. Similarly, capsule collections of N Brown’s brands, such as Simply Be, Jacamo and JD Williams, are available through other retail channels, such as the Tesco website. “That’s our additional way of accessing new customers and launching ourselves into new markets, to continue our momentum and pace,” says Angela.

Opting to stage a lingerie photoshoot followed by a catwalk show featuring women wearing sizes 12–26 the day before London Fashion Week was a decision that made waves for the brand. Angela describes it as a “soft protest against the lack of representation of really beautiful, curvy women on the catwalks”. The canny move led to extensive media coverage, a result Angela says shows there is a strong demand for fashion that caters to people of all sizes, and for a brand that does it with energy and fun.

Angela loves coming to work every day and credits the N Brown culture as a factor that drives her enthusiasm. She is heartened to note the company has managed to maintain some continuity

with its earlier incarnation, including maintaining relationships with some partners it has worked with for more than 30 years.

As it has evolved into its new international offering, N Brown has proudly managed to keep its identity as a Mancunian company. “There’s a camaraderie, a sort of familial feel to it. We haven’t lost that,” explains Angela. “I often talk about us being a big tree with deep roots here in Manchester – we’ve pruned the tree, enriched the soil and it’s grown in a different shape, but it’s still got those same deep roots happily planted here in Manchester.”

Though its roots may be firmly in Manchester there’s little doubt that N Brown – with its new online presence, forward-thinking fashion sense, and an offering that caters to a wide range of women – will see its popularity soar much further than its UK city base. ■

“Supporting N Brown across its business-critical applications is fast paced and exciting, a reflection of their business. Being at the heart of the organisation allows us to anticipate change, be agile and work as ‘one team’ to deliver a great experience to its end customer.”
– Ian Thomas, Managing Director Commercial Sector, Sopra Steria UK

A digital future led by strategic partnerships

How do you steer your organisation through the digital hype? Sopra Steria shows the way.

Delivering outstanding work in the 21st century is all about partnership – and Sopra Steria’s collaborative and long-standing relationships with many of the world’s leading companies over the past 50 years proves its longevity across all sectors.

As a trusted strategic partner, Sopra Steria drives digital change by advising on and executing IT strategies that successfully steer its clients towards a digital future. For example, it has been supporting leading multi-brand fashion retailer N Brown during the biggest business transformation in the company’s 140-year history as it refashions itself from a direct mail-led to digital-first retailer. Responsible for the business-critical applications and infrastructure, Sopra Steria has been acting as an IT Service Integration and Management Partner throughout this period of significant change.

By working as ‘one team’, Sopra Steria gains deep insight into the demands of N Brown’s business. It has implemented professional, industrialised processes, instilling a ‘preventative measures’ culture that enabled it to reduce operating risk. The company is also supporting N Brown’s expansion into new markets by transforming its office hours support model with the introduction of ‘predictive’ technologies, and using on/off-shore resources to deliver a 24/7 digital service. To drive growth, Sopra Steria has reinforced N Brown’s mission-critical systems and enhanced existing applications to enable trade on third party marketplaces.

Successful partnerships are clearly based on

shared goals and ambition, as well as open and honest engagement at every level. Beyond N Brown, one of Sopra Steria’s longest standing partnerships is with leading global retailer Tesco. Since 1985, Sopra Steria has provided continued support and development of the retail giant’s crucial IT services, ensuring its mission-critical services stay at the forefront of retail innovation and delivery in the UK.

Sopra Steria also has strong partnerships in the financial services sector, working with the FCA on its implementation of the digital Market Data Processing Platform, the UK’s largest – capable of handling millions of transactions every day. It also supports key leaders in markets, from insurance to utilities, and has built a compelling reputation for successful joint ventures. Together with the Cabinet Office, Sopra Steria established one of the UK’s largest ever joint venture Shared Services (SSCL), which delivers services for more than 300,000 government and police personnel and processes over £50 billion of payments per year. ■

Decades of experience and a deeply ingrained belief in partnering with clients – strengths that make Sopra Steria a perfect partner to navigate through the digital hype. To learn more visit <http://www.soprasteria.co.uk/CTA>

Ian Thomas
Managing Director, Sopra Steria UK
ian.thomas@soprasteria.com
Website: www.soprasteria.co.uk

sopra steria