

Buzz Queens

Why Rihanna and Kylie Jenner are critical to Puma's ambitious new women's push.

By Sheena Butler-Young



Behind the scenes of a recent Fenty design meeting



Over Easter weekend, Rihanna was relishing a rare few hours of downtime in New York during a day off from her Anti World Tour. Scores of paparazzi snapped flicks of the star as she ran errands in a black Vetements hoodie and fur slides from her Fenty x Puma collection.

Even when she's off duty, Rihanna's every fashion move is a statement for the masses. And that's

why Puma is making the trendsetting songstress a cornerstone of its business strategy.

But the brand isn't stopping there. Last week, the highly anticipated sneaker from Puma's campaign with Kylie Jenner hit stores, fueling a new wave of buzz after the queen of social media teased her partnership for the past month on Instagram.

Make no mistake about it: Puma is serious about girl power.

Celebrity-brand endorsements

are nothing new, but the German footwear-and-apparel maker's collaborations with two of pop culture's most influential women are not of the garden variety.

Rihanna, Puma's women's creative director since December 2014, and Kylie Jenner, the brand's newest ambassador, represent a strategic effort on the part of Puma to speak to the women's market in an unprecedented way.

"Women can sell sneakers to

PHOTOS: COURTESY OF PUMA

women,” said Adam Petrick, global director of brand and marketing at Puma. “What the industry has forgotten is that women want and deserve the same kind of attention to detail and storytelling that men do.”

Puma’s latest undertaking is one that has challenged athletic footwear-and-apparel companies for many years. While the women’s market offers extensive opportunities for athletic brands and retailers, experts contend that players have largely failed to tap into them.

“The industry has vastly underserved the female customer,” said Matt Powell, a sports industry analyst with The NP Group. “There are more women running than there are men running. Women today are serious about their sports and fitness activities. There is a big opportunity for retailers and brands to figure out how to grow their women’s business.”

Rihanna has already helped Puma’s creative team gain the confidence to push the design envelope. Case in point: the pointy-tip stiletto boots with the Puma form stripe featured on the runway during Rihanna’s much-buzzed-about Fenty show at New York Fashion Week. “It’s crazy to see the Puma stripe on a heel. It trips me out, but I enjoy it,” the star told FN that night.

In January, The NP Group released data identifying the brand preferences of brands across the country. The songstress outranked mega-stars such as Beyoncé, Coldplay and Jennifer Lopez as the most marketable of all big-name celebrities (based on responses from 92,000 consumer surveys compiled by the BrandLink database). A quick glance at Rihanna’s Instagram, where she has nearly 36 million followers, and Twitter, where she is followed by more than 57 million, easily lends credence to the findings.

“Both Rihanna and Kylie have the ability to capture the headlines in traditional media as well as in social media because they have large followings as fashion/style and urban/street icons,” said Denise Lee Yohn, brand consultant and author of the book “What Great Brands Do.” “Kylie’s family ties make her even more interesting and buzz-worthy, but neither seem to naturally have credibility in the sneaker category.”

Perhaps that is the point. Puma, as its CEO Björn Gulden told *Footwear News* during Rihanna’s New York Fashion Week debut for her Fenty X

Puma collection in February, is thinking outside of the traditional marketing box.

“Puma has a strong history with females, but it was very difficult to find an athlete who was global,” Gulden said. “When we did the research, Rihanna was the person who came up everywhere. When we got to know her, we [learned] that she’s so strong creatively, and she’s the perfect person to help us reach the female consumer.”

Despite the fact that neither Jenner nor Rihanna is a professional athlete, both women prioritize personal fitness and share the values of Puma’s target demographic, according to Petrick.

“Rihanna is a creative muse for the brand,” Petrick said. “We look to her in terms of how she styles herself, her attitude — even her words are used in our internal presentations. She captures what we’re trying to represent — her mindset and values match our brand perfectly.”

Similarly, Jenner, who constantly dishes on her day-to-day moves to her nearly 15 million Twitter followers and shares photos of her fast-paced, jet-setting lifestyle to more than 56 million Instagram admirers, is the personification of *goals* for Puma’s target consumer.

“The relationship with Kylie is about embodying a person who represents our consumer and the fit,

active lifestyle we want to portray,” Petrick said. “She captures the ideals of the young women we want to serve. She is hyper-influential, entrepreneurial and creative in her own way.”

Not to mention, the 18-year-old trendsetter has a thing for sneakers. Of late, Jenner’s Instagram has been overtaken with posts depicting her sneaker collection, and her closet full of Puma digs also made the rounds on social last month. “I’ve definitely embraced a more casual side. I used

to wear heels to lunch but not really anymore. Just for nights,” Kylie said in February during the launch of her eponymous clothing and shoe brand with her sister Kendall Jenner. “I’m all about a cool sneaker.”

With two of today’s most persuasive female forces going to bat for the brand, Puma’s girl-power push is creating excitement at retail. Foot Locker Inc.’s women’s banner, Six:02, was a key collaborator during the Rihanna Creepers launch in September 2015.

Natalie Ellis, VP and GM at Six:02, said the retailer jumped at the opportunity to be involved in both high-powered collaborations. “There is a lot of appetite and interest from women in terms of sneaker culture and athletic-inspired fashion,” Ellis said. “Women like Kylie and Rihanna — their lifestyles and their abilities — are very inspiring to our customers.”



The Fenty trainer

“What the industry has forgotten is that women want and deserve the same kind of attention to detail and storytelling that men do.” Adam Petrick



Inside Kylie Jenner’s Puma ad campaign

STARTING LINEUP

A look at Puma’s other fierce female brand ambassadors



Lexi Thompson

Professional golfer

At 12 years old, she was the youngest person to qualify for the U.S. Women’s Open in 2007.



Marta Vieira da Silva

Brazilian soccer player

She’s been FIFA World Player of the Year a record five consecutive times.



Yarisley Silva

Cuban pole vaulter

The athlete won the silver medal in the women’s pole vault at the 2012 Summer Olympics.



Jenna Prandini

U.S. National track team

Prandini is an Olympic hopeful and 2015 National Champion.



Jamie Grainger

Professional trainer

A former division 1 athlete, she is personal trainer to Rihanna.