

Average is the New Elite

Everyday ambassador programs help brands grow presence through relatable storytelling. **BY MORGAN TILTON**

LET'S BE HONEST: Most outdoor recreationists don't aspire to summit Mt. Everest or compete in 200-mile ultra runs—they'd rather spend a morning hiking on trail near their house or a weekend camping in their local woods.

And brands are taking notice, establishing ambassador roles for everyday outdoor lovers. The goal? To create an on-the-ground presence and foster relationships with consumers through relatability.

"Consumers look up to people who they can relate to and who they feel inspired by on many different levels, whether it's a personal story, goals of athletic achievements, work-life balance, how they train, or the podium," said Jenny Taylor, brand director at Salomon North America.


Currently, Salomon's ambassador program features some global elite athletes but is now largely skewed towards influencers (the brand has 255 individuals in North America alone). Merrell likewise gave its community program a focus on diversity—of various trail sports, ethnicity, and body shape—and has 35 U.S.-based ambassadors.

The idea of both programs is to create sustainable, long-term relationships with relatable athletes who inspire consumers and represent the brand.

Of particular resonance with consumers are ambassadors who juggle full-time or multiple jobs, while still finding time to get out and enjoy the outdoors. "When consumers see athletes who are like themselves in terms of intensity and lifestyle—rather than people doing epic feats that seem unobtainable—we see more social media engagement through likes and comments," says Sue Harvey Brown, former director of consumer experience marketing for Merrell.

Average Joe and Jane partners also allow brands to tell a wider variety of stories than the pinnacle athlete at the top of his or her game.

"Our ambassadors are not cookie-cutter," Harvey Brown says. "We want to amplify their messages and inspire more people to hit trail. It's a higher-maintenance relationship than paying an agency to employ influencers or sending influencers product, but it's mutually beneficial and longer-term."

Assessing direct ROI is challenging, but Merrell and Salomon track the social media reach and engagement of ambassadors—and believe in their power. "We believe strongly that first and foremost, besides any type of commercialization, our ambassadors help us build brand equity," Taylor says. 



OUTDOOR ED.
Western Colorado University launches the nation's first Outdoor MBA.
BY JENNY WILLDEN

IT DOESN'T TAKE A business genius to see the outdoor industry is thriving, but it might take some brains to ensure it stays that way long into the future. For the first time, an institution has answered that call by creating a new outdoor-oriented advanced degree program.

In fall 2018, Gunnison's Western Colorado University launched the nation's first Outdoor Industry MBA, welcoming 22 students from across the country for its two-year online program.

The new program teams a traditional MBA core with different tracks for the product or service side of the outdoor-recreation economy. In-person immersion experiences, outdoor industry guest lectures, and capstone projects with leading outdoor companies ensure that students are ready to meet the challenges of today—and tomorrow.

"We want to expose them to where the industry is and where it's going so they can see other aspects and choose," says Jay Whitacre, a faculty member at Western Colorado University. "We're trying to make the program as diverse as possible to set graduates up to succeed in everything from product development, to design, to service tracks, to higher-up management, retail sales, and sustainability."

And though the Outdoor MBA program is still in its infancy, Whitacre predicts it will track on an upward trajectory that mirrors the industry itself, and he plans to bring all 22 students to the Snow Show in January.

"There's no shortage of outdoor industry enthusiasts and professionals who want to further their education and propellant in the industry," he says.

