STUDENT CASE STUDY

Burton Girls: Creating a Space for Women in Snowboarding

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“Since day one, we’ve charged ahead to innovate and give as much back to snowboarding as we’ve gotten out of it.” - Jake Burton Carpenter, Founder and Chairman, Burton

Introduction

In the late 1990s, Donna Carpenter, co-owner of Burton Snowboards and wife of Jake Burton Carpenter, sat around the conference table with her fellow board members. As she looked around the room, Donna was struck by the fact that out of the group of ten, only two were women. It reflected the limited participation of women and girls in a sport that tended to be male-dominated. “This has got to change,” she declared.

Determined to increase the number of women within Burton and within the snowboarding community, she created “Burton Girls,” ramping up the company’s efforts to produce products tailored to the female segment and creating positions within the company to analyze and promote women’s participation in the sport. Now in 2015, after the introduction of countless innovative technologies for women’s snowboarding equipment and gear, and marketing strategies that have built a sense of community and lifestyle for women and girls who snowboard, Donna wonders about the future direction of the company and the Burton Girls program she has pioneered. How can Burton attract more women and girls to the sport and to its products? Can Burton successfully build a lifestyle brand for women through expansion into the apparel industry? Or, should the company stick to what it does best – produce technologically advanced snowboarding equipment and gear?

Burton Overview

History and Corporate Culture

In 1977 Jake Burton Carpenter began Burton Snowboards with the Backhill, a narrow wooden snowboard with a rope and handle attached to the nose, and single strap bindings to hold a rider’s feet (Figure 1). He made every Backhill by hand in his barn in Londonderry, Vermont, as there were no snowboards manufacturing machines at that time. Despite his enthusiasm and dedication, Jake could only sell 300 snowboards and had to lay off two relatives and a friend. With time, Jake advanced his snowboard design, using fiberglass instead of wood and creating plastic bindings to hold the rider’s feet into place.

Although operations began to grow, Burton faced a major obstacle: ski resorts did not allow snowboarding. Jake realized that he had to persuade the resorts to permit the sport in order to expand his business, and he began a campaign for resorts to allow snowboarders to ride on their slopes. A breakthrough came in 1982, when the first National Snowboard Championship was held in South Pomfret, Vermont at Suicide Six Resort, which became the first ski resort open to snowboarders. Today, out of 400+ ski resorts in the United States, there are only 3 which do not allow snowboarding.

To attract more people to the young sport, Burton partnered with mountain resorts to launch a program in 1998 called “Learn to Ride,” which continues today. Recognizing that new riders may be hesitant to

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2 Based on personal communication with Cara Williamson, Brand Manager, Women’s & Youth, Burton Snowboards in discussion with the authors, April 2015.
invest in purchasing a snowboard, or intimidated to try the sport, the program features Burton-trained coaches and unique rental boards that have beginner-friendly technology (a beveled edge and concave face that make standing up on the board easier), which aim to provide beginner riders of all ages with the best snowboarding experience possible.

As Burton grew in terms of sales, product offerings, and company size, it expanded its business into Europe and established an office in Innsbruck, Austria. Today, Burton has grown into a globally recognized brand with products and stores across North America, Europe, and Asia. With Jake and his wife Donna at the helm, Burton built and fostered the sport and culture of snowboarding.

Burton remains the leader and foremost innovator of the snowboarding industry. Burton’s research and development operations are centered at its Vermont headquarters in a facility called Craig’s, which is directly adjacent to Burton’s main corporate office and production facility. Craig’s--modeled to look like a barn similar to that which originally housed Burton’s operations in the 70’s--is a cutting edge R&D facility and the most advanced in the industry. Based on feedback from Burton’s customers, distributors, and employees (who are all snowboarders themselves), and professional team of riders, Craig’s designs new prototypes each day. Using rapid prototyping machines, engineers can experiment with new models and produce a new board in just a few hours. A machine shop allows for similar experimentation with manufacturing processes. The advanced technology at Craig’s allows a new snowboard design to go from drawing, to implementation, to being on the snow in less than a week.

Among the most critical elements of Burton’s product innovation is its commitment to being rider-driven. The company strives to keep in constant contact with the snowboarding community through customer feedback, ride days, and sporting events. Burton has an extensive customer service program through which riders can call-in and voice their complaints or suggestions. All calls will be answered by a real snowboarder and customer service teams aggregate monthly reports on customer feedback in order to feed into product design and marketing strategy.

Product Line

Burton started its business focused on producing hardgoods (snowboards, boots, and bindings) and then expanded its product line into softgoods (snow jackets, pants, gloves, hats, and goggles) and eventually into accessories. To keep their dominant position in the snowboarding industry, Burton promotes their products at major sports events and mountain festivals. Burton organizes the Burton U.S. Open Snowboarding Championship where the best snowboarders come together as well as riders events and product demos. Burton also organizes mountain events, which invite everyone to try their product for free, learn snowboarding, and meet others within the snowboarding community.

Burton’s Market & Competition

Since Burton is a privately owned company, it does not publish financial data. However, it has been estimated that the company has between 40% and 45% share of the snowboard market.  

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35% of Burton’s sales come from the U.S. market, 30% from the European market, while the rest mainly come from the Japanese and Canadian markets. In addition to numerous partner stores across the world, Burton now has 18 flagship stores in locations including Canada, Japan, and Korea.

K2 is Burton’s closest competitor with a 31% market share. Smaller players like Lamar, Salomon, Rossignol, SIMS, and GNU together constitute about 20% of the market. In the women’s segment, Burton is seen as the leader. Today, much of the competition either sells only hardgoods or additionally, a limited range of accessories like headgear and pullovers that aren’t gender-segmented. Burton and K2 are the only industry players that have expansive and dedicated product lines both for men and women, demonstrating a strong commitment to bringing more women into the sport. Because K2 is a ski company that began producing snowboards in addition to skis, Burton retains a competitive advantage as a snowboard-centric brand leader. It has successfully marketed itself as the primary snowboard brand globally.

**Burton Girls**

**Vision**

Burton has always strived to differentiate its products for women versus men, something that the snowsports industry (and sports industry in general) had not always done. Donna Carpenter has remained passionate about bringing women into the sport and providing them with products specific to the female form, as well as educational opportunities to learn how to ride and use Burton products. Today, women make up approximately 30% of Burton’s business. The goal of the Burton Girls program is to make that segment grow to 51%.

**Product Development: Women’s Line**

“Long before ski companies were designing products for women, we were making a concerted effort for women’s product differentiation and making it a priority.” —Clarissa Finks, Category Manager, Women’s Hardgoods, Burton Snowboards

Burton has been on the cutting edge of designing women-specific snowboard equipment since its nascent days. A key example of innovation in the female product category is the TrueFit boot. In 2005, Burton conducted a study of 250 women around the world in order to develop a new boot specific to the anatomical build of a woman. The revolutionary design offered narrower heels and support for lower calf muscles, allowing for better comfort and performance. Burton also introduced a board called the “Social” in response to women’s desire for a versatile board at a mid-range price. Based on flaxo flex technology, the board offered more control and flexibility (Figure 2).

In the fall of 2016, Burton plans to introduce another board for women called the “High Spirits,” a powder-specific women’s model targeted at advanced riders who cruise on aggressive, big-mountain

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4 Ibid.
5 Ibid.
7 Ibid. (Category Manager, Women’s Hardgoods, Burton Snowboards) in discussion with the authors, April 2015.
8 Ibid.
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terrain. The technology for the board evolved from interactions between the product development team and professional Burton riders Kelly Clark and Kimmy Fasani, who, in speaking with other women at Burton Girls events across the country, recognized the need for a higher-performance board designed specifically for “girls who rip.”

Marketing Strategy: Women’s Line

When it comes to the female segment, Burton’s greatest barrier is education. With its array of high-tech snowboards and broader equipment and auxiliary goods offerings, it has proven to be a challenge communicating with women about how to select the right products. To bridge the education gap and build a community for female riders, Burton has incorporated numerous events and social media programs targeted at women.

The Burton Mountain Festival is a cross-country demo tour featuring a series of events, music, and a product tent village hosted by Burton and its corporate partners (such as MINI Cooper and Rockstar energy drinks). The tour stops at nine mountain resorts across the United States. This year’s Burton Mountain Festival featured the first ‘Burton Girls Activation’ tent. The tent carried the entire Burton women’s product line of hard and softgoods, allowing women to view and demo every product. Female riders could learn from expert Burton product staff about which products are best suited to their riding style and needs (Figure 3).

To further develop a sense of support and community amongst female riders, the company also organizes ‘Burton Girls Ride Days.’ Bringing together girls for a day of food, riding, and drinks, Burton is able to get feedback and insights on their products while riding side-by-side with their end-user. Such ride days are not only invaluable to Burton’s market research, but they also bring together girls who share a passion for snowboarding but often lack an opportunity to meet and connect (Figure 4).

To provide an ongoing network for its female riders, in 2011 Burton launched BurtonGirls.com. This online community for women combines the culture of snowboarding with fitness, clothing, and lifestyle. Contributions from female pro riders and Burton staff provide workout tips for the female snowboarder, fashion advice for the slopes, and events to check out after a long day of riding. The Burton Girls Instagram account has also recently taken off, growing from 10,000 to 70,000 followers in just 12 months.9

Also key to the Burton Girls community is the brand new Burton Girls Ambassador Program. In the 2014-2015 snowboarding season, 25 women and girls from across the U.S. and Canada were chosen based upon their influence within local communities. Outfitted with equipment, outerwear, and apparel, these Burton Girls Ambassadors (who range from a 16-year-old student to a 34-year-old mother) maintain social media channels to share their passion for sport and community. The Ambassadors program plans to expand internationally next season.

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9 Cara Williamson, Brand Manager, Women’s & Youth, Burton Snowboards in discussion with the authors, April 2015.
Entry into Women’s Apparel

“Apparel is going to be the biggest addition to our brand. We want Burton to be a lifestyle and not just a snowboard manufacturer.” - Cara Williamson, Brand Manager, Women’s & Youth, Burton Snowboards

“The idea is that if we can get the Burton brand to a broader audience, we can get more people into snowboarding.” - Clarissa Finks, Category Manager, Women’s Hardgoods, Burton Snowboards

Burton now seeks to extend its product offerings to women who aren’t just interested in snowboarding but also want to breathe, live, and dress like a snowboarder. Burton is ramping up its apparel products, providing street clothing and other casual accessories. In late 2013, Burton hired several new employees specializing in apparel and fashion in order to build their first true apparel line for women. The marketing team has started advertising these new designs in “non-endemic” media sources, such as TeenVogue and Nylon magazines so as to reach an audience beyond the snowboarding market. Burton also plans to offer seasonal variations in the apparel line for women and to publish season-specific clothing catalogs.

In the immediate future, Burton plans to use their social media channels and Burton Girls events to strengthen their line of communication with female riders and girls who are potentially interested in riding. By integrating apparel line with soft and hard snowboarding products, Burton hopes to become a lifestyle offering for current and potential riders.

The expansion into lifestyle products will also mean a major change in the nature of competition. In addition to K2, Burton will now have to compete with well-entrenched global brands like Nike, Adidas and young upstarts like Lululemon and Under Armour. Retailers ranging from H&M to Tory Burch are also moving into the fashion-meets-action sweet spot.

The global sports apparel market — which includes women’s activewear — is set to grow to $178 billion by 2019. In 2013, in the U.S., sales of women’s activewear alone reached $11.5 billion, a 9% jump from 2012.

The Way Forward: Selling Snowboarding as a Lifestyle

As Donna Carpenter reflects on Burton’s success to-date in reaching female riders through new product designs and its Burton Girls community, she still sees opportunity ahead to reach more women through its broader apparel line. Can they succeed in expanding into apparel while remaining true to their core mission? Can Burton sell its brand as a lifestyle, on and off the snow? Or will Burton dilute its brand by venturing into apparel?

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10 Research data from Trefis
11 Research data from NPD
Figure 1. Burton “Backhill” snowboard, 1977

Source: National Alpine Museum of Australia

Figure 2. Burton “Social” snowboard, 2015

Source: burton.com
Figure 3. Burton Mountain Festival tent village at Mount Hood Meadows, Oregon, 2015

Source: skihood.com

Figure 4: Burton Girls Ride Day event, Mammoth Mountain, CA 2014

Source: Burtongirls.com
Teaching Questions

1. Will Burton be able to replicate its success in the snowboarding equipment industry in the apparel industry?

2. Can Burton successfully expand its business within the female segment? Should it focus on reaching more women through its core product lines (e.g. equipment and gear), or through its apparel?

3. Despite Burton’s efforts to attract more people to snowboarding, the participants of snowboarding have not increased in recent years. Should Burton continue to organize events or festivals to encourage more people to snowboard?

4. Burton’s main revenue comes from the U.S. and European market. However, Asia (especially China) has potential to grow snowsports and expand their market share. Should Burton dedicate more resources to emerging markets like China?