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Kohl's Overhauls Sonoma in Push to Bolster Private Brands

By David Moin



The new Sonoma women's presentation at Kohl's
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Kohl's biggest revenue-generating brand, Sonoma, has been reinvented, marking a first leg in a push to modernize private and exclusive labels.

While an announcement on Sonoma is expected Monday, ads about its new look and tag line, "Goods for Life," first appeared on the Academy Awards Feb. 28. Kohl's had never previously advertised during the Oscars.

"Sonoma touches more of our businesses than any other brand," said Michelle Gass, chief merchandise and customer officer. "It has the most opportunity in the realm

THEY ARE WEARING

of our private brand stable. If Kohl’s manifested itself as a product, it would be Sonoma.”

For the relaunch, “We spent millions of dollars. The entire merchant organization had to be on board.”

“Sonoma underwent a comprehensive reimagining, from the product to the environment, to the marketing communications,” said Michael Gilbert, executive vice president of product development. “It’s been an 18-month project.”

In 2014, Kohl’s launched its “Greatness Agenda” multiyear strategic framework to drive growth, involving a new loyalty program, beauty department, personalized marketing and small-store formats, among other plans. With Sonoma and other programs, Kohl’s is reducing product cycle time, committing less to long-term buys, getting more cautious with inventories and more reactionary.

“The first pillar is amazing product — offering our customers things they need and will love. Sonoma checks both of those very well,” Gass said. Sonoma, she said, has become sharper on everyday basics and core essentials like T-shirts and capris, and with fashion items such as “trend-right” military jackets and denim dresses.

At Kohl’s showroom in New York, which opened in February, Sonoma showcased its apparel and home categories, suggesting a store. Asked if one day there could be a Sonoma specialty store, Gass replied: “That’s not in our plan right now, but we keep our options open. What we love about this brand is that it’s easy, timeless and casual....That’s how people live their lives.”

Last year, Kohl’s comparable sales on national brands rose 6 percent while sales were down for private brands, reflecting some shift in emphasis and some in-house labels losing relevance. National brands represented 52 percent of the \$19.2 billion retailer’s business; private and exclusive brands, 48 percent.

“We are not trying to get away from private and exclusive brands. We believe there is a great role for both,” said Gass. Sonoma’s remake represents the first of others ahead “to bring newness and relevancy” to private and exclusive brands, she said, noting some changes in the Jennifer Lopez brand have been made.

The 22-year-old Sonoma collection, after losing volume and lacking identity and cohesiveness, category to category, has been redesigned to stand for casual style and simplicity. It remains low-priced and promotional. Sonoma includes men’s, women’s and kids apparel, footwear and home and emphasizes denim, utility capris, shorts, easy tops, T-shirts and woven shirts. It doesn’t offer juniors, young men’s, infants and toddlers.

“Before, they were sort of random programs. Now they are all part of the look, working seamlessly together,” said Gilbert. “There are a lot of fabric and finishing upgrades, more texture in knits and wovens, softer fabrications, slub textures, and we improved the washes.”

Of all the brands at Kohl’s — private, national and exclusive — Sonoma is the largest,



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exceeding \$1 billion in annual sales, with the retailer’s other private brand, Croft & Barrow, not too far behind. Sonoma is profitable.

“Sonoma wasn’t as relevant as it needed to be. Volume had been decreasing,” Gilbert explained. “Men’s looked one way. Women’s was chasing different directions. Accessories didn’t necessarily go with the outfits. It took on more of a label connotation, so we started to re-imagine what it should be. We asked customers what they were looking for.” The answer was “simplicity, an easy experience, great quality. They don’t just want a bunch of inexpensive things.”

Kohl’s this week completed the installation of new Sonoma fixturing in 400 locations for easier shopping and stronger display. There is merchandising from aisles to the walls at different heights for “greater dimension” and mannequins for the first time.

Within Kohl’s “good, better, best” prices, Sonoma falls in the “good” zone offering women’s basic tops, \$14 to \$20; fashion tops, \$26 to \$40, and bottoms, dresses and skirts, \$20 to \$50.

“Sonoma is our flagship brand,” Gilbert said. “We weren’t treating it as such in the past. We are now.”

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