



Filling a Gap in the Market



An Interview with
Shoshanna Gruss, Founder, Shoshanna

EDITORS' NOTE In 1997, Shoshanna Gruss graduated from UCLA with a double bachelors degree in history and art history. She is a Trustee of The Nightingale-Bamford School and a member of their Alumnae Board Committee. Gruss is a founding chair of the Sesame Workshop family leadership committee and a founding member of The Rockefeller University's Parents and Science Steering Committee. She is a Vice Chairman of the associate committee of the Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center and the MSKCC Children's Committee. Gruss started her clothing company, Shoshanna (www.shoshanna.com), in 1998 with the mission to design a clothing line that appealed to different body types. In 2005, she began designing and marketing children's swimwear. In 2009, she was the face of Judith Ripka's advertising campaign and then paired with Judith Ripka to launch her own jewelry line through QVC in August 2010. Gruss then teamed up with Charlotte Ronson to collaborate on a swimwear collection, "Made with Love," which was introduced in the spring of 2009.



Shoshanna Gruss

When you launched the brand in 1998, what did you see that made you feel there was an opportunity for this brand to succeed?

It's what I didn't see – I was the customer and I still am. I was fortunate to travel the world with my family and to walk into the greatest stores in the world, and I didn't see things that were appropriate for me, that worked for my body type, or that were age appropriate. So I knew there was a gap in the market.

There was a whole group of women being ignored and I was part of that group. I was petite but had a curvy body and that wasn't being addressed. I had this concept, which I told my parents about. My dad reminded me that I didn't even know what I didn't know. I knew less than nothing, but I had this idea.

It took two years to get it off the ground and I made a million mistakes, but I learned from them and started this small line that people responded to immediately.

Has your market remained consistent or have you expanded?

It has changed. The brand has grown as I have grown, and has evolved as my life has changed.

No longer was I a young girl focused on making cute, wearable, fun clothing to go out in. As I became a mom, a wife, and a businesswoman, I had more needs in my life, and the product line and customer base grew.

The customer base has evolved from just a young girl getting used to her body, to a working woman, to a mom, to a woman in her 40s and 50s who is in good shape and needs

dresses and swimsuits that are appropriate and make her feel good.

I focus on celebrating women and their bodies, and making clothing that looks beautiful and celebrates the shape, but is appropriate for all walks of life.

Many equate price with quality, but you offer high quality for very affordable prices. How do you balance the two?

Our margins may not be as high as some of the other bigger companies that offer dresses at our price point, but it was always important for me to offer quality. Our quality is better than some \$4,000 dresses I see in the market.

But I've always believed in keeping overhead low. We don't do runway shows, we utilize every inch of our office space, and we don't have a big showroom.

I've always believed in making beautiful samples, selling them to the stores, and shipping them.

I've been able to be the face of the brand, and since I'm representative of the customer, I've been able to get my message out there.

So we don't waste money. It's more glamorous to do fashion shows and advertising, but this is work for us and we've never had to cut back.

In terms of distribution, you work with some of the best known department stores out there. With high turnover in retail, is it tough to get your message across when those salespeople represent the brand?

The customers are so smart and they come looking for it, especially online – that has changed the game completely.

When we do trunk shows, I run to every department store to check out the products, talk to the salespeople, and make sure we maintain a visual presence with them and help them understand the clothing.

When I launched my line in 1998, it did really well and touched a nerve. But when I launched my swimwear line in 2000, it was a whole new game, because no one was selling swimsuits as separates, and no one was doing 13 sizes on top and 7 sizes on the bottom – and no one does now, because it's difficult to do.

You had the passion for creating the products and fulfilling this need, but there is also the business side. Was it frustrating to have your time pulled in so many directions?

I did and do love the business side of it, and I'm just as involved in that. I watch the bottom line. So I have that nice balance of loving the creative aspect but also loving the business side of it.

I also grew at just the right pace – I always knew growing too fast would be a disaster. There is nothing wrong with keeping people wanting more. So I used that to keep it exclusive in the beginning, and as I felt more comfortable, we rolled it out to more doors.

You're really changing how many of these women perceive themselves.

Yes, it's how you present yourself to the world and if you don't feel good, it's awful, and every woman has her issues.

The best part is when we hear from someone on Facebook or via e-mail about how frustrated they were, and how they now feel good and celebrated.

Has your father said, maybe you weren't so crazy after all?

He was right – I didn't know anything. But that was okay because I came at it from a completely different perspective and that is one of the reasons it worked. ●

Selected items from the Shoshanna Fall 2011 line