

Learning from Levi's

A standing-room only, spilling-into-the-aisles crowd packed the Main Stage auditorium Sunday morning for a presentation by James 'JC' Curleigh, who holds the positions of executive vice president and president of global brands for Levi Strauss & Co.

Curleigh made his entrance riding a bicycle, guided by a GPS-based direction-finding app connected to his Levi's Commuter Trucker Jacket with Jacquard by Google ("turn west on 34th Street," said the voice emanating from the jacket, helpfully, if a few blocks

late) — a fitting setup for his topic, "Learn from Levi's: How the 150-year-old Startup Continues to Transform its Iconic Brand."

In the background, clearly audible under his opening remarks, could be heard the voice of the young Bob Dylan. "That song," Curleigh said, "has the line, 'You better start swimming or you'll sink like a

stone, for the times, they are a-changin'.' Bob Dylan wrote that song 50 years ago, and as far as I'm concerned, he could have written it yesterday."

Turning from Dylan to Sir Isaac Newton, Curleigh cited the laws of motion and said, "Think about how this applies to your brand or your business. The first law is, an object at rest tends to stay at rest, until you apply force. For us, basically, that means that if you do nothing, nothing happens. The second law of motion is that acceleration is produced when a

force acts on a mass. The greater the mass, the greater the amount of force needed. It basically says that how big you are, and how fast you can go, is determined by the momentum you've created for your brand or your business."

The third law of motion, Curleigh noted, is that for every action there is an

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— 'JC' Curleigh, Levi's**



'JC' Curleigh bicycles into the Main Stage auditorium.

equal and opposite reaction. "This means that even when you think you've got everything figured out, something's coming at you from another angle — otherwise known as competition."

With that as background, Curleigh discussed some steps Levi's has taken over the past few years to, as he put it, turn move-

ment into momentum — how he and his team have worked to create what appears to them to be the necessary conditions for success in the current retail reality. This, as he described it, involves striking a strategic balance between maintaining and protect-

Curleigh

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ing a widely loved, iconic brand and growing it. Step A, he said, is protecting the core. “We have always, basically, been the leader in denim. In fact, here’s a question for you: Who’s number two?”

From the audience came a silence. Answering his own question, Curleigh said the holder of the number-two position has varied over the years, depending on what the competition was doing, while Levi’s has been and continues to be number one. However, in terms of share of closet, denim accounts for about 7 percent — i.e., how much of the average person’s total wardrobe consists of jeans.

Which is not a lot. Levi Strauss & Co., after all, is not a museum, and Curleigh isn’t a curator. Levi’s is a busi-

ness, Curleigh is a brand manager and a key mission for both is growth. How do you go beyond dominating the 7 percent of the average jeans owner’s closet? One way is to expand both in terms of offering (T-shirts, shorts, shoes, women’s clothes, jackets, etc.) and channel (an expanding list of partner retailers and a rapidly growing online business, not to mention brand stores, including a 25,000-square-foot Levi’s store in Times Square scheduled to open this fall).

Another way is to expand your audience. Last fall, Levi’s celebrated the 50th anniversary of its Trucker jacket with a party in Hollywood featuring, among others, Chance the Rapper, Snoop Dogg and Solange Knowles. This coming Wednesday, January 17, people will be sleeping in the streets outside the San Francisco Levi’s, Curleigh said, to get the new Air Jordan-Levi’s denim sneakers and matching jacket.

Finally — and both of the above are



‘JC’ Curleigh of Levi’s

in a way examples of this — Curleigh stressed the fact that Levi’s continues to be engaged with the surrounding culture. “We find that when we’re at the center of

culture,” he said, “our business and our brand only get stronger. And it doesn’t just happen by accident. You create those conditions for success.”