

RETAIL

Q&A: Annie Hurlbut on how she is evolving Peruvian Connection into a lifestyle brand amidst the pandemic

January 27, 2021



Peruvian Connection relies on Peru's alpaca wool and pima cotton for its line of apparel, accessories and assorted lifestyle products. Image courtesy of Peruvian Connection

By MICKEY ALAM KHAN

Since 1976, Peruvian Connection has made ethnographic textiles the point of reference for its artisan-made collections. Now, it is rapidly adapting to the times under the aegis of company founder Annie Hurlbut.

In addition to the label's signature alpaca and pima cotton knitwear, the brand offers a range of tailored outerwear, romantic dresses, unique basics and handcrafted accessories, all designed by and made exclusively for Peruvian Connection.

"We continue to work with the same producers, only now in many cases we're working with the descendants of those same producers who've grown up in the knitting business," Ms. Hurlbut said.

"Peruvian Connection and the artisan knitters who make our collections have evolved together into a sophisticated knitwear design firm that combines old world textile artistry with modern technology," she said.

Peruvian Connection now has grown into an internationally renowned online, catalog and retail store brand for luxury Peruvian textiles, featuring five collections of artisan-made garments each year.

In this interview, Ms. Hurlbut outlines the direction of the brand as consumers readjust to a new work-from-home lifestyle with increased dependence on online and mobile transactions. She also shares her philosophy on the quality of the product and the role of Peruvian artisans in keeping the country's craftsmanship alive. Please read on:

How did Peruvian Connection get started?

In the mid 70s I was living in Cuzco, Peru, doing anthropological research on women selling in Andean marketplaces.

Halfway through the year, my grandmother sent me a ticket to fly home for my mom's 50th birthday.

I knew my mom wouldn't have much interest in the old textiles I had begun to collect, so I searched instead for a beautiful alpaca sweater.

In truth, I couldn't find a really well-made one, so I opted instead for a soft, hour-glass shaped sweater knit of alpaca

in fact, I couldn't find a really well-made one, so I opted instead for a soft, hourglass-shaped sweater knit of alpaca yarn and trimmed with glamorous, long-haired alpaca fur. I was hoping it would make her feel sexy at 50.

I think I succeeded because when she showed it off to her friends at a birthday party the next day, they all implored me to import them.

After the party my mom and I mused about it and concluded, "Why not start a business together?" A couple of days later I headed back to Peru with \$400 borrowed from a life insurance policy in my backpack.

What factors do you contribute to the longevity of the brand?

Where to begin? The brand has always had a deep tap root in Peru, its extraordinary textile tradition, the expert cottage industries where our products are made and its precious natural fibers, alpaca and Peruvian pima cotton.

From the beginning, we have never strayed far from our mission, which is to create exceptional artisan apparel.

The original designs, the skills of the artisans who make our products, the use of top grades of sustainable, luxury fiber alpaca and cutting no corners when it comes to producing an enduring product all of those elements have contributed to the longevity of our brand. And, finally, 45 years of the passion and dedication on the part of many talented people along with a customer base that is fiercely loyal have brought us to where we are.

What impact has your company had on the cottage industries in Peru?

Since 1976 we have worked with the same cottage industries, returning year after year, adding new producers along the way as our company and market grew.

We continue to work with the same producers, only now in many cases we're working with the descendants of those same producers who've grown up in the knitting business.

Peruvian Connection and the artisan knitters who make our collections have evolved together into a sophisticated knitwear design firm that combines old world textile artistry with modern technology.

It would not be exaggerating to say that Peruvian Connection over the course of 45 years has been the mainstay of artisan textile production in Peru.

How have you seen your customers' shopping habits change during COVID?

Unquestionably we have seen an uptick in interest for our unique luxury fiber knitwear.

The comfort and sheer luxury of our warm, frothy, woolen-spun alpaca sweaters have taken cocooning to a whole new level. And because these soft, sensuous shapes are designed to flatter and come in colors and patterns unlike anything available elsewhere, it's a whole different experience than throwing on a sweatshirt for comfort.

Sales of our jeans and pants in interesting washes and colors have gone through the roof as well.



Peruvian Connection's spring 2021 collection. Image courtesy of Peruvian Connection

How do you maintain brand authenticity through your marketing and selling channels?

Brand authenticity cannot be manufactured. It should be lived, inside and out, and we believe that authenticity must be reflected first and foremost in the product itself.

For 45 years, we have remained faithfully committed to partnering with true Peruvian artisans, working with such luxury Andean fibers as Peruvian pima cotton and alpaca.

We are dedicated to the survival of these ancient textile traditions, and base many of our collections upon this art

form, season after season.

It goes without saying that excellent customer service is yet another layer of authenticity and trust that we proudly stand upon.

That connection with our clients comes as a result of having a team of genuinely passionate believers in the brand. We are a family-owned business, and that culture of family is felt behind every effort across the business.

Talk a little bit about your catalogs, their track record for success and how you have leveraged this success during COVID.

One thing we know about our catalogs is that they tend to transport our customers. We've heard it a thousand times.

Our catalogs have been shot in places as romantic as Liguria, Corsica, Morocco and our beloved Cuzco. It was a real challenge to produce a catalog that didn't lose the magic that our customers had come to expect.

In fact, we scheduled and canceled four shoots between March and May last spring. We were, in fact, the first shoot out in mid-May, and our shoot pretty much invented COVID protocol.

Ironically, as tragic as COVID has been for brick-and-mortar stores we know, we have seen that it has been a boon for brands selling the right goods and the ability to deliver those goods to customers in the safety of their homes. Because of that we have come through the last year intact.

What made you decide to expand into bedding and has the endeavor been successful?

I've always been intrigued with the idea of Peruvian Connection evolving into a broader lifestyle brand.

It seems logical that people's tastes don't stop at their closets. What made the foray into bedding possible were three things: the creative and technical strengths of our design team, a rich archive of original prints to draw on and, finally, the help of a pair of outside consultants with deep roots in luxury home.

Although we have a breathtaking range of designs in our archive, all have this in common: all echo Peruvian Connection's brand aesthetic of authentic historical textile inspiration. Most evoke the well-worn, weathered surfaces, antiqued colors and broken-down patterns of textiles from bygone eras.

Derived from the past, they are familiar, yet somehow evolved. The results of the bedding endeavor have so far been exciting.

Perhaps it didn't hurt that over the last several months people have been home-bound and yearned to make that experience as rich and comfortable as possible.

In any case, one of our two fall bedding collections made it into the top product sales category, which is very competitive.

What do you think the next year will bring for retail?

After the difficult year we've had, people are starting to reassess the value of their time now that everyday behaviors and habits have been forced to change.

We're predicting positive sales results online in the year ahead, particularly for apparel, as the return of in-person gatherings will also allow for the return of self-expression through fashion.

We also believe that customers are looking forward to shopping in-person once again.

Our uniquely detailed, brick-and-mortar stores provide our customers with a rich context for our collections of original artisan designs. And, of course, experiencing the feel, fit and style of a product firsthand will bring with it an energy that can only be achieved in store.

With that in mind, retailers will have the amazing opportunity to connect and engage with customers in thoughtful ways.

Whether bringing together slightly larger groups or hosting intimate gatherings, the hope of a new season ahead keeps relationship-building and connection at the forefront of planning.

Anything exciting on the horizon you want to share?

We are expanding our lifestyle offerings in the coming year to include a new category of printed table linens. Stay tuned. Many exciting things are in the development stage.

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