



Best Foot

Keds has been focused on females for more than a century. Its unwavering purpose grounds President **Gillian Meek's** decision-making as the shoe company revamps digital offerings and moves into new markets.

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Forward







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Keds created one of the original sneakers for women—the Champion—made in 1916.

The push for female empowerment and equality has sparked a global conversation.

Movements like #MeToo and women's marches around the world are cranking up the volume.

It is a reckoning that has some brands playing defense while others try to glom onto the movement.

For Keds, however, it is business as usual: The future always has been female at the footwear company.

In 1916, Keds entered the U.S. footwear market with the first athletic shoe for women. It was the earliest manifestation of **the company's driving purpose: to empower women to be who they want to be and go where they want to go.**

"In empowering women we endeavor to maximize their potential and their contributions," says Gillian Meek, president of Keds. "When our consumers feel they can be anything and go anywhere, they naturally feel empowered."

More than a century later, Keds is still putting power to **purpose.**

"What was **purpose** in 1916 remains a **purpose** in 2018," Ms. Meek says. "To have been an originator in making products for women allows us to engage in the women's empowerment conversation in an authentic but contemporary way."

But a transformation is afoot for the shoemaker. Ms. Meek and her team have set ambitious goals for 2018, including driving growth through global expansion and overhauling digital offerings.

This change agenda makes Keds' female-focused **purpose** even more essential. According to *Harvard Business Review* and EY's *The Business Case for Purpose*, 84 percent of global executives say transformation efforts have greater success if integrated with **purpose.**

To unleash strategic change in a way that drives value to all stakeholders and secures the future of the organization, Ms. Meek and her team are measuring every move they make against the company's **purpose.** And if it does not fit, the answer is no. "We won't make investments that aren't part of the foundation line," she says. "Any product has to link to our heritage **purpose.**"

Leading With the Purpose

At Keds, putting **purpose** front-and-center means putting females at the center of every-



thing they do. And that starts with how the team talks, Ms. Meek says.

“The whole team is constantly talking about our consumer: who she is, where she shops and how she connects to the product,” Ms. Meek says.

This intense focus ensures the messaging never goes off course and helps Keds create products that connect with women everywhere, according to Ms. Meek. To keep those products moving off the shelves, Ms. Meek and her team have prioritized expanding and promoting Keds.com and building the company’s social media presence.

The pivot to digital is mission critical.

According to a 2017 KPMG report, 29 percent of women are expected to purchase shoes online in the coming year.

“We need to put our brand where the customer spends her time,” Ms. Meek says. “Keds.com is where we tell our story and establish a point of differentiation for each of our products.”

A big piece of that overhaul is happening with the company’s mobile site, which brings in 56 percent of the site’s total traffic, according to Multichannel Merchant. “For us, [digital transformation] is about the ecosystem the consumer lives in, every single channel or exchange she has with us,” Emily Culp, Keds’ chief marketing officer, told the website. “Winning with her is pivoting the way we go

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president, Keds

to market.”

Take the brand’s Ladies First Since 1916 campaign, which features content celebrating Keds’ commitment to female empowerment. In a switch from the brand’s usual rollout, the campaign took a mobile- and social-first approach in which multiple pieces of micro-content for Facebook, Twitter and Instagram were followed by print ads. It is part of the broader strategy to shift new marketing and sales platforms toward the most profitable channels.

The overhaul of Keds.com is especially important as the company continues to expand its presence outside of the United States. The website probably will be the first experience a consumer has with Keds.

One region Ms. Meek is particularly excited about entering is Asia Pacific. It is expected to be the fastest-growing region for women’s and girls’ apparel sales during the next two years, according to Global Industry Analysts. And as Keds works to open brick-and-mortar stores throughout the region, including Korea, Japan and China, the brand can leverage its longstanding **purpose** in the market where the company’s message of female empowerment has been resonating with women, *Fast Company* reports.

The Risk Space

Keds.com allows the company to test new strategies with minimal investment, says Ms. Meek. “It’s how we tune our message and products for the female customer.”

The Keds design team regularly receives pitches for collaborations, and when they find partners who fit with the company’s **purpose**, Keds.com is a great place to test those matches, she says. Last year, for example, Keds collaborated with the Rifle Paper Co., a small lifestyle brand that makes stationery with colorful floral prints painted by



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founder Anna Bond. Keds produced a series of their classic sneaker featuring the floral designs only sold on the website. "We begin these collaborations online to give the idea a chance to prove itself before we ship new products out to 1,000 retailers," she says.

The Rifle partnership passed with flying colors: The shoes sold out in 24 hours on both Keds.com and Rifle's website.

"My view on collabs is all about finding partners with whom you share values and equity, and the goal is to make sure you're introducing yourself to new consumers," Ms. Meek told *Footwear News*. "We are looking for mutually beneficial partnerships, and we use our filter of female empowerment as a way to find collabs."

Spreading the message of female empowerment is more than an online campaign at Keds. The brand hosts live events—which it simultaneously broadcasts on social media—that work to reinforce its **purpose**. For example, last August, Keds co-hosted a panel of female founders and CEOs from brands like SoulCycle, S'well and It Cosmetics to discuss women's equality in

the workplace and offer advice to aspiring female entrepreneurs. And in January, the brand announced its Create & Cultivate 100 list. Launched in partnership with the Create & Cultivate organization, which is dedicated to helping women build their careers, the list celebrates women who are redefining the future of the world's workplace.

"We aren't just buying ads, we are showing up," Ms. Meek says. "A physical presence represents authenticity. You have to do what you say you are going to do—physical presence shows your consumers you are committed."

An Open Book

Every new initiative has metrics to define results. And Ms. Meek is very straightforward about how they are doing. Being transparent about the numbers helps employees understand how they are delivering against **purpose**—and that knowledge is empowering.

Ms. Meek maintains an open-door policy and is happy to discuss strategy, metrics and the reasoning behind her decisions. But it was not always that way.

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afraid to ask about the financials, so I had to let them know I was open to these discussions,” she says.

So Ms. Meek spent much of her first year on the job acclimating people to the idea of transparency. She encouraged employees to ask about metrics related to their projects, and shared goals and financial results in team meetings to reinforce the new culture.

“It doesn’t matter what division you are in, you should be able to talk about the numbers and how they tie back to what we do,” she says.

Ms. Meek also meets with the executive committee at Keds’ parent company Wolverine Worldwide, including CEO Blake Krueger and CFO Michael Stornant, on a quarterly basis to assess progress, profits and achievements against the goal of sustainable growth. Even then, **purpose** frames the discussion and widens the view beyond the latest financial results.

“Everyone has profits and losses,” Ms. Meek says. “Our **purpose** lets us have authentic conversations about working with the right people and investing in the right projects to drive results.” **IQ**

Walk the Walk

Visit Keds’ website or headquarters and you are sure to pick up on a common theme: ladies first. It is more than a motto or hashtag—for Keds, it is a way of being.

The company’s culture, like its purpose, is inclusive and female-centric. Unlike most corporations that struggle to incorporate women in the boardroom or move them up the ladder, company leadership is predominantly female. “It’s not intentional,” says Gillian Meek, CEO, Keds. “Women are just drawn to us.”

Ms. Meek says part of the reason women want to work at Keds is because the company provides benefits that specifically support women. The business offers perks that include fertility and maternity benefits, adoption support, maternity and paternity leave, on-site day care and mentoring programs. Keds’ parent company, Wolverine Worldwide, also has a strong women’s resource affinity group, which Ms. Meek helped start. The group offers support services and enrichment programs designed for women in all stages of their career.

“It’s natural for me as a product creation person to look around, see what people need and try to solve those problems,” Ms. Meek told *Footwear News*. “So whether it’s doing that through footwear, which was the obvious day job part of it, or doing it through creating opportunities for women in our community to network or share best practices, that’s the same kind of problem solving that led me to [create the affinity group].”

