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BRAND SPOTLIGHT / ÅHLÉNS

This article appeared in *Contagious Magazine* issue 47

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One for all

After more than a century in business, **Åhléns** was in danger of becoming a wallpaper brand. The department store was an expected presence on the Swedish high street that was fading into the background rather than inspiring or exciting shoppers. To stand out, the company has started standing up – for social and environmental issues – in ways the public can't ignore

By Chloe Markowicz



Swedish retailers Ikea and H&M are famous the world over. But back at home, less internationally known brand Åhléns is just as much of a household name. 'In Sweden, there is only one department store in people's minds,' says the brand's marketing director, Lina Söderqvist. 'That's a very good place to start off from.'

Some 117 years after being founded as a mail-order catalogue, Åhléns has 70 department stores all over Sweden, 3,000 employees and a turnover of kr5bn (\$605m). However, over the past few decades, the number of Swedes shopping there had decreased. Söderqvist recounts that people have told her: 'Well, of course I like Åhléns. Everyone likes Åhléns, but I wouldn't cry if it went away.' That's not a very good place to be.

'It's a place without any real identity,' says Henrik Evrell, founder and senior strategist at Stockholm branding agency Seventy. 'It's where normal people go to shop for normal things but it doesn't stand out. That could have worked well ten, 20 years ago, but now people are looking for something to satisfy their personal needs. A brand like Åhléns can fall by the wayside and just mean nothing to a lot of people.'

Åhléns needed to grow its business by incentivising people to visit its stores more often and buy more once they were there. So it hired Forsman & Bodenfors in the autumn of 2013, briefing the Stockholm- and Gothenburg-based advertising agency to drive consideration by transforming shoppers' attitudes towards the brand from 'like' to 'love'.

'We sell make-up, we sell interior decoration, and fashion. All three are highly emotional things that define you as a person, so we had fantastic potential to have a highly emotional relationship. But we were just too neutral,' says Söderqvist. 'The picture of Åhléns in people's minds was too unclear and based on rational benefits.' Åhléns had almost 100% awareness, but the combination of a weak emotional relationship with its customers and a confusing offering put the brand low on Swedes' mental shopping list.

One reason shoppers didn't have any real understanding of the brand was because it was siloing its advertising by category rather than emphasising its overall positioning. Åhléns considered fashion, beauty and homeware retailers as its competitors and advertised accordingly. 'Åhléns is the only nationwide department store in the country; in that sense, it offers something no one else does,' My Troedsson, planner at Forsman & Bodenfors, says. 'But if it looks at itself from the perspective of different categories, then it has a never-ending amount of competitors. We told Åhléns, "You have to embrace your identity as a department store."'

Previously, Åhléns' strategy was to only depict own-label products in its communications. But realising that the unique selling proposition of the department store is that people can buy a combination of brands and private-label goods, it resolved to make this clearer in its advertising, positioning itself as a 'department store that carefully selects for everyday life'.



Making a splash since 1899

Before Åhléns became Sweden's only true department store, it was a mail-order catalogue called Åhlén & Holm. While the retailer's recent PR-worthy campaigns feel like a new strategy for the brand, in fact it's not a world away from what the company was doing more than 100 years ago.

The retail giant of today can be traced back to a single product and just one well-crafted ad. Back in 1899, the company's founders realised that what everyone in Sweden wanted, but couldn't get, was a painting of the royal family. After advertising prints of this portrait in the *Aftonbladet* newspaper, Johan Petter Åhlén and Erik Holm sold 100,000 copies.

This triumph inspired Åhlén and Holm to set up their eponymous mail-order company, selling homeware, fashion and beauty products. The catalogue did a roaring trade, mostly thanks to JP Åhlén's talent for attention-grabbing stunts. In 1911, knowing how Swedes would travel far and wide just for their first chance to see a car, he plastered an automobile with advertisements for the Åhlén & Holm's catalogue. The vehicle drove 25,500km across Sweden, offering free rides to people up and down the country. Then, in 1913, Åhlén decided to buy his very own plane and host an air show, instructing the pilot to distribute leaflets promoting the brand. The spectators were so impressed that they kept the ads as treasured souvenirs.

Left: Åhléns began life as a mail-order catalogue; opposite page: the Nordic Shades campaign featuring a Muslim woman in a veil caused controversy in 2015



To help this come through, Åhléns promoted a brand-led approach in its advertising, ensuring consistent messaging across campaigns. Söderqvist explains: 'We hadn't really talked to our customers about our benefits as a department store. We have lots of good stuff all in the same place. We want people to feel that Åhléns has already made a choice and trust that it has made a good choice.'

Another challenge was that Åhléns' media budget paled in comparison to homegrown retailers with international footprints, like Ikea or H&M. So Åhléns decided to change tack. Instead of launching several small campaigns throughout the year, the brand decided to focus on a limited number of annual campaigns that would make a big splash. 'We don't have a lot of media money,' explains Söderqvist. 'So we need a PR angle for the campaigns, we need to be talked about.'

Troedsson adds that being somewhat controversial is helping Åhléns break through. 'We want to go from liked to loved. To be loved, you need to have a strong personality, you need to have a voice, you need to dare to take a stand.'

Showcasing Sweden

Åhléns' most attention-grabbing campaign was based on a fairly innocuous proposition: everyone is welcome in the department store. But the execution of this initiative provoked huge debate. The Nordic Shades campaign, launched in the autumn of 2015, advertised a new fashion collection in classic muted Scandi colours, modelled by Swedish women with various skin tones.

'In Sweden, most ads show people with blonde hair and blue eyes,' says Amat Levin, PR strategist at Forsman & Bodenfors. 'This reflects Swedish society as it looked in the 1950s, not in 2016.'

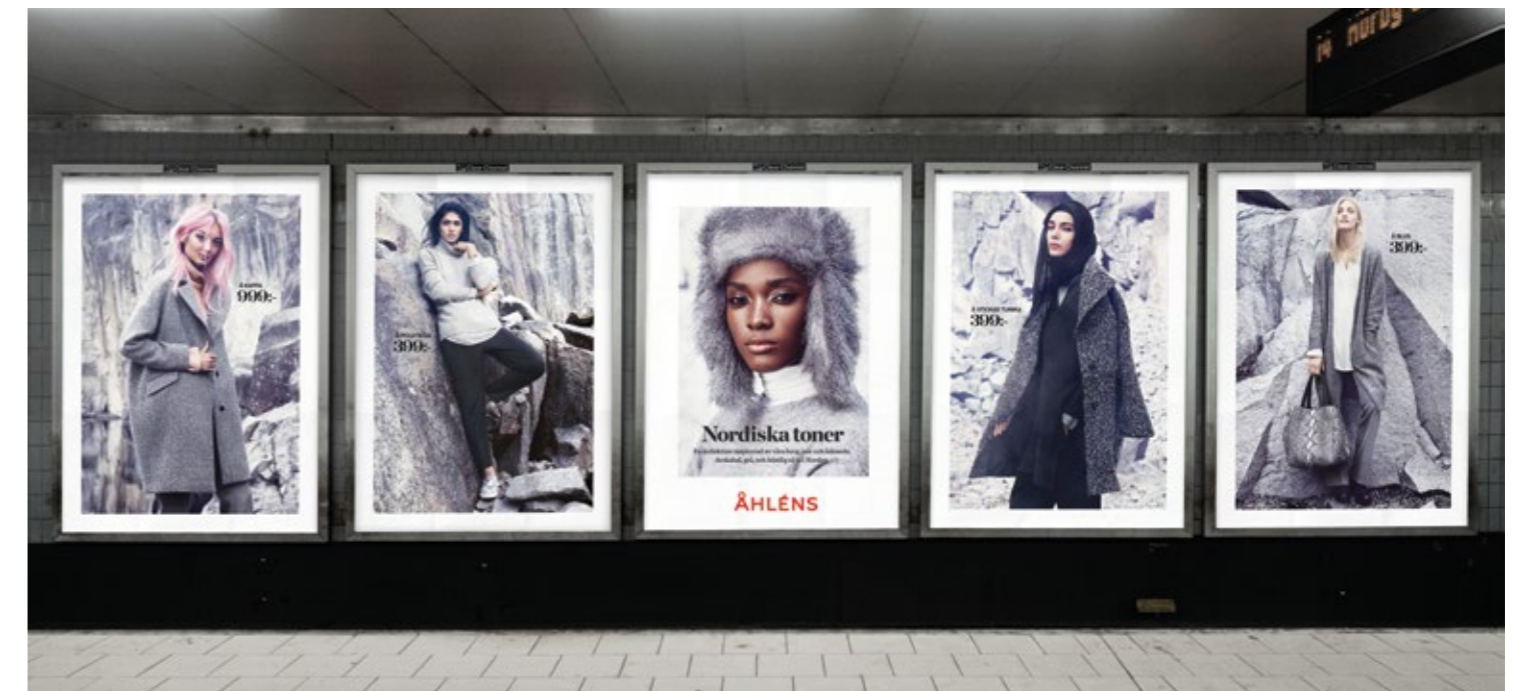
Only one of the five models in the Nordic Shades posters stirred controversy: the one in the veil. 'That says a lot about the current climate,' says Levin. 'Islam is considered to be one of the more controversial issues today in all of Europe. But we have people from all over the world living in Sweden and people from all different ethnicities shop at Åhléns, so it shouldn't be a big deal to feature them in a campaign.'

The ad led to discussions on social media, TV chat shows and newspapers, with some Swedes commending Åhléns for representing modern society in its communications. But right-wing commentators accused the brand of wanting to transform Sweden into a Muslim country, while feminists derided Åhléns for promoting what they saw as a symbol of oppression. Another source of criticism came from women who had moved to Sweden from countries like Iran or Saudi Arabia, where they had been forced to cover their hair.

Åhléns embraced the debate because it helped transform the brand from a mainstream and painfully uncool retailer into one that was more daring and modern. 'Åhléns is known as a traditional brand, one that is nice and polite,' says Weronica Nilsson, the brand's head of PR. 'People felt both happy and provoked by Åhléns taking this stand.'

We're just showing Sweden the way it looks today because we believe in everyone's right to be seen in advertising. We are a department store for everyone... That should be seen in our communications

Lina Söderqvist, Åhléns





Social responsibility has always been in the DNA of Åhléns, but we haven't really talked about it for the past 20 years or so

Lina Söderqvist, Åhléns

However, the company was keen to address the topic sensitively, avoiding accusations of cultural appropriation by ensuring that the woman wearing the hijab was Muslim and using a stylist who has one of the most popular Instagram accounts in the Muslim fashion world.

The campaign wasn't designed to make a political statement. 'We're just showing Sweden the way it looks today because we believe in everyone's right to be seen in advertising,' says Söderqvist. 'We are a department store for everyone and we mean it for real. That should be seen in our communications.'

Indeed, the brand embraced gender fluidity by choosing transgender model Lea T to front its 2015 spring fashion campaign. It mixed up gender roles in its last Christmas campaign, which

featured children celebrating the Saint Lucia parade. Tradition dictates that girls participating in this ritual don white robes and a wreath of candles, while boys dress as stars, elves or gingerbread men, but the kids in Åhléns' ad chose their own costumes.

The brand has also fought ageism by selecting unconventional models. In September 2015, Åhléns chose the 'world's fastest 70-year-old' to star in print and outdoor ads promoting its Sports & Balance line, a range of wellness clothing, equipment and books. An online video depicts how Barbro Bobäck took up running as a senior citizen and won gold medals at the Veteran World Championship.

The goal was to inspire people to take up sport by showcasing an accessible role model. If Bobäck

could do it, so could they. The retailer's spring fashion campaign this year again calls into question what is acceptable behaviour for older people. The No Limits ads feature stylish septuagenarians in torn jeans, mini-skirts and hoodies, and are based on research about the ages that society dictates are the cut-off points for people to wear certain items of clothing.

Open arms and open jobs

Åhléns' emphasis on inclusivity is part of the brand's wider positioning as a 'conscious department store'. But this goes beyond advertising to encompass the company's general commitment to doing good. As the brand's website states: 'We want to be part of a changing society, and see it as our responsibility to try to improve a few things.'

And the one problem Swedes believe needs to be urgently addressed in the country today, is that of the influx of migrants. In 2015, Sweden welcomed 163,000 refugees, equivalent to 1.6% of its population, and more people per capita than any other country on the continent.

This situation has inspired passionate debate. The question on every Swede's mind, says Johan Sâthe, chief editor of Swedish marketing magazine *Resumé*, is: 'How can we still have a welfare



state in 20 or 50 years, if these people can't work? What can we do to help people work and become a real part of society?'

Åhléns' response is to welcome not just shoppers, but employees of all backgrounds as part of its so-called Diversity Project. It has announced that by 2020 it plans for at least 20% of its workforce to be of non-Swedish origin. This is a bold endeavour for a mainstream department store. But Åhléns can no longer afford to be timid. In November 2015, in co-operation with the Swedish Public Employment Service, it began recruiting new immigrants to work at two of its Café Å Lait coffee shops. This year, Åhléns has extended the programme to hire 150 newly arrived immigrants in its department stores across the country. The purpose is to help asylum-seekers better integrate in society and improve their language skills.

Åhléns is launching another initiative called Open Door, through Axfoundation, a non-profit founded by its parent company. Open Door's mission is to facilitate meetings between Swedes and immigrants. Among its employees, Åhléns is particularly promoting the Occupation Door part of this programme, which encourages Swedes to use their professional networks to assist new immigrants with job-hunting.

Defying convention, clockwise from top left: mixing up traditional gender roles in a kids' campaign; the Sports & Balance line was promoted with the help of the 'world's fastest 70-year-old' Barbro Bobäck; No Limits ads featured stylish septuagenarians





Undies for all

For Åhléns, emphasising that it's a department store for everyone is so important that it extends to every ad campaign, even one advertising men's underpants.

Instead of hiring buff models to parade around in boxers and briefs, in October 2015 the department store turned to local comedy troupe Alla Mina Kamrater to help launch its first-ever male underwear line. 'Of course the men are not David Beckham,' says marketing director Lina Söderqvist. 'They look like normal men. You cannot be stereotypical if you want to be a conscious department store. You have to break norms.'

Åhléns filmed these men having an honest conversation about their bodies and created billboards showing the comedians in their tighty-whities. But Alla Mina Kamrater weren't just the models, they were product developers too, helping the department store determine the design of its new collection. In fact, Åhléns invited the entire country to help design the underwear. It launched three demo products (short leg boxer, long leg boxer and briefs) and asked everyone buying them to share their opinions on Twitter and Instagram. Åhléns received valuable feedback, and weirdly even donations of people's favourite old underwear, which will help the retailer ensure that its collection is a perfect fit when it hits stores this autumn.



Socially responsible retail

Working to improve society has been an important part of Åhléns' operations since its inception in 1899. Under co-founder JP Åhléns' leadership, the company opened a summer camp for children, donated construction materials to families who could not afford to repair their homes, offered educational scholarships and helped build drains to improve the conditions of the Swedish countryside. But today the general population isn't aware of its charitable nature, even if Axel Johnson, the brand's parent company, defines its corporate vision as being 'a positive force for change'. As Söderqvist says: 'Social responsibility has always been in the DNA of Åhléns but we haven't really talked about it for the past 20 years or so.'

Sustainability in particular is very important to Åhléns. On its website the brand describes how this 'permeates everything' it does, and how it has vowed to minimise its impact on the environment when it comes to design, manufacturing and sales. The company has a dedicated Sustainable Purchasing Council, which oversees all issues related to buying. It also has a line of sustainable fashion, homeware, beauty and toy products, called Bra Val (Good Choice), and is stringent about which goods can carry this label. They must be made from recycled materials, Tencel or organically grown produce.

But in a 2014 survey, Åhléns found that many customers did not know about the company's green initiatives or its eco-friendly products. 'We haven't communicated very much about sustainability in the past,' says Anita Falkenek, head of sustainability at the brand. 'People talk about greenwashing, we have been greenwashing. Customers in Sweden are very aware about sustainability issues. So it is very important that we can explain to our customers that we are contributing to make the world better.'

Emphasising its purposefulness is a key way to build a stronger relationship with shoppers who share those same values. 'We had been talking to many people at the same time, and we didn't stand out enough,' says Söderqvist. 'If you try to be everything for everyone, you end up being nothing.' This realisation inspired Åhléns to strategically focus its communications on just one target group, known by the acronym Lohas, which stands for lifestyle of health and sustainability. The demographic isn't defined by age or income but by what the Lohas Sweden website describes as a quest to live 'the good life with a conscience'. These are the kind of people who do yoga, eat organic foods and care about the environment. More than 35% of the Swedish population fits into this category, an increase from about 25% a decade ago.

Ethical ecommerce

Åhléns isn't exactly at the forefront of online retail. In fact, it only added purchasing functionality to its site in March this year.

But the retailer made its ecommerce launch both newsworthy and on-brand through a partnership with the charity Stadsmissionen.

This non-profit offers refuge to thousands of women each year, many of whom are escaping domestic violence. To make the charity's housing more like home, Åhléns is donating homeware goods. Each time someone purchases a product on the Ahlens.se website that is marked with a house icon, an identical item is provided to a Stadsmissionen shelter.





If you're vanilla, people might like you, but they won't love you. Some people have to dislike you for others to love you

My Troedsson, Forsman & Bodenfors

According to Åhléns, the majority of its shoppers already over-index towards Lohas tendencies, even though the brand wasn't actively targeting them. To demonstrate to these shoppers that its stores offer more sustainable products than they might think, in November 2014, Åhléns kitted out an apartment only with products from its Bra Val range. People could rent the property on Airbnb and when they paid the kr500 (\$60) to book their stay, they received a voucher for the same amount to spend on Åhléns' sustainable goods.

To promote the campaign, the brand created a web series showing Åhléns' sustainability manager's stay at the apartment with well-known actor Kalle Zackari Wahlström. The brand also reached out to the 1.9 million members of its loyalty club, offering them 5,000 bonus points if they purchased three Bra Val products in a three-month period. Forsman & Bodenfors reports that its 2014 campaign led to a 250% increase in awareness of Åhléns' sustainability ambitions.

There's a clear business imperative to acting responsibly and targeting customers who care deeply about sustainability. As Söderqvist says: 'They are willing to pay a little bit more when they can see that the company shares their values.' In a report this year, Åhléns stated that about 6.2% of total sales come from sustainable goods. Its goal is to increase this proportion to 12 by 2018.

Pushing personality

By turning its values of inclusivity and sustainability outward through attention-grabbing ads, Åhléns is showing Swedes that it's no longer a dull department store. 'Communication has been the main tool for Åhléns to go from being a practical choice to being a more emotional choice,' says Susanna Thorslund, Forsman & Bodenfors account director. 'We have been able to draw out the personality of the brand.'

And Sweden has taken notice. Åhléns won't share sales figures but it reports that from 2014 to 2015, advertising awareness increased by 30% and likeability by 23%, even though it had a much smaller media budget last year. Meanwhile, both consideration and preference shot up by 10%. The brand's social media followers showed a dramatic increase too. On Instagram, for instance, Åhléns has gone from having 17,000 followers in May 2014 to 123,000 followers now, a 624% increase in less than two years.

Courting controversy might have helped Åhléns capture attention, but it didn't come without a price. Troedsson says that following its campaign featuring the veiled model some people vowed never to shop at Åhléns again. But she shrugs this off. 'If you're vanilla, people might like you, but they won't love you. Some people have to dislike you for others to love you.' 🍷

1899

The year Åhléns was founded as a mail-order catalogue

70

Department stores across Sweden

3,000

Employees

20%

The percentage of Åhléns' workforce that it hopes will be of non-Swedish origin by 2020

Åhléns in numbers

5bn

Annual turnover in krona (\$605m)

2.2m

Members of Åhléns' loyalty programme

6.2%

Percentage of total sales from sustainable goods

30%

Amount that Åhléns' advertising awareness increased from 2014 to 2015

