

## THE DRAPERS INTERVIEW EMMA ALEXANDER

**W**ith a shiny new 18,000 sq ft flagship at The Plaza on Oxford Street, multi-brand young fashion retailer USC is gearing up to compete with the likes of Topshop, Foot Locker and Forever 21 on the UK's busiest shopping street.

Young fashion is often typified by raucous stores that create an organised chaos, designed to capture the short attention spans of youthful shoppers. But according to USC brand director Emma Alexander, this is not the winning formula for the future. Rather than being tempted by Sale signs and pumping music, she believes shoppers have more sophisticated needs – and as its customers have evolved, so too has USC.

From one Edinburgh shop set up in 1989 it now has 70 stores across the UK, and on the eve of its 25th anniversary this September Alexander is keen to talk about its new-found sense of direction when meeting *Drapers* at the Oxford Street store, which opened on June 17. Petite, glamorous and dressed head to toe in USC-stocked brand G-Star, as she walks through the shop she straightens out the displays and chats with staff.

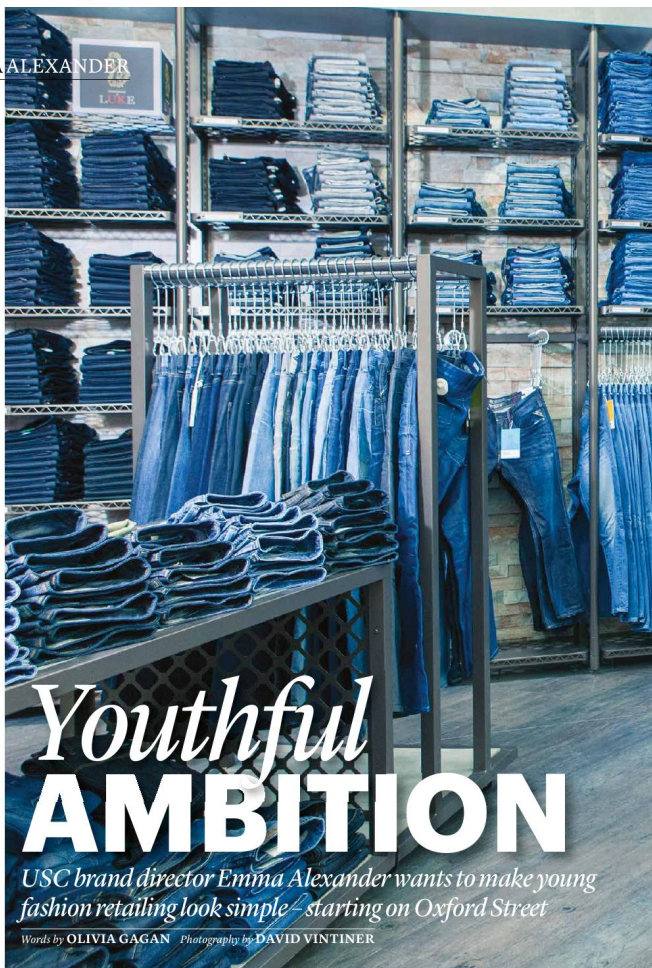
So what do USC's customers want in a store these days? "Ease," Alexander replies. She says this boils down to "great availability and great product in an easy-to-shop format. We should make outfit-building easy."

She is therefore at pains to explain how simple and intuitive the shop is, and on first impression it does represent an evolution from the crowded, hectic stores common to the young fashion sector. It has been clearly divided into zones – shoes, denim, womenswear, menswear and accessories.

Within these areas, individual shoes are perched in a simple, grid-like wall display and a denim wall has piles of jeans ranked in style and length from floor to rafter. Grey metals and wood are used for the fittings, with wide, spacious aisles. Each shop-in-shop – whether Replay in denim or USC bestseller Converse in footwear – shows rows of neatly stacked product. Denim-clad assistants receive training from both USC and the brands they sell before being allowed onto the shop floor.

Two days after opening, the store is an oasis of orderly calm – in stark contrast to a few days earlier, Alexander says. On the day *Drapers* visits, 25,000 units of clothing are on display with 15,000 pairs of shoes held in the stockroom. Alexander whips out her mobile to show a picture of the delivery of a veritable mountain of shoe stock waiting to be stowed away four days previously – the Sunday before opening. She spent the weekend mucking in with the new shop staff "in our trackies, helping get it all in place".

London-born Alexander explains this practical, hands-on approach is in the blood: "I was brought up on the factory floor. My dad and grandfather started a factory making tweed coats on London's Kingsland Road in Hackney with the money my dad received from his bar mitzvah," although she does not reveal his name or when it was founded. "My mother became a designer at the factory, which evolved into producing womenswear for John Lewis and other high street



# Youthful AMBITION

USC brand director Emma Alexander wants to make young fashion retailing look simple – starting on Oxford Street

Words by OLIVIA GAGAN Photography by DAVID VINTNER

retailers. Every summer holiday I sat cutting up swatches and creating mood boards."

A degree in Clothing Marketing and Distribution at Manchester Metropolitan University confirmed her desire to work in fashion, and she started her career on Marks & Spencer's graduate trainee programme in 1997. By 1999, she had moved to River Island as a buyer. She then took the head of buying role at Jaeger in 2002, which she says offered "the opportunity to understand the more premium end of the high street market. Fabrication, cut and fit were all essentials in that role." In 2005, it was back to M&S for a four-year stint as head of buying.

These experiences of the young fashion, middle market and more premium end of the high street made Alexander a prime target for USC, which by

2010 had suffered a turbulent time in the recession. Then-owner Sir Tom Hunter had bought it in 2004 for £4.3m, but after a pre-pack administration in 2008 it was sold for an undisclosed amount to Dundonald Holding – one of Hunter's companies. During this process, 15 of its 58 stores at the time were closed.

A turnaround did not come easily. It reported a number of losses before steadily returning to the black in 2009 when it posted a turnover of £69m, compared with £4.9m the year before. Current owner Sports Direct took an 80% stake for £7m in 2011 before snapping up the remaining 20% in January 2012.

Under Sports Direct founder Mike Ashley, USC has been positioned as part of the business's premium lifestyle division, a 160-store group including former independents Flannels, Cruise and Van Mildert.



Makeover: Alexander, pictured in the flagship store's denim department, has overhauled USC's image

Today USC has upped its offer through a mix of more expensive denim brands and branded footwear, with labels including Lacoste, Hilliger Denim, Weekend Offender, Pretty Green and Henri Lloyd. A pair of Pretty Green jeans retails for £80, for example, and a focus on this premium pricing is key under Alexander's strategy. It also maintains less expensive stalwarts including Levi's, Quiksilver and own labels such as SoulCal and Soviet. The business has grown rapidly, with 116 Republic stores converted to USC last year after Sports Direct bought the former out of administration in February 2013.

After joining in 2010, Alexander was charged with overhauling USC's image, which she says was tired: "There was a lack of direction, a lack of brand DNA, a lack of a tone of voice." The brand DNA she

has since sought to create consists of "offering a one-stop shop. It means offering a tightly edited selection, which is important within the vast denim and footwear industry."

The elevation of USC is taking place on both the brands and customer sides, she adds. On the shop floor, this translates to the glossier, more serene image showcased on Oxford Street.

G-Star European sales director Jonas Bach says the strategy has worked well for his brand: "Our challenge is to make the G-Star DNA equally strong in each shop, while using each location's uniqueness to its full advantage. The concepts implemented at USC allow us to clearly express this."

Alexander's buyer-led approach to retailing appears to be paying dividends. Sports Direct does not break

down results by brand, but revenues for its premium lifestyle division soared 52.5% to £71.2m in the 13 weeks to January 2014. International store openings and ecommerce growth are on the long-term agenda for USC, but Alexander says for now the focus is on the UK. If successful the Oxford Street shopfit will be rolled out, starting with USC's most premium stores.

The development of the newer, sleeker feel is ongoing. "I've been here four years and loved every minute. I've been able to build a really good team. We've set some clear business goals, which are about what you see around you today [at the store]," she says.

Her history as a buyer drives her strategy as brand director. "It's not about [the] personal," she concludes, when explaining what makes a good retailer. "It's about looking through the eyes of the consumer."