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How Columbia Sportswear Became America's Most Trusted Brand



Jena McGregor Forbes Staff

Careers

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Columbia Sportswear CEO Tim Boyle (by Neil DaCosta for Forbes) NEIL DACOSTA FOR FORBES

Some outdoor clothing brands wear their heart on their sleeve, so to speak, such as Patagonia suing the Trump administration to protect public lands or REI closing stores on Black Friday to encourage people to spend time outside.

And then there's Columbia Sportswear, a stalwart retail staple with a third-generation CEO who's let himself be the brunt of jokes in the company's ads and takes pride in being "approachable."

The Portland, Oregon-based wholesale and retail brand may be less outwardly vocal about its employee benefits, social stances and sustainability efforts (even if there are many)—some of the factors that made it rank No. 1 on brand values and trust in our inaugural Halo 100 list, done in partnership with analytics firm Hundred X. Instead, it focuses on marketing the durability and innovation of its products.

It's a message that seems to resonate with consumers of all backgrounds. Patagonia would have led the brand values/trust measure, but because the company was only chosen for review by a handful of Black consumers, could not be included on our list. Columbia, on the other hand, was recognized by enough consumers across the board.

Tim Boyle, the company's longtime CEO—he's worth \$2.7 billion, by *Forbes'* estimate and is the largest shareholder of the company—attributes the results to the brand's "approachability."

"Companies are a lot like individuals: your personality comes through. Your actions, maybe not," he says. "Maybe it comes from the company's heritage. My mother's family were immigrants from Germany. We sort of take this approach that we want to be very democratic. We want to be approachable."

Boyle's mother, of course, is Gert Boyle, who [died in 2019](#) at 95 after decades as the company's chairman. Gert's parents fled Nazi Germany when she was 13 and bought a small hat company that grew into Columbia. She started running the company in 1970 after her husband's death; Tim left college early to help and became president in 1989. The pair famously appeared in humorous [ads](#) where Tim was left to test or demonstrate the company's products in extreme conditions such as a [car wash](#) or [mountain top](#).

“We basically try not to take ourselves too seriously,” says Columbia Sportswear CEO Tim Boyle. “We’re making stuff to have fun.”

Even now, Columbia features her image on the web site's [“Tough Mother Outdoor Guide,”](#) which promises to “keep things simple and deliver reliable, no-nonsense advice.” While competitors may tie their brands to extreme activities like climbing Mt. Everest, Boyle says some consumers may be put off by that, thinking “I just want to be comfortable with my family outside.”

Columbia has been doing more to reach out to consumers of color, sponsoring a group of Black women anglers and featuring them in an [International Women's Day ad](#), as well as the NASCAR driver Bubba Wallace, who is Black, featuring his interest in outdoor photography in a TV event with [National Geographic](#). It has long sponsored a nonprofit called [GirlTrek](#) that's focused on getting African-American women and girls out walking.

HundredX's analysis also shows that just 2% of respondents gave Columbia a poor or mixed review for how it handled the pandemic, below the 10% average. Boyle says he's been focused on building relationships with suppliers. “All of a sudden the world got turned upside down,” he says, comparing the supply chain to something as reliable as electricity that suddenly wouldn't turn on. “I've spent a significant amount of time personally with logistics providers to understand what we need to do better to be a preferred shipper.”

He's also focused on safety—a strong proponent of vaccines, he spoke with other CEOs [at the White House in support of mandates](#)—as well as raising pay and offering retention bonuses to distribution center and retail employees and expanding its hiring pool to include 16- and 17-year-old students they hadn't hired in the past. “That's been a real bonus for us,” Boyle says. As he puts it: “We basically try not to take ourselves too seriously. We're making stuff to have fun.”