

Get to know Nudea, the brand with a new take on luxury and inclusive underwear

We spoke to Priya Downes, founder of Nudea, about creating an underwear brand that is fit-centric, the power of being hands-on, and the challenges created by a lack of women investors.

What is Nudea?

Nudea is a fit-centric lingerie brand offering expertly crafted, comfortable lingerie that fits without compromising on a feminine aesthetic. 'Nudea', meaning new goddess, is fuelled by an obsession with fit and inclusivity and embraces the cultural shift away from overtly sexy lingerie to a more modern, body-positive attitude. Appealing to modern-minded women, Nudea offers a wide size range, neutral, contemporary colour palettes and hero styles designed and created for real women with real bodies.

I think the days of building a website and then hoping people will come are truly behind us. It's hard work building customers and reaching people particularly as a new brand on small budgets. You have to growth hack it and it takes time to build momentum – in the early days the opportunity to talk to people directly about the brand, and for them to feel and touch the product

was crucial. The word of mouth then created the first wave of momentum, which then snowballed into the pandemic.

We also built a community of 600 bra wearers through our workshops pre-launch who formed our first customer base. Referrals are still an important way for us to acquire new customers. My biggest achievement as an entrepreneur really came from my biggest lesson, which was truly understanding our customers. As an indirect consequence of bringing our fulfilment in-house, I personally packed and prepared our customer orders, I wrote little notes (and still do) in every order and got to know many of our customers by name. Through this process, I have learned so much about who our customer is, what they appreciate and love about us.

What was the catalyst for launching Nudea?

After eight years working for some of the big houses, including Chanel and Burberry, I felt the itch to try something new that married my head for numbers with a love of great product. I knew straight away I didn't want to create yet another fashion brand – it was important for me to create a product that served a need as well as being made with care and passion.

Working in luxury fashion instilled in me a huge appreciation for quality, craftsmanship and authenticity, all of which I felt was missing in the world of underwear. I was so uninspired by uncomfortable and old fashioned bras and wanted to modernise bra fitting from getting measured to the final product. Nudea is fully focused on user experience and customer satisfaction from online bra fitting to delivery.

How has the business evolved since its launch?

Since we launched in 2019, we feel we have modernised bra shopping and made it a positive and supporting experience. We have filled a gap in the market – specifically between wearing a comfortable bra and owning a beautiful piece of lingerie.

The industry still feels hyper-sexualised and targeted to a male gaze. Underwear shopping should give you confidence and make you feel like the best version of yourself.

That's what Nudea's trying to do – empower women to be able to fit themselves and buy underwear that makes them feel great.

Our growth and brand awareness has come from PR and organic influencer connections who genuinely love our product and want to spread the word of fitting and better fitting underwear for all. Our attention to personal customer service and the fitting experience has created great reviews and word of mouth for us, which has been brilliant for leveraging brand awareness in a lost cost way.

In today's environment, it's even more important for brands to have strong values, an honest and transparent approach to building customer bases and connections. We have held this close to us from the start when we created our first group of 600 women to test our fitting process who have remained loyal to us from the start because of our values. It's important to be more than just the products you sell, and this has helped us create a truly engaged and loyal customer base.

In September 2021, Nudea became a carbon-neutral company. Nudea's sustainability commitment includes easy-to-use fitting tools to deliver on fit for conscious, responsible shopping, premium recycled fabric and yarns that last longer, thoughtfully-designed styles made in partnership with responsible suppliers who pay fair living wages, produced in a GOTS and SLCP fully-certified factory in Portugal and delivered in recycled and recyclable packaging.

Nudea also pledges 1% of annual revenue to charity and in 2021 has donated to clean water charity Splash and breast cancer charity CoppaFeel.

How are you funded?

Fundraising has been key. In early 2021, we secured a second round of capital to support future growth, including moving into wholesale as well as strengthening the brand's sustainability credentials. The company has raised

over £1M in equity funding and the lead investor is Cornerstone, a leading seed fund which invests in black and diverse founders in the UK.

Fundraising has been the steepest learning curve. As a first time entrepreneur, nothing quite prepares you for the rollercoaster and strong emotional stomach needed to fight for what you're passionate about no matter the timing or industry you operate in.

I have been surprised by the lack of female investors, particularly for a female-founded business that you would expect to easily attract women investors as they would more easily identify with the problem we are trying to solve.

We have just completed a crowdfund round which, despite it being more targeted at retail investors, has still resulted in 80% of the 670 new investors being men. I would love to have more women on my Board and also on my cap table. For me, that is a challenge I would to continuing trying to evolve for Nudea.

What has been your biggest challenge so far?

Marketing (customer acquisition) in a traditional digital way is challenging for a brand lingerie brand. It's hard to find influencer partners who will wear your product and market it for you as most fashion brands rely on. In addition, Facebook screens ads and content for nudity, which makes it hard to showcase our products.

In a startup, every day is a new challenge because inevitably you will face something you have never had to do before. I have always been a problem solver. I have been able to change careers from finance to fashion and now my own business on the simple belief that everything can be learnt, you just need to have the motivation to want to learn. I try to break things down and

anything I can't do or don't have time to, I ask for help.

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I am lucky enough to have a brilliant team who challenge and support me to get through the toughest challenges. Interestingly, the emergence out of the pandemic has brought about as many challenges as during the dark days of lockdown. In lockdown, it was about getting the work/life balance correct as I just found myself working all the time with no clear line between home and work time.

How does Nudea answer an unmet need?

For my business, it was bringing customer fulfilment in-house. When we first launched, we had a third party warehouse picking and packing our online orders, which was fine until lockdown happened. I personally was worried about what that meant for staffing at the warehouse and didn't want to risk not being able to fulfil orders.

Despite it being a tactical move rather than strategic, bringing customer fulfilment in-house was the best thing that ever happened. We were able to offer a personal service and a real luxury touch to our packing, for example, little uplifting notes, which really helped to boost our customer service and retention.

What's in store for the future?

We want to be the online go-to brand for great underwear – the M&S for a new generation of bra shoppers who demand more from their everyday staples; comfort, style and sustainability. As an online brand in 2022, we are visible globally and our growth is not just focused in the UK, as we have plans to scale our business in Europe and US as well in the next few years.

We have plans to expand our product offering into loungewear, sleepwear all the time inventing ways to make it better. Our next product range, which we are very excited about, will be sustainable – either made from recycled yarns or natural materials that are sustainably sourced. We are also expanding our size offering from 27 to 43 sizes.

What one piece of advice would you give to other founders or future founders?

Just do it! So many people and particularly women find excuses not to. The biggest challenge that any entrepreneur faces is resilience and women are genetically wired with more than our fair share, it's tough and it's a long road but so rewarding. As long as you have resilience and love challenges, you're already 80% there, so what are you waiting for?

Priya Downes is founder of Nudea.

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