

# Making the jump

MASTERING COLLABORATIONS

When menswear brand **Agi & Sam** started out, collaborations with major brands helped it grow, but which partners were the right fit?

When recent graduates Agape Mdumulla and Sam Cotton (pictured, from left) met while working at Alexander McQueen in 2008, it was difficult to fathom how they could launch their own menswear brand.

They saved money from housing benefits and jobseekers' allowance to create their first lookbook and a small collection that amounted to about 50 pieces. 'I sewed everything up and we cut everything on the floor,' says Mdumulla. 'We were trying to get an intern and they'd turn up at my living room – you should've seen their faces!'

Getting traction proved tough. 'We thought we'd make and sell a collection and get enough money to put down a deposit for the next one but there are so many other things to pay for,' adds Cotton.

## Getting off the ground

Then in 2012 they embarked upon a series of collaborative projects that gave them lift off. The pair created a T-shirt line for Liberty and a capsule collection for Mr Porter before Topman made contact.

'We wanted to work with Agi & Sam in particular because we loved what they were doing,' says Topman's creative director Gordon Richardson. 'Their work with print brought something new to what we were offering at the time.'

Weighing up the implications of working with a mainstream



high-street chain ('So many other brands like JW Anderson had worked with Topman so we felt it was a reputable thing to do,' says Cotton) with concerns over quality ('It was better than the stuff we were doing at the time') the result was 2013's Owls collaboration: a 20-strong range that was carried in Topman stores in as far away as Australia.

As well as confidence, the partnership gave the pair big-league marketing and production insight that they could never have learned solo. 'I remember going to Oxford Street and seeing our stuff in the shop window. It was the first time I felt we'd made it,' says Mdumulla.

For a young brand, such a collaboration proved a turning point as other companies saw in Agi & Sam a partner with a proven track record that a big company could work with.

## Setting boundaries

Collaborations now make up 50 per cent of Agi & Sam's revenue: it has teamed up with London Undercover (umbrellas), Evian

(T-shirts) and Italian coffee titan Lavazza on a 5,000 run of 'bespoke coffee cups'. But it does throw up a question. When is a prospective collaboration the wrong fit?

'The main consideration is money but it's also the integrity,' says Cotton. 'It needs to make sense – we don't want to look like a brand that does too many things.'

Collaborations can also place strain on creative freedom. 'Sometimes it's like banging your head against a brick wall,' says Mdumulla. 'If it's a big company it can take months to get things signed off.'



It also risks creating a heavy financial and operational burden. 'You take an order from Selfridges or one of the big department stores and they don't pay you anything for perhaps 60 to 90 days,' says Cotton. 'So you might have a £100,000 order but you still have to find £50,000 up front to produce it without getting paid until you deliver it.'

## Moving it forward

Mdumulla says he'd like to collaborate with sportswear or technology brands. 'We want to work with someone who can elevate us to a new level,' he says. 'We'd love to grow into an all-encompassing lifestyle brand that has all these different facets so it's good if you can work with these people to help get that into people's psyches.'

Inventive brand link-ups have helped Agi & Sam become fixtures on London's menswear map and provides an alternative blueprint to other startups aiming to get their brand off the ground.



# Higher quality hires

GETTING RECRUITMENT RIGHT

Marketing agency **The Eleven** was bruised by some costly employment decisions in the early days. Founder Ben Gateley says he has now taken a more serious approach to recruitment.



'People' is often the cliched response to the equally cliched 'What's the most

important thing in your business?' question. Ben Gateley has made it an obsession over the past 10 years

while running The Eleven with Rob O'Donovan. The two started the business in 2006 and now oversee a mini group consisting of four different agencies and 40 staff.

Gateley claims that he now devotes an hour and a half, three days a week, specifically to recruitment, regardless of whether he has a role open or not. We asked him for his insights.

## What's your main recruitment tip?

Personal recommendations are the best and I never use recruitment agencies. I think the type of person who jumps from job to job generally uses a recruiter. We have a lot of incentives for our own staff to recommend people they know using their own networks.

## How have you built The Eleven entirely on recommendations?

The first five employees were amazing but it gets harder with the next phase and personal recommendations dry up.

## What's your approach to the interview process?

We used to have pretty free-flowing conversations during the interview in the beginning. Now we're a lot more focused from the outset on what we're trying to test and get a lot more people involved; junior,

senior and different departments. We always do phone screens first, even if just for 10 minutes.

**What do you look for in an interview?** With creatives, attitude can be tricky because you can easily just focus on their work. It's only in a pressurised or social situation that you see their true personality and character.

**What can be the impact of the wrong hire?** Negativity is contagious; others mimic it and very quickly you've got a negative culture.

## How else have you adapted your recruitment process?

We really work the probation period now to test and track two things; whether they're good enough for their job and whether their attitude is right.