

## Valuable Comparison

Equine industry footwear leaders are encouraged by the rise of competitors from the outside.

The fashion influence has actually been good for Western, according to Justin's Watson.

"They lend credibility to our authenticity and help drive consumers to our brands," he said. "As they say, 'imitation is the sincerest form of flattery.'"

He said mainstream stores tell the company that many consumers are asking specifically for Justin brands.

"When mainstream fashion publications want to feature Western, they want the authentic Cowboy boot—not the designer version," said Watson. "We've been making boots for more than 127 years, and the end consumer knows he can rely on that experience."

Durango's Miller said there are always going to be customers who don't know the difference, but that means the manufacturers' marketing has to change a bit, as does the approach of the retailer. Durango has also enjoyed wide coverage in traditional fashion magazines when Western is chosen as a theme.

Another good avenue for Durango has been the Professional Bull Riders (PBR). Since those who attend PBR events are predominantly from outside the equine industry, exposure there offers the company an opportunity to influence those who may buy fashion to purchase the "real thing."

"Most of those folks are definitely not core Western, but they love the lifestyle," Miller added.

Double H takes a similar approach. "We believe that by creating the styles

that consumers are looking for, we can help attract consumers to the traditional Western stores," said Schappell. "We believe Western is a category, not a trend. The trend is not being driven by the Western industry, but by the fashion industry."

Schappell said those companies are propelling Western into the spotlight, and a rising tide lifts all boats.

Ariat has concentrated on helping Western retailers do the best job possible of selling footwear to help them compete with fashion and go one step beyond.

"Western retailers should think of themselves as destination locations for anyone wanting a pair of Western boots," said Cross. "New customers are coming to their stores every day looking for an authentic product not available elsewhere."

A key, she said, is providing an exciting and unique retail experience.

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## Maximize your Customers' Shopping Experience

- > **Maintain a great product assortment.** Keep it fresh, fashionable and full price. Give the customer the sense that your store is the only place to shop for Western boots if they want authentic brands and the newest styles.
- > **Use merchandising to drive sales.** The goal is to make the products irresistible to the customer. Focus on display, point-of-sale visuals and pairings with other accessories and apparel. Department stores spend lots of time and money on visual merchandising, and that is the Western retailer's main competition for these customers.
- > **Bone up on boots.** Make sure that store personnel understand the products and how to sell them. They should be trained in fitting boots and have a good grasp of the features and benefits of each brand.

Beth Cross—Founder, Ariat International