Menswear e-tailer Bonobos began when two Stanford Business School roommates, frustrated by their own shopping experiences, decided to create a perfect-fitting pair of pants, guided by a determination to make shopping for clothes as easy and painless as possible. Today, Bonobos has grown into the largest fashion brand ever built on the web in the United States. We spoke to the brand’s VP of Operations and Product Management, Melissa Baird – who joined the company in 2013 – about innovation in retail and the challenges and advantages of fulfillment in the e-commerce era.

**QUIET LOGISTICS:**

Bonobos is a menswear e-commerce pioneer. What were some early key challenges in carving out this new space, and how has the landscape changed since then?

**MELISSA BAIRD:**

Bonobos was founded to solve two problems. One, the founders couldn’t find great fitting men’s clothes; and two, they also couldn’t find a hassle-free way to shop. When we started in 2007, we were built on those foundations, and we thought online would provide the best experience possible. Since then, we’ve learned there’s an approach that mixes online with offline for a truly comprehensive experience. And since we launched the menswear business has seen incredible growth, and a remarkable change in that now it’s cool for guys to care about how they look.

**QL:**

Bonobos and Quiet have a similar mindset in terms of leveraging technological innovations to create exceptional customer experiences. How would you describe the way that Bonobos has harnessed the power of technology to improve the shopping experience?

**MB:**

Technology is a core competency for us. We have a fantastic tech team that handles software development in-house. They can test quickly and innovate based on what works. Logistically, one of the things that’s great about e-commerce is that you’re able to keep your inventory mostly in one
place. You don't have to distribute across all your stores, which allows us to have a wide range of sizes for all customers, as well as sizes that are atypical and normally carried in low quantities – and of course that makes for an improved shopping experience.

Our customers are stylish, busy people. We pride ourselves on the fact that they can come to our site, be delighted by the options, place an order easily and then have the items show up quickly so they can start wearing them right away. Customer satisfaction and accuracy are an enormous piece of that experience. Our policy to ship in 1 or 2 days, with free shipping and free returns for 365 days, is vital to our service.

“We only get to touch the customer a couple times, when they order and when they receive, so we need customers to trust that our deliveries will live up to our promises.”

QL:

What would you say are the major differences in building and evolving an e-com-centric, direct to consumer brand as opposed to traditional channels?

MB:

One of the biggest differences is intrinsically that we have more access to data about our customers. We use that data to inform daily decisions, such as what products to offer, how we offer them, what the shopping experience should be like, and what delivery should be like.

Since we were founded online and then expanded offline with our Guideshops, we've been able to benefit from the advantages of establishing our brand digitally and having all of that flagship credibility. Some brands that start offline and then build ecommerce—for them, online is very secondary, and it's a big shock as opposed to already having your brand presence there organically.

QL:

Speaking of Guideshops, how do they fit into the overall goal of making shopping for clothes as pleasant and efficient an experience as possible?

MB:

Well, our Guideshops are really an extension of our customer service. You can make an appointment or walk in and get one-on-one service. You can try on all of your sizes and we can place an order for you right then and there, and you'll receive it at home in 1 or 2 days with free shipping. It's the same award-winning customer service offered by the Bonobos Ninjas based in our New York headquarters, and it's important that it's the same online and offline.

One of the things that stands out is that the Ninjas are empowered to make their own decisions, treating humans like humans, even though we are in many ways a tech-driven brand. Similarly, we're offering the Guideshops as another touchpoint, catering to the way each individual customer prefers to shop. Whether that means chatting and trying on items before they buy, or going online to the website and making purchases there, they have the option.

Of course, there are nuances that differ from online to offline. For example, there are some products that lend themselves naturally to Guideshops – we sell more suits in Guideshops than online. They're a higher price point, they're more tailored, closer fitting, so it makes sense. And we've also found that customers who come into the Guideshops make repeat purchases sooner than those who don't. So it's just as important to recognize the nuances and play to them.
One of the biggest differences is intrinsically that Bonobos is a direct-to-consumer brand as opposed to traditional channels. As a result, we have more access to data about our customers, what products to offer, and how we offer them, what the shopping experience should be like, and what delivery should be like. Customers spend time and energy choosing the right item. We need to honor that by delivering an amazing product with amazing service, which is why we began working with Quiet Logistics back in 2009.

We only get to touch the customer a couple times – when they order and when they receive – so we need customers to trust that our deliveries will live up to our promises. Customers spend time and energy choosing the right item. We need to honor that by delivering an amazing product with amazing service, which is why we began working with Quiet back in 2009. [Read the original announcement here.]

“Quiet’s been a great partner in navigating this new retail space, able to change on the fly as we need it, so that our processes evolve as our brand knowledge is evolving.”

We definitely feel like Quiet Logistics is an extension of us. Quiet is growing and innovating, too, so they understand the challenges – holiday volumes, troubleshooting when we need it, et cetera – just as you’d expect if we had an in-house fulfillment team, and customer service is incredibly responsive.

Quiet is integrated into our culture and vice versa. In fact, they invite our team to tour the facility once a year, and anyone from Bonobos who’s never been goes. It’s incredible. Actually, a little before my time here, we did a campaign where we – the Bonobos team – named some of the bots in the Quiet warehouse. It’s such a fun, creative culture and everybody was really excited. We’ve even dressed up as a bot for Halloween! It’s a rare vendor partnership.