

OP-ED

# A Less Than Supreme Collaboration

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## Deconstructing Supreme's New York Post Print Campaign

*At a time when brands are increasingly owning their values (hey Nike), a superficial collaboration can be even more detrimental to the long term viability of a brand. Supreme's recent work with the New York Post was arguably a great advertising buy, but it was far from a great collaboration and it serves as an example for marketers to examine before launching their next campaign.*

Last month, Supreme made headlines in New York City – literally. The brand worked with the New York Post on another attention-getting campaign in which they splashed their logo across the entire wraparound cover of the well-known tabloid. It was the first time in history that a brand had been given the opportunity to purchase this real estate on the Post, and copies of that day's edition sold out almost entirely by 7:45 a.m. They also received a lot of positive earned media that celebrated the 'collaboration.'

No doubt this was a coup, but only for the Post. It certainly gave newspapers execs everywhere a rare moment of optimism – and good on them for experimenting and innovating. As I see it, though, this wasn't a win for Supreme when you consider their reputation and evolution as a brand. Hang with me and I'll explain why.

It's not the first time Supreme has invested in non-traditional marketing efforts. In fact, they're known explicitly for building out marketing and product collaborations. In the past several years, they've worked with an endless string of high-profile brands, as well as unexpected partnerships like the one with Kidde that resulted in a co-branded fire extinguisher (2015), and with Hardcore Hammers on – you guessed it – a bright red hammer (2012). The streetwear apparel company is also known for their sudden 'drops' of new merchandise that they release with little to no advance publicity, backstory, or explanation. With a cult-like following, Supreme's brick and mortar stores from Manhattan to Los Angeles will generally see lines around the block for new 'drops' (product launches), and from this standpoint, they have been quite successful. Their products have also become a status symbol, with a wide-range of celebrities proudly sporting the brand.

On the flip side, however, Supreme is beginning to develop a dangerous reputation for being less than thoughtful about their collaborations. In other words, people are starting to feel that the brand is willing to slap their logo on anything and watch it sell en masse, raking in the profit. From this standpoint, the strategy loses footing: It's obviously not the way to maintain a long-term, passionate fanbase.

This brings us back to why the Post effort was problematic. When I heard about the 'collaboration' I began searching, hoping I'd find the kind of *fit* that a true partnership demands (beyond the two brands simply sharing NYC as their home). Perhaps they'd released limited edition apparel, planned to host an event, layered in tertiary partners, or did something else to provide a little depth. Unfortunately, my search turned up empty. The only relevant piece of media released to the public was a short video posted to a section of their website titled "random." The video depicts the life cycle of the Supreme tabloid edition as it travels from printer to bodega; it is untitled.

That's why, from a holistic branding and marketing perspective, the New York Post effort can't really be called anything other than what it was: A paid print advertisement. I'm aware that this might not be a popular view given Supreme's standing as a cult favorite for a large contingent of fashion and streetwear enthusiasts around the world, but I'm taking the long-term view and thinking about the overall health of the brand. The potential for this alignment to be a success was all there, but unfortunately, execution fell flat. The two brands failed to provide any substantive storytelling, let alone a functional value-add to each other's identity or any 'layers' to dig into. As such, they lost the authenticity intended by their partnership.

## Collaboration Marketing in the 21st Century

Collaboration marketing is a term that, until recently, didn't exist. Now, however, with the rise of digital and social media, collaboration has become a key strategy for marketers who are looking to expand their brands' audience and align themselves with the right niche in the market. Fashion and retail is an ideal landscape for collaboration because apparel lends itself to creative re-thinking: Take an iconic sneaker silhouette, pair it with another iconic brand or individual with similar values, goals and target audiences, and you'll have a product that is both eye-catching and culturally meaningful. Add to this a little storytelling and a creative approach to promotion, and the result can be incredibly lucrative.

While many of Supreme's past collaborations have relied on creativity, story, history, design and craftsmanship, more and more in recent years have not.

Let's look at another one of their recent efforts: the Supreme branded New York City MBTA 'collaboration' which involved the Supreme logo printed on Metro Cards and nothing else. There was no promo event, no story about why the two teamed up, no special ride to be unlocked and no related content other than a few straightforward social media posts announcing the product. There was absolutely no functional utility, except for those who flipped their cards for a profit, and the emotional value was limited to bragging rights and perhaps a more pleasing aesthetic for the few seconds riders have their cards in hand. The whole effort just looked opportunistic. There were so many interesting things they could have layered into this collaboration, but they chose to do nothing. Most of the buzz was negative and coverage primarily consisted of fights on subway platforms and comments noting the lack of substance.

I'll admit I am a marketer, so I tend to pay closer attention to advertising than the average consumer. But so do the diehard fans, influencers, sneakerheads and streetwear connoisseurs who have the power to make or break a brand.

## Collaborate For Real

Now let's look at another example of a fashion partnership with the City of New York that had a little more substance:

Heron Preston represents a new breed of creative entrepreneur who cannot be defined by any traditional labels. He received a BBA at the Parsons School of design and parlayed that into work as a global producer for Nike, a creative consultant to Kanye West, and the head of his own fashion label, HPC Trading Co. He is a self-proclaimed "cultural icon in youth culture" and, according to his website, "finds particular joy in the unexpected; taking conventional themes and reinterpreting them."

Guys like Heron do not engage in surface-level collaborations. They go all in, just as he did when he teamed up with The City of New York Department of Sanitation. After literally brushing up against a plastic bag while swimming in the ocean, he decided to do something that would make a statement about the environment. Coincidentally, the New York Sanitation Department was launching a new campaign and nonprofit right around the same time, hoping to promote sustainability and bring attention to the efforts of sanitation workers who keep the city healthy, safe and clean.

Heron took used Sanitation Department uniforms and redesigned them. He combined the existing materials with donated clothing and design elements and then launched the line, dubbed UNIFORM, at one of the Department's salt sheds. According to Heron, "UNIFORM's ideology redefines fashion and brings awareness to DSNY's service to New York City, without which street culture would not exist." A percentage of all proceeds from the line went to the Department's Foundation.

As my friend, Taylor Scott (author of *Ballgames to Boardrooms*), is fond of saying, *go one more step*. That's exactly what Heron did when he decided to turn his outrage into a creative endeavor that provided value on many levels. That extra effort may be the difference between two brands merely fitting together and a collaboration that truly flourishes. I'm sure there were well-intentioned people on both sides of this Supreme and NY Post advertising buy – but I wonder how much more impactful and rewarding the effort would have been if they attempted to truly collaborate.

## Seeing it Through

To be fair, Supreme has had its own share of prosperous and ingenious collaborations since its 1994 establishment. Most of these partnerships were authentic and held true to Supreme's 'hypebeast' ideology, embracing urban street and skate culture. Perhaps the most high-profile example is their collaboration with Louis Vuitton. Even though the LV partnership brought about some negative attention from high fashion elitists, Supreme profited, having already found its place in the cross section of high fashion and streetwear thanks to a variety of other efforts, including their long-standing association with hip-hop artists like Kanye West (the "Louis Vuitton Don" himself). LV x Supreme has been dubbed by some as the most notable collaboration in fashion history, and following this success, Supreme has been coasting on a wave of attention that's made the brand appear untouchable. Their limited-release manufacturing strategy has remained consistent, creating a continued sense of urgency and scarcity that drives followers to snatch up merchandise at almost all costs. However, Supreme's brand is at a point in its lifecycle where there's likely a ton of pressure to continue growing and scaling. While this is normal, it can lead to decisions that impact short-term revenue at the expense of long-term brand value.

Besides the New York Post attempt, there are many other signs that the brand may be tiring. Anecdotally, the article I saw shared more than any other in my LinkedIn newsfeed during the week of the New York Post drop was a story and quote from the CEO of Birkenstock proudly exclaiming that they turned down a Supreme collaboration. Widely respected marketers were cheering him on, commenting and applauding that someone "finally said no."

By failing to create an authentic experience, it's not hard to see a move like Supreme's as a sign of disrespect to longtime fans of the brand: *Here's another unessential item with our logo on it because we know you'll buy anything we put out.* While it might work for them for a short time, they could eventually lose their unique position within the fashion industry and, in turn, their collaborative reputation.

What do you think? Was this NY Post campaign a positive move for Supreme or would have you approached it differently?

Do you have a favorite collaboration that was launched with more meaningful content and experiences to enhance the impact?

Brady Sadler is a marketer, author and consultant with a passion for developing creative partnerships. His new book, *Collaboration is King: How Game-Changers Create Marketing Partnerships That Build Brands and Grow Businesses*, is now available for purchase on Amazon, Audible, and Barnes & Noble. Read the first chapter and download a free Collaboration Playbook at [CollaborationIsKing.com](http://CollaborationIsKing.com).



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