

# Marketing Student Margot Stern on Pizza, Gatorade and 'Legit' Brand Awareness

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*Margot Stern is a Wharton MBA student. During a recent class on consumer behavior, she called on the expertise of high school students in and around Philadelphia for their insight about how best to position the national running shoe brand, Saucony. Stern spoke with Knowledge@Wharton High School about her interest in marketing, focus groups and why she is impressed by high school students' authenticity.*

*An edited version of the transcript appears below.*

**Knowledge@Wharton High School:** Tell us about yourself and the Wharton class you took on consumer behavior.

**Margot Stern:** I'm from Philadelphia. I went to a high school called Germantown Friends School, and I've lived in Philly most of my life. I've traveled a little bit internationally and studied abroad, and I'm actually in the Wharton and Lauder MBA and Masters Program in International Studies. I'm particularly interested in marketing and marketing across different cultures and different consumer groups. I decided to take a class with professor Americus Reed on consumer behavior because I was really interested in the cross section between psychology and branding and marketing. In a traditional class, you might go to class and have different lectures about topics and learn things by textbooks. But in this class, we actually worked with a real professional client, a national running shoe brand. They wanted us to take their product, which was running shoes, and find a way to market it more effectively to high school students. For the entire semester, we worked with the professor and with this company and actually interviewed and worked with a lot of high school students to try to figure out how to position this shoe brand to appeal to a younger market, to high schoolers.

**KWHS:** The brand [you worked with] was Saucony. How did you go about finding high school students to offer feedback about the Saucony brand?

**Stern:** We reached out to students in a number of different ways. We tried to use some of our personal relationships to get in touch with parents, either Wharton parents who were Wharton professors or people whom we knew, and we reached out to high schools. Sometimes we reached out to the athletic departments. Wharton [also] has a program where they work with high schools in West Philly, and so, we were able to work with some high school students here. We were able to get a great variety of students from all around Philadelphia, from both private schools and public schools.

**KWHS:** Did the students respond well to your brand-related questions? Tell us about how the process went.

**Stern:** We always offered students pizza and Gatorade, because we've done a little bit of research and we thought that was the best way to get to students. At one point, the company made some gift certificates available, some discount cards for their sneaker brand. We would bring a bunch of different sneakers along with us. Some were this particular company's brand, and we brought along some other brands of shoes — like Nike, [brands] that high schoolers have heard of.

Usually we would start by talking to the [high schoolers] about the importance of what we were doing. We said that when a company looks to market a shoe directly to a high schooler, they want to learn from that high schooler. So they want to learn not just about what kind of shoes that high schooler wears, but what is called a psychographic profile. For a high school or scholastic athlete, a psychographic profile would be: What are their interests? What kind of music do they listen to? What kind of rituals do they do to get ready for big games? What do they do if they win? How do they

celebrate? What do they do if they lose?

The high schoolers were definitely animated and interested in telling us their own personal stories, and we found that it was very specific. There were some things that, as a team, people did together, and there were some things that [individual] high schoolers did – [like listen to] their favorite song [as a way to] get psyched up or to focus before the big game. [Some] things were individual for each high schooler, and [other] things were more of a group activity.

Later, we would move into asking them questions that were associative — what kind of a feeling or attitude or type of personality do you associate with this sneaker? We might give them a Nike sneaker and say, “What does this make you think of? If you have to describe the personality of the person who wears this shoe, what’s the person [like]?” They often [gave] very specific answers. Nike was a person who was athletic and cool and dominant. New Balance — and I’m sorry to say this – [was] the grandfather taking long walks with the dog. It was really interesting because the high schoolers had specific ideas of what different brands meant to them. Without realizing it, they were talking about brand personalities and brand identities. It was definitely interesting. The high schoolers had a lot of really good insights.

**KWHS:** This basically constituted a focus group, right? Can you talk a little about the use of focus groups in consumer awareness, brand identity and brand awareness?

**Stern:** Sure. Usually when a company is trying to create a brand or understand how their brand is received, pictured or understood in the market place, they will pick a particular cross section of people. In some cases, it’s a specific group. In this case, it was people between the ages of 15 to 18 who were athletes — co-ed. But it could be anything. It could be mothers of children who are between the ages of 2 and 4. It all depends on what the product is and what the company wants to learn about the group. In this case, the company wanted to learn about what high schoolers thought about their product. A focus group is one of [several] different ways to do that. Other ways might be [by] doing a written survey [that you] send out to many different people. You ask questions and people answer those questions according to different feelings they have about brands.

What makes a focus group special is that sometimes there are insights or ideas that come out of people talking to each other. A one-on-one interview is a great way to get an expert’s opinion. Maybe if you were marketing a drug, you would ask a doctor his opinion of the drug. And if you wanted to know if people preferred Diet Coke or Diet Pepsi, you could send a survey out to thousands of people. But in this case, when you want to get a little deeper insights and you want to understand how people function as a group, then you do a focus group, which is usually around six to 10 people. There are certain ideas or opinions that [come] from people bouncing ideas off each other. We would hold a sneaker up and say, “What do you guys think of this?” One person would say, “Well, this color is cool, I like this.” And another person would say, “Yeah, but look, the treads on the bottom of that sneaker are too big and this isn’t a legitimate running shoe.” You learn that way how people’s ideas about brands are not just individual, but are influenced by each other.

**KWHS:** What did you learn about the appeal of the Saucony brand to high school students? What were some of their key insights?

**Stern:** Honestly, the high schoolers didn’t know a whole lot about the running shoe, which was not a surprise because what we understood about it when we began the project is that this shoe is very popular and well respected among elite and fitness runners. An elite runner would be somebody who competes regularly as a runner, and a fitness runner would be somebody who is out there three, four times a week, running regularly and cares about what kind of gear they use — pays attention to different brands in terms of their functionality. Saucony’s already a well-respected shoe and very popular in that segment, but we found that a lot of the high schoolers we talked to didn’t have a very specific idea about it. They didn’t necessarily have specific associations about [Saucony’s] brand personality. Keep in mind, though, that we talked to high school athletes who represented a cross section — football players, soccer players, basketball players. Usually the one percent or two people in the group who were runners had heard of Saucony. Maybe they had run with

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[the brand]. They had a quiet respect for understanding it was a good running shoe. But there definitely wasn't any sort of enthusiasm or excitement about the shoe.

**KWHS:** What do high school students want most from their brand messages? What did you take away from this?

**Stern:** That's a really interesting question. It wasn't necessarily what we expected. When we first talked to the high school students about brands and what brands were popular, we got a lot of response about Nike and Under Armour. There were two very different appeals. Nike was popular because it's cool, the advertisements are really cool and the high schoolers were really specific about Nike ads. They could quote or imitate an ad that they had recently seen. And they really responded positively to that. They would also talk about the experience of walking into [a Modell's or Dick's Sporting Goods] and saying, "There's a tiny little section over here for a smaller brand, and then the whole wall is Nike and there's so much variety." Variety was a really big deal to them. [Having] lots of different options for colors and styles captured their attention.

What surprised us was that we thought high schoolers would be a little suspicious of a big brand like Nike. But when it came to Nike, they were impressed by its largeness and popularity, and being big and powerful was actually positive. That was really interesting.

Under Armour was perhaps one of the most interesting insights. High schoolers felt like if somebody was wearing Under Armour, it made them "legit." There was something about the importance of authenticity in athletes. If you showed up to a basketball game, and the opposing team walked on and they [were] all wearing suits, [you think], "They're here to play, they're serious, they're legit." It was the same thing with Under Armour. Athletes who wore it were considered legit, and that was something that really resonated with high school students.

We took that back to Saucony. We said, "Look, you're a company that isn't super well known among high schoolers. You're not going to be a Nike, and you don't necessarily want to be a Nike because if you were, then all of the elite runners who respect you because you're this authentic running shoe company are going to start thinking that you're a mass-produced brand. So why not take the message of legitimacy and try to work with that, work with what you already are." We knew that high schoolers really responded to this idea of legitimacy and authenticity and we thought, "Try to create a brand message around what it means to be an athlete who's legit." If you really want kids to start paying attention to running shoes, then maybe the way to do that is to create a message and a brand around how running is a legitimate part of being an athlete, or [how] being in physical running condition somehow makes you more legit as an athlete.

**KWHS:** All this knowledge you're gaining about brands and consumerism as a student, where do you hope to take this in your own future?

**Stern:** The best part of this project for me, honestly, was talking to the students. I really enjoyed it. I liked that their opinions were different than mine. I liked that they surprised me. I liked that I didn't always know what they were going to say. One of the things that really surprised me, for example, was [who actually inspired these young athletes]. You look at top athletes who are really popular, in commercials, with sponsorships, and you assume that a high-school-age male is going to respond to those athletes, is going to idolize them. One of the questions we asked in the focus groups was, "What athletes inspire you? Who are the athletes who really motivate you; when you aspire to be like someone, who is it?" In more than one focus group, kids who did not know each other mentioned the same baseball player. And they mentioned it in the same exact context, which was, "This is a baseball player who I look up to because he's this particular position and he's kind of short [in] stature. I don't think I'm necessarily going to be the next Babe Ruth or I don't think I'm necessarily going to be the next famous basketball player, but here's an athlete who I can relate to. If I work really hard, I might be able to aspire to that." That was so cool because you had two different kids that didn't know each other saying the same thing about an athlete who is popular, but somewhat of an underdog.

It was so cool to see that these high schoolers had really done their research; they were knowledgeable about these sports, and they were relating to people because they felt a personal connection. Another answer [to our question about what athletes motivated them] was even more heartwarming. A lot of them mentioned fellow athletes, teammates. They said, “If I have a teammate who plays basketball and I play soccer, but he’s really good at basketball, I go watch his games,” or “Just my friends who play really well, they inspire me.” [We got this] answer from kids across the board. Kids at different schools with different backgrounds, playing different sports, they all said the same thing. Here’s a group of people that, yes, respond to big companies like Nike – yes, advertising is effective on them. If Nike advertises a really cool sneaker, [high school students] are going to be excited about that sneaker. But that doesn’t mean that all they care about is branding and marketing and messaging. They also care about their friends. There is a level of integrity and authenticity among high school students that is really impressive. At such a young age, all of these athletes were focused on what’s real to them, not just this picture of what’s in the media.

#### Related Links

- [American Marketing Association](#)
- [Saucony](#)
- [Forbes.com: Who Knew? Turns out Google Is a Killer Brand Marketer](#)
- [AdWeek: Saucony’s New Running Spot Trips Over Its Own Tongue](#)
- [AdWeek: Saucony Races to Rebrand](#)