

COMSTRAT 564

Customer-Brand Relationship Strategy:
An Integrated Marketing Communication Plan

Hot Topic Redux:

Extending the Hot Topic Brand for the Elder Millennial



A PROPOSAL BY

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Executive Summary

Hot Topic is a retail store that specializes in alternative clothing and licensed pop-culture merchandise. In the past, the store catered to the gothic and emo subcultures through a variety of clothing and accessory options, as well as music merchandise in the form of band T-shirts and albums. Currently, Hot Topic's selection focuses more on licensed merchandise in the form of Disney and Studio Ghibli-inspired clothing, with a muted emphasis on the alternative, gothic, and emo subcultures that formed the backbone of the long-term, loyal customer base. In an effort to provide a new value proposition and a return to old-school Hot Topic principles, a new sub-brand is needed to supplement Hot Topic's current business model.

To fulfill the desires of the elder millennial customer base, the launch of a new Hot Topic Redux sub-brand would include re-releases and updates of older, popular alternative styles. Hot Topic Redux would serve to capture late 90s to late 2000s nostalgia and reinvigorate the Elder Millennial's love of Hot Topic, while having the additional benefit of introducing traditional Hot Topic designs to a new generation of customers.

Using Greg Satell's Awareness-Sales-Advocacy marketing model, the Hot Topic Redux sub-brand seeks to expand its business through a holistic media plan centered on building long-term customer engagement through customer touchpoints.

Customer Personas

Brand and persona research was conducted using a variety of ethnographic secondary research via the Internet (see Appendix) and one-on-one interviews with three frequent Hot Topic shoppers over the age of 30. The secondary research articles frequently referenced comparisons between the “new” Hot Topic and the “old” Hot Topic. While Hot Topic has not released publicly disclosed financial records since they were acquired by private equity firm Sycamore Partners in 2013, their persistence in the brick and mortar mall space eludes to a successful business model. However, that business model has included a greater influence on expanded fandom licensing and a greater emphasis on current pop culture trends compared to the previous focus on alternative clothing options.

Based on the research conducted, two primary customer personas emerged.

They are detailed on the following pages.



Goth Gwen, the “Elder Millennial”

Life goals: To curl up with a good book while looking fabulous

Education level: Bachelor’s Degree

Age: 28-42

Common pains: Finding affordable, alternative clothes that express themselves

Interests: Reading, black cats, clothing

How they spend their free time: Watching video essays on YouTube, listening to podcasts

Internet Hangouts: Instagram (to look for that “Dark” Aesthetic)

Income level: \$35,000-\$65,000 a year



Musical Molly, the “Elder Emo”

Life goals: “I just want to be able to go to live shows again.”

Education level: Some college

Age: 27-39

Common pains: Can’t find skinny jeans ever since Gen Z “cancelled” them

Interests: Music, video games, Tim Burton films

How they spend their free time: Listening to music, learning guitar

Internet Hangouts: Spotify, Reddit

Income level: \$30,000-\$60,000 a year

Brand Identity

Brand Promise

“We pride ourselves on being the destination of pop culture and music merchandise. We do this by hiring the best people, having the best product, and providing the best customer experience for our one-of-a-kind fans.” (Hot Topic Mission Statement 2022 | Hot Topic Mission & Vision Analysis, 2021)

Brand Values

Since its founding, Hot Topic has prided itself on being contemporary, alternative, and fresh. It touts itself as the “Loudest Store in the Mall” and a “cool, music-inspired accessory destination for both guys and girls” (Company Info | Hot Topic, n.d.).

Brand Personality and Attributes

Hot Topic represents the alternative population and pop culture enthusiasts. It is inclusive, cutting-edge, and fun. Hot Topic understands the importance of self-expression through clothing, accessory, and entertainment choices. They encourage the discovery of new music, and celebrate the unique aspects of every customer.

In terms of attributes, Hot Topic can best be described as:

- Alternative
- Gothic
- Unique
- Welcoming
- Entertaining

New Brand Concept

Today's Hot Topic caters to a wide array of fandoms, from TV shows like Supernatural to Kpop groups like BTS. In the mix, there are still gothic and alternative elements, including the contemporary pastel goth trend. The primary demographic is 12-22 year olds, with a strong secondary market of older, "Elder Millennials." From the insights gleaned from my secondary research, as well as one-on-one interviews, the millennials yearn for older aspects of the store, including past popular clothing designs. The eponymous Hot Topic brand already releases a wide variety of clothing styles, from gothic dresses to bright tank tops. I propose expanding the brand by creating a "Hot Topic Redux" sub-brand. This sub-brand would include re-releases and updates of older, popular alternative styles.

Hot Topic Redux Clothing Example



The preceding designs are what Hot Topic has done in the past to cater to the alternative clothing niche. These particular designs, while still available to access on Hot Topic, have not been in stock for at least 5 years. Using these and other older Hot Topic brand designs as inspiration, the Hot Topic Redux brand would strive to capture the "old Hot Topic" feel, fulfilling the desires of the older, loyal customer base as well as introducing the designs to the younger customer base. Launching the Hot Topic Redux brand would offer ample opportunities for customer engagement, be a source of surprise and delight for the older customer base, and call back to the alternative, expressionist roots of the Hot Topic brand while still maintaining the current, successful business model.

Customer Engagement Plan and Customer Touchpoints

Objective 1: Awareness Touchpoints

Hot Topic's primary demographic is 12-22 year olds, with a strong secondary market of older, "Elder Millennials." For the purposes of the Hot Topic Redux sub-brand, reaching the secondary market is the main goal. Considering the unique and niche reputation Hot Topic holds in the retail market, customers interested in alternative fashion likely have a long history with the brand. As such, awareness factors can focus on notifying these customers and playing on the nostalgia angle of Hot Topic Redux.

Attention

- **Hot Topic Redux Collection Website Section** | The Hot Topic Redux brand would receive its own special section on the Hot Topic website for ease in browsing and linking to associated awareness campaign announcements.
- **Campaign Hashtag** | Encourage sharing of Hot Topic Redux-related topics using hashtag **#HTredux**
- **Omnichannel Social Media Announcement** | Coordinated campaign posts/videos on associated Hot Topic Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Youtube, and Pinterest revealing Hot Topic Redux.
- **Paid Social Media Ads** | Paid ads promoting the Hot Topic Redux collection on Facebook and Instagram.
- **Email Announcement** | Email announcement sent in coordination with omnichannel social media push. The email would link to the Hot Topic Redux collection website and come with a 30% off coupon code to encourage purchases among the main customer loyalty base.

Evaluation

- **Influencer Marketing Push** | Send Hot Topic Redux collection clothing to influencers in the alternative fashion space to promote Hot Topic Redux throughout interested communities in advance of the collection's launch.
- **Customer Reviews** | Encourage customers to leave feedback/reviews for Hot Topic Redux collection on Hot Topic website, Facebook, and Instagram.

Objective 2: Sales Touchpoints

Many people targeted by the Hot Topic Redux awareness campaign will likely be long-term customers of Hot Topic, or otherwise be interested in alternative clothing. However, some customers may not shop frequently at Hot Topic in its current iteration. The Hot Topic Redux sub-brand can serve as a strong sales motivator where there would otherwise be limited engagement. Robust recency and proximity protocols must be initiated to establish habitual repeat transactions.

Recency

- **Email Retargeting** | Implement retargeting strategies to email loyalty database to encourage additional Hot Topic Redux purchases, offering a \$15 off \$50 coupon code.
- **Paid Social Media Retargeting** | Implement retargeted paid social ads offering a \$15 off \$50 coupon code to individuals who made a Hot Topic Redux purchase on the Hot Topic website.
- **Email updates** | Notify email loyalty database of new additions to Hot Topic Redux collection.
- **Omnichannel Social Media Updates** | Post new Hot Topic Redux-related marketing materials to associated Hot Topic Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Youtube, and Pinterest to notify followers about new additions to Hot Topic Redux Collection using older models to reflect the elder millennial demographic.

Proximity

- **Radius Marketing** | Send push notifications via radius marketing to all users with the Hot Topic app, giving them 20% off in-store on Hot Topic Redux purchases.
- **Physical Store Displays** | New store displays, including product wall sections, end-caps, and point-of-sale printed materials will be used to update the physical appearance of brick and mortar stores to give people a taste of the old-school Hot Topic experience while also showcasing the Hot Topic Redux collection.
- **In-Store Launch Events** | Physical stores reserve the option for in-store live music events for Hot Topic Redux collection launch.

Objective 3: Advocacy Touchpoints

Self-expression is the heart of alternative fashion, and there are great possibilities to create advocacy around the Hot Topic Redux sub-brand through business-to-consumer (B2C) communication and peer-to-peer (P2P) community engagement. Through establishing dialogues around the Hot Topic Redux brand, the awareness-sales-advocacy model can spread to new customers and engage the existing loyal customer base.

Value Exchange

- **Customer-based Inventory Requests** | The Hot Topic Redux collection contains retired designs and clothing inspired by old-school Hot Topic fashion of the late 90s to the late 2000s. Customers will be encouraged to contact Hot Topic online to request more old and out of stock items to add to the Hot Topic Redux collection.
- **“Back by Popular Request”** | Additionally, when popular Hot Topic Redux items sell out, customers are similarly encouraged to put in a restocking request.
- **Item Polls** | Customers will be encouraged to vote on polls of retired designs on the Hot Topic website, Facebook, and Instagram in order to gauge interest for new Hot Topic Redux items.

Community

- **Hot Topic Redux Online Community** | Using the #HTredux hashtag, customers would be encouraged to show their outfits on Hot Topic social media channels (mainly Facebook and Instagram).
- **“Share Your Redux” Contest** | Customers would be encouraged to share their photos and experiences shopping at Hot Topic in the late 90s to late 2000s and share what the Hot Topic Redux brand means to them now.
- **Visibility Elements** | Special pins, banners, stickers, and digital assets would be available to customers to share their excitement for the Hot Topic Redux brand.
- **Affiliate program** | Influencers would be encouraged to apply for the Hot Topic Redux affiliate program to become brand ambassadors and make money while they express their love for Hot Topic Redux.

Message Contents

To expand on the modalities discussed in the Customer Engagement Plan, selected message contents will be listed here as a guideline for upcoming Hot Topic Redux campaign communications.

Objective 1: Awareness

Overall Purpose:

Notifying customers of the Hot Topic Redux launch, playing on the nostalgia angle of the new brand.

Attention

- **Message | Omnichannel Social Media Announcement |** “Hot Topic proudly announces an exciting return to form! Join us for the launch of Hot Topic Redux, a new brand with all of your old Hot Topic favorites and new styles with gothic and alternative flavor. It’s just like you remember, but better.”

Message Benefit: This message will serve to target interested publics that follow Hot Topic’s social media channels.

- **Message and Incentive | Email Announcement |** “Hot Topic proudly announces an exciting return to form! Join us for the launch of Hot Topic Redux, a new brand with all of your old Hot Topic favorites and new styles with gothic and alternative flavor. It’s just like you remember, but better. For a limited time, receive 30% off your Hot Topic Redux purchase!”

Message Benefit and Incentive: This message will serve to target the email loyalty database, notifying them of the Hot Topic Redux launch and offering an incentive to purchase the brand.

Evaluation

- **Message and Incentive | Influencer Marketing Push |** Individual messages will be subject to influencer feedback. Encourage influencers to use **#HTredux** hashtag and offer influencer promo code (unique to influencer) for 20% off a Hot Topic Redux purchase.

Message Benefit and Incentive: Influencer marketing will serve to inform the Hot Topic community about the Hot Topic Redux launch, expand the Hot Topic community, and offer incentive to purchase the brand.

- **Message and Incentive | Customer Reviews |** “Love your new Hot Topic Redux gear? Tell us about it! Leave a review on the Hot Topic website and earn a \$5 reward toward your next purchase.”

Message Benefit and Incentive: Review requests would solicit customer evaluations of the Hot Topic Redux brand, increasing trust for potential brand purchases by new/existing customers. The \$5 reward offers an incentive to review their previous purchase and make a new purchase.

Objective 2: Sales

Overall Purpose:

Encouraging sales of the Hot Topic Redux brand.

Recency

- **Message and Incentive | Email Retargeting |** “That purchase you made? It just earned you a \$15 off \$50 reward on your next Hot Topic Redux purchase! Check out the latest and greatest additions to Hot Topic Redux right here: (Hot Topic Redux website link).

Message Benefit and Incentive: Email retargeting is an effective strategy for return purchases

and additional revenue. The \$15 off \$50 offer rewards Hot Topic customers for their loyalty and encourages more purchasing behavior.

Proximity

- **Message and Incentive | Radius Marketing – Push Notifications** | “Check out the Hot Topic Redux collection today and take 20% off your in-store purchase!”

Message Benefit and Incentive: Radius marketing would serve to encourage visits to physical Hot Topic stores and increase familiarity with the Hot Topic Redux brand. The 20% discount would encourage transactions in-store.

Objective 3: Advocacy

Overall Purpose:

Encouraging community support of the Hot Topic Redux brand.

Value Exchange

- **Message | Customer-based Inventory Requests** | “Do you think we’re missing something? Tell us! The Hot Topic Redux brand is here to serve you. If we don’t have the items that you’re looking for, let us know! We’ll do our best to add them to the Hot Topic Redux collection.

Message Benefit: The inventory request program encourages customer participation and dialogue with the Hot Topic Redux brand while acknowledging the customer’s need for self-expression.

- **Message | “Back by Popular Request”** | “We’re sorry, this item is sold out! Let us know that you miss it so we can get it back in stock.”

Message Benefit: The popular request program serves as a gauge of desired inventory and lets Hot Topic customers know that their opinion matters.

Community

- **Message | Hot Topic Redux Online Community** | “Show off your style! Tag us with #HTredux to get featured on our social media channels and have a chance to share your favorite Hot Topic Redux styles with the community”

Message Benefit: Social sharing promotes community participation, encourages self-expression, and spreads awareness of the Hot Topic Redux brand.

- **Message and Incentive | “Share Your Redux” Contest** | “Have you been rocking out at Hot Topic since forever? We want your stories and pictures! Share your experiences from the 90s to the late 2000s with us and let us know what the Hot Topic Redux brand means to you now. We’ll be giving the Top 10 winners free Hot Topic Redux swag and exclusive discounts. We’ll even give you 30% off your next Hot Topic Redux purchase just for entering!”

Message Benefit and Incentive: The Share Your Redux contest would encourage community participation and encourage awareness/sales of the Hot Topic Redux brand.

Long-Term Relationship Building

Hot Topic Redux Brand Promise

Hot Topic promises to honor its rich history in the alternative and gothic communities by serving the people that represent the spirit of such self-expression.

Hot Topic Redux Brand Values

Hot Topic Redux is a return to form for the brand, representing the best that late 90s to late 2000s alternative fashion has to offer. Hot Topic Redux seeks to provide new clothing and accessory options that honor this special time in Hot Topic history.

Hot Topic Redux Value Proposition

By returning to its roots, Hot Topic Redux serves their long-term customer's desire for the now-nostalgic gothic and emo styles that filled Hot Topic stores in the late 90s to late 2000s. This will inspire engagement and express appreciation for Hot Topic's strong secondary market of elder millennials and give younger populations the chance to experience the "old days" of Hot Topic.

The Hot Topic Redux brand would be a source of surprise and delight for long-term customers and inspire continuous engagement with the brand. Additionally, the brand would encompass several key touchpoints in relation to customer engagement: functionality, emotional factors, and self-expression. The clothes are functional and tangible, Hot Topic itself endears emotional and nostalgic reactions in the elder millennial market, and the entirety of Hot Topic's purpose relates to self-expression. Overall, the Hot Topic Redux brand would fill the needs of its long-term customers while introducing a new generation to the concepts that made Hot Topic a unique and fun shopping destination for the alternative community.

Appendix: Research Documents

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