

The route to youth

Climbing brands share strategies to approach sport's shifting demographics

→ **THE CLIMBING CROWD IS CHANGING.**

With more gyms opening in the United States, more kids are starting out as gym climbers, and many are staying there. Without the accessibility barriers of a long hike, drive and with adult supervision in indoor gyms easy, the kid sector is growing, and companies on the show floor are flocking to help. Collectively, the goal for companies is the same — to promote the sport of climbing, albeit each with their own spin on it.

La Sportiva (#18027) is focusing more on partnering with youth rather than pushing them to excel at the elite level at a young age. “We are really cautious on how we address youth programs with sponsorship or partnership,” said Ian Achey, events and promotions manager. “We want kids to grow up climbing because they are passionate about it. With that mentality, there is less of a chance of burnout and injuries. It is

more about community involvement and less about sponsorship.” La Sportiva partners mainly with climbing teams around the Boulder, Colo. area (where its U.S. headquarters is located) and with youth competition events.

Mad Rock (#4037) is taking a similar approach, giving kids great sale deals to lessen the financial burden. Along with partnering with teams and coaches throughout the country, it has a resale program that allows climbers to donate their shoes to be resoled and given to those in need. “The shoes don’t even need to be our brand,” said Kenny Suh,

sales and marketing director. “We just think that getting the first pair of shoes on people is a key step in engaging them in this sport.”

Instead of the relatively up to the coaches to do the coaching approach that La Sportiva and Mad Rock take, **Five Ten (#12017)** is getting really involved with the development of their athletes, outside of climbing. “It is important to get them product and develop them as climbers,” said Nancy Prichard-Bouchard, communications director, “but we have always had a huge education and professional development

component to our programs. If kids want to be the next Dean Potter, they need to be able to write a paragraph.” As part of their athlete programs, Five Ten encourages their athletes to have blogs and promote their sport.

Evolv (#1033) has high hopes for gains with youth climbing. “Parents are bringing kids to the rock gym instead of soccer practice,” said Marketing Manager Mychele Lepinsky. “They want to write one check and have the gym figure out the kids T-shirt and shoe size. We partner with gyms so that when kids start the team, it can be like all other sports out there.”

Climbing companies, though different in execution, all are after the same thing — getting shoes on kids and keeping them on the wall. As Lepinsky said: “Brands should play nicely in the sandbox. After all, it is the youth that keeps us all here.”

--LORIN PALEY

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