

## **Episode 10: Focus on Alumni with Sydney Hylland**

### **Kathryn Harth:**

Welcome to Get Online from Great Plains IDEA. I'm your host, Kathryn Harth. Thanks for downloading this week's podcast. Get Online has expert advice and creative resources to inform and enrich the online educational experience for both students and faculty.

This is the third episode in which we bring you the stories and life achievements of Great Plains IDEA alumni. These short profiles on individuals give listeners a glance into what it's like to follow your dream, face down a challenge, and accomplish something when doubt almost stopped you.

Today I'm joined by a recent graduate of our merchandising master's program, Sydney Hylland, who shares with us her journey in the retail industry from North Branch, Minnesota to Momo, Sweden. You'll get to hear how her newest employer rivals the efficiency of the e-commerce giant Amazon, what fascinates her about her industry, and why she believes a college degree is still worth it.

Sydney, welcome! Thank you so much for joining us as an alumni guest for this episode of Get Online.

### **Sydney Hylland:**

Thanks for having me, I'm really excited to be here.

### **Kathryn Harth:**

We are excited to hear your story. Let's start with something kind of simple, why did you choose the field of merchandising and retail? Was there a moment in your life when you realized this was your path or a job or even a person that made you fall in love with this industry?

### **Sydney Hylland:**

Yeah, actually. a little bit of both. There was somebody, and an experience. So I actually grew up thinking, I don't even know where it came from, I just wanted to be a lawyer. That was just what I've always wanted to do, even as a little kid, you have a dress up for career day, I was asking to put on my mom's blazer and go to school. So I had always planned on that and then I went to California for spring break with a friend of mine and my cousin's wife is a CEO and president of a very high-end premium retailer, and I kind of saw what she did for the day because we were hanging out at her office. I could totally do this and I was talking to some of the buyers there and I just realized, "okay, this is what I need to do with my life." I've always loved fashion, this is nothing new, I love the retail side. It's just talking to people and getting to understand consumers, [it] just really resonated with me and it was just then I knew I needed to switch.

### **Kathryn Harth:**

So you were in high school when you discovered your path?

**Sydney Hylland:**

Yeah.

**Kathryn Harth:**

You're lucky. Not a lot of people get to find their path so soon, that is really neat and I think that speaks a lot to job shadowing. The opportunity for high school students to get to go job shadow.

**Sydney Hylland:**

Definitely, because until you're talking to people that actually do that job on a daily basis, you don't understand what jobs are out there, and even school, especially at NDSU, and through my master's program with GP IDEA, there's so much exposure to what kind of jobs you can do and you don't even know about half the stuff out there until you hear of it and you're like "oh that's really interesting."

I really didn't even understand that people were making these floor designs and setting out things for major retailers, I didn't understand that it was a job or technical design and all these really cool things, and you get exposed to it in all these different ways.

It's kind of chance, but also taking the time to learn about them as well.

**Kathryn Harth:**

It's all about exposure. So let's talk a little bit about your master's degree. There is a lot of talk in society today about whether a college degree is worth it or not, you have a bachelor's degree, a graduate certificate, and a master's degree, most recently, completing your master's degree through Great Plains IDEA.

So my question to you is as a very recent graduate of a master's program, what do you think? Do you feel it's worth it?

**Sydney Hylland:**

I mean, obviously, I'm a little biased, but definitely. I really don't think I would have some of the experience I have today and I know previously at one of my jobs they said how that really stood out on my resume and how I was able to show that I could go to school and work at the same time; just shows discipline, that I was good with time management.

I would highly recommend it if it's something that's going to help you in your career. Definitely, if the thought's even there, it'll do wonders for career advancement.

**Kathryn Harth:**

That's great, that's great to hear that for you, personally, it has been very helpful.

**Sydney Hylland:**

Oh definitely, I think it's the ease. I was very fortunate enough to still be able to travel and do my school work. I was on vacation, I just read on the plane or write a paper while I'm sitting at an

airport, there's so much you can do and I feel like it doesn't take up too much of your time. I really was able to focus on my career, get it started, and then do my school work at night and on the weekends.

And one thing that's great about online is most of the classes have your literature and your lecture that you can listen to and read in your time. So if I have a really long day at work, I don't have to stress out and be like "okay, I have to sit in class for two to three hours tonight." I can do my school work whenever I want to or, sometimes when I had lectures that were a little bit longer, I would listen to it on my way to work.

I can be a lot more productive with my time and I just think it's so much more beneficial when you have more control of your schedule. And I didn't have to feel guilty if I wanted to push back not doing an assignment when I was planning with writing it down on my calendar for the week like "okay, Tuesday I need to do this, if I want to push it off to a Wednesday because it's not due, why not?"

It's really nice to be able to take control of your schedule and I don't feel like I had to sacrifice my social life just to do school and work because I have seen a lot of people do that.

**Kathryn Harth:**

Obviously, you're a very organized person, just on what you just shared.

**Sydney Hylland:**

Yes, time management's huge.

**Kathryn Harth:**

Yeah, to sit down each week and kind of plot it out and know how it's going to happen, that's a great skill to have.

**Sydney Hylland:**

Yeah, I wouldn't say it's easier, but it's a lot easier when you can take control of your schedule. And as long as you're good with your deadlines and you make sure you meet those, it's no issues and it's really cool to also get to know professors from all over the country and students like my network from classes are huge, absolutely huge.

If I were to move back to the US, if I just pick a state, I'm like "okay, I actually know a professor or another student in my class that lives there that I could connect with" because they obviously are in the same field.

So, it's great that I have connections at Nike, Timberland, Apple, all these really cool companies that it's not even just good for professional networking, you learn more about those industries too.

**Kathryn Harth:**

That's fascinating. You know, research in higher ed is showing there are more and more online programs, but what they're finding is that even though a student could enroll anywhere in the country, at any school in the country because it will be an online program, most students still choose a school within 100 miles of where they live.

Even though it's online and they never have to go to campus, they're still choosing a school within 100 miles of where they live and that has a lot to do with brand recognition. Wanting your employer to recognize the quality of the education you're getting.

Break [music]

**Kathryn Harth:**

The Great Plains IDEA Merchandising Program prepares students to navigate the retail industry and develop corporate social responsibility initiatives. Dedicated faculty from five universities work together to provide a technology-rich program that helps students improve business strategies through profit-maximization, customer satisfaction, and selling approaches, all measured through the triple bottom line with a strong focus on sustainability.

This unique program offers a master's degree or graduate certificate and is 100% online, allowing students the flexibility to choose what fits best with their academic and professional goals. Learn more about the merchandising program at [www.gpidea.org](http://www.gpidea.org).

Break [music]

**Kathryn Harth:**

You mentioned several brands right there that you got to learn about through your interactions with fellow students, but you've also worked for some popular brands like Best Buy, Stitch Fix, and now you work for Boozt. So share with listeners something they might be surprised to know about what it's like to work with big and growing companies like that.

**Sydney Hylland:**

Regardless of whether if you're working for a big or growing company you really need to be able to adapt to any environment. Best Buy was such a huge company and just the buying merchandising team was over 150 people, it's huge so just being able to adapt. Sometimes they move people around and just on the need of resources and people to help out, you really need to be able to be like "yep, I am totally fine with shifting gears and changing teams onto a whole different product line that I have no idea about."

When I was working at Best Buy I started in health and wellness, so I worked with Apple, Garmin, Samsung, a lot of baby items, so LV, which is really cool, Miku, some up and coming baby monitors, and Owlette is maybe one that people are familiar with. It's become quite popular from Kim Kardashian, actually.

So it's like you learn those products and then I shipped it over to the laundry team. And so learning about major appliances, which for someone that was fresh out of college, I had never bought an appliance before. I knew nothing but you really have to just learn the product and be able to adapt to those situations.

But then working for Boozt, it's so much smaller. Our buying and merchandising team are maybe 50 people, but they're growing so fast, this time last year the team that I'm on currently was one person and now it's seven. It's growing so fast that they're almost not able to keep up and luckily they're able to hire people throughout the pandemic. So that's fantastic, and getting people to move all over the world, they've been great with sponsoring visas and getting the best talent possible to work for them.

There's a huge difference between working for a smaller company than a big, I think you get a lot more say, a lot more voice, and you also get to know people, obviously, a lot faster. So it's really good on the networking side and being able to show your worth to maybe someone that's not going to see it every single day. I have a better relationship with people that are in C-Suite with Boozt than I did at Best Buy because I have the availability to them and I've only been there for a short period of time.

It's quite a big difference, but overall, I think you just need to adapt.

**Kathryn Harth:**

Adaptability, that is critical, so in preparation for today I had never heard of Boozt and so I was doing some research on their LinkedIn page and on their website and they claim on their website, they say that they are a technology company in the fashion industry and obviously they're growing, you said that, so then that really paints a picture as to why someone fresh out of grad school would want to get in with a company like this.

But you had to move across an ocean to Sweden from Minnesota to do that, so was there something about the company that you love? Maybe you should explain to listeners what the company does and then was there something about it that you really loved beyond just the growth?

**Sydney Hylland:**

Yeah, so Boozt started as a company, you could compare it to Shopify, so people put their stores online and sell their product and more of a technology platform, and now they have shifted into a- we still consider it a tech company, but they still do fashion and it's growing astronomically, like ridiculously fast.

We've beat so many numbers and so the unique thing about them is that they only do things online, they all have their own outlet so they call it Booztlet, so when probably can't sell or if maybe they bought too much, they can put it on Booztlet so they have like the outlet store but then they also have a physical beauty store and the best I can compare it to is Sephora. It's very premium, very high end, the merchandising in the store is fantastic, they do a really really good job, but they just focus on being able to deliver the best online.

Also, the best way I can compare it is like Amazon in the US. So Amazon just launched in Sweden three weeks ago now, so it's very new, it's very minimal. It's just not a good user experience. And in the US, I know I was so used to having things delivered in one to two days and it was great, it was very very great, but they don't have that here. They don't have that service, but Boozt is like that for fashion anywhere in the Nordic.

So that's where they're getting people, and it's great they can do one to two days within anywhere in Norway, Sweden, Finland, Germany, Denmark, it's crazy how fast they ship. I ordered something the other day and it took less than 24 hours to get there.

**Kathryn Harth:**

That's insane.

**Sydney Hylland:**

I know, and it's great. So it's really really good, the customers are really happy. There's not a lot of customer disappointment, and they're able to do that through having the largest electronic warehouse in the world, bigger than Amazon.

**Kathryn Harth:**

I think I saw a picture of that.

**Sydney Hylland:**

Yeah, it's really cool, and they have that just outside of where I'm living in Momo, but now we're right on the train and it's huge. They're even building onto it, they're going to have a bigger machine, it's world-class.

It's phenomenal what they're able to do for such a small company growing so fast. That's what really attracted me to the company itself, but then in college styles, I always loved e-commerce and omni channel shopping and I just knew that was the future of the growth of technology. So it was just a really good move.

It was a great opportunity. I saw it on LinkedIn, applied, and scored an interview, and here we are.

**Kathryn Harth:**

Cool, I'm so excited for you. I'm just getting excited hearing you talk about this, I can't imagine living your life right now, how cool.

**Sydney Hylland:**

Yeah, it's been a really interesting experience going from American work culture to formal culture because Boozt hires so many international employees, I think we have over 37 right now, or just around that number. I only know of two other Americans at the company. So it's really cool to work with people from all around the world and they all have very unique

experiences and how they got there, some are Swedish, yes, or Danish because we live right across from Copenhagen, some are from there.

Then a lot of people ended up marrying a Swede, or like me and just saw the great opportunity, and why not? Yeah, it's just very different working with people that are international because it's a lot more relaxed than what I'm used to, I mean, the dress code is different, people wear leggings to work and that first time I thought "oh my gosh, that totally throws me off." I used to wear heels in a blazer, it's very very different.

**Kathryn Harth:**

With all the work from home, I think a lot of people are wearing leggings to work right now. But you get to do it and actually go into the office and that's awesome. That's great.

So you're kind of leading me into the last question that I have for our interview today, I wonder if you could provide some advice for our listeners. What would you say to a listener who is uncertain about working in the retail industry, or you could answer what would you say to a listener who's holding back and uncertain about getting a master's degree?

**Sydney Hylland:**

I think if you're thinking about getting a master's degree, just do it because there are so many different options, there are different programs and, like you said, so many people usually go closer to home for school. Most schools now offer online programs and it is great that you're able to work a full-time job and go to school, or you can even work part-time, go to school full-time, there's so many different options that work for all schedules.

I think it's just very doable, it's very easy to do, but if anyone's ever thinking about working in the retail industry, I would definitely do my research or maybe ask some professionals that are in the industry already. What kind of jobs are out there because you really don't know until you are exposed to these positions.

I think people always know what a buyer is, or merchandiser, or visual planner, technical design, there's just so much. Don't limit yourself, really get to know what else is out there because I think when people think of retail, they think of just working in a store. I did that in college and I loved it. It was fun getting to know customers, and yes, working in a store is a blast, just the energy, but there's more than just that.

There are so many different routes you can take.

**Kathryn Harth:**

That's good advice, thank you so much, Sydney, for joining us today and sharing your journey and telling us about your experiences. We really appreciate it and we wish you all the best.

**Sydney Hylland:**

Well, thank you. It's been great, thanks for having me.

**Kathryn Harth:**

That wraps things up for season 1 of Get Online... We are going to take a break, but you can download other episodes from season one wherever you get your podcasts or visit our website to learn more about Great Plains IDEA. Just go to [www.gpidea.org](http://www.gpidea.org).

Special thanks to our guest, Sydney Hylland, and Dr. Linda Manikowski, professor at North Dakota State University, who put me in touch with Sydney.

In the final moments of this episode, on behalf of the team here at Great Plains IDEA, I'd like to say thank you to our listeners. We've learned a lot in this first season and we appreciate your patience and your support.

I'm your host Kathryn Harth, and until next time, Get Online.