



SUDDEN REVIVALS

## Fashion's Zombie Brands: They're Baaack

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Photo: Courtesy Everett Collection

Another day, another revival of a fashion house, with a photogenic young man attached to design it. Nothing to see here, just another turn of the blithely spinning fashion-news wheel, right? Except that the brand in question is only four years old and is best known for selling moderately priced trays, costume jewelry, and other whimsical gift-friendly items. I'm referring to last Thursday's announcement that [C. Wonder would be revived](#), with stylist and television personality Brad Goreski as its creative director and QVC as its launchpad.

Revivals in fashion are old hat, of course. [Schiaparelli](#) and [Vionnet](#) have been brought back, with some success; [Halston](#), less so. A [revamped Charles James](#) is on its way, thanks to Harvey Weinstein, and [Paul Poiret got a new lease on life this week](#). But these names have the kind of history and pedigree that make them seem ripe for another round. No disrespect to gilt costume jewelry, but C. Wonder, in terms of comebacks, is more like the [Crystal Pepsi](#) of fashion.

This particular revival is coming to us thanks to Xcel Brands, a four-year-old brand-development and media company that also owns the rights to H by Halston (which will return this fall with another TV-friendly personality, Decades' Cameron Silver, as its fashion director). But it's also been seen at [dELiA\\*s](#), which is mining the nostalgia of Gen-Xers and older millennials who used to pass the catalogue around in the cafeteria ([#deliasforever](#), reads the copy on its revamped website, fittingly). The past few months have also brought resurrections of tween paradise [Limited Too](#), and on the higher end, of [Band of Outsiders](#), a company that only just went out of business this spring, but has already been [snapped up](#) by the Belgian company CLCC SA.

Why is this happening? And is it a viable business strategy? Has the nostalgia window narrowed, or is it simply that there are no new ideas? With a [Harper Lee "prequel"](#) on the best-seller list, [Heroes: Reloaded](#) coming to prime time, and a reboot of the hardly venerable [Fantastic Four movie](#) on our screens, it's been a summer of zombie entertainment properties, so perhaps it's fitting that we are fully immersed in that phenomenon's fashion equivalent: zombie brands.

For Robert D'Loren, chairman and CEO of Xcel Brands, C. Wonder's value lies in its wide-ranging appeal. "What was so great about C. Wonder and what did Chris Burch do incredibly well?" he asks rhetorically. "[It] appeals to five very broad demographics, from Gen Z to the boomer — there's a cool factor [there]." (Though he adds that "it's the 30 and up [contingent] that's paying the bills.") For Xcel, which also has [Isaac Mizrahi](#) and Judith Ripka in its stable, working with known quantities has been a formula for success. After all, he points out, "when you buy brands that have already created that awareness and have that loyal customer base, you're starting in a much better place. Start-ups are incredibly difficult, particularly in today's environment."

"There's certainly more brand awareness than one could build over a short period of time," agrees Liz Dunn, founder and CEO of the brand-strategy consulting firm Talmage Advisors, "versus just saying, 'I'm going to start a preppy, value-oriented retailer from scratch.'" She adds that C. Wonder connected with customers — "It wasn't for everyone, but I think some shoppers were fans of the brand and sad to see it go" — and that its woes could be chalked up more to "some really bad business decisions, particularly around real estate." In particular, she thinks Burch opened too many stores, too quickly, in expensive areas — there were 32 in total, many of them located in high-end malls like the Shops at Columbus Circle and the Westchester in White Plains.

D'Loren says that we can expect the new C. Wonder to be very much like its predecessor, with a few tweaks. "The product mix will be the same, but with a more robust apparel and accessories collection," he says. In addition to selling the wares on QVC, D'Loren says that Xcel Brands plans to launch them in department stores and via e-commerce. They will not open freestanding stores Stateside, but may enter into license agreements for stores around the world. As for how they'll carry on Burch's tradition of in-store whimsy ([spontaneous staff dance parties](#), [musical dressing rooms](#)), "In the world of entertainment that we live on television, it's pretty easy to do that, especially with a personality like Brad," D'Loren says. "We can do [it] in social media in a much bigger way than a single store environment. The challenge will be, how do we replicate that shopper experience in the department store channel? And we're working on it, so stay tuned."

C. Wonder has its loyalists, who may indeed follow the company down these new paths. But in the juniors space, things get a bit more challenging. [dELiA\\*s](#) and Limited Too don't sound like they're planning top-to-toe transformations, either. A spokesperson for Bluestar Alliance, which bought the latter, told the [New York Post](#), "We are going to bring it all back." While Gen-Xers and millennials fondly recall [dELiA\\*s](#), and their younger counterparts couldn't wait to snap up glittery baby tees at Limited Too, both stores still have to tackle a demographic of current teens and tweens who aren't subject to that nostalgic pull. Can these revived not-so-classics ever exceed their first iterations? "I don't think that they can," says Dunn, "but that doesn't mean that they can't have some successful presence, scaled down from where they were."

Which may be the point. Fashion right now is practically the polar opposite of tech — start-up-averse and incredibly cautious. While that's understandable in such a high-risk industry, it has a side effect of keeping new and creative approaches at bay in favor of sure bets. Still, whether or not it's Good for Fashion, expect zombie brands to become increasingly common. According to D'Loren, Xcel is always looking for new properties to inject with new life. As he puts it, "Anything that would increase market share would be of interest to us."