

Challengers to Watch 2023: Early Majority

By [Jude Bliss](#), issued by [eatbigfish](#)

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The world remains uncertain, and businesses must adapt to new and unpredictable economic, geopolitical and environmental realities. Against this backdrop, it's important to pay attention to the new (and renewed) challengers emerging and primed to disrupt categories in 2023. These companies are finding opportunities in the uncertainty, breaking with expectations, and not just meeting the needs of a fast-changing world but shaping its future.

In the 10th instalment of our annual 'Challengers to Watch' feature, we identify 20 rising companies from around the world and explore the broader trends, opportunities and threats to the status quo they represent.

Our roundup covers an expansive range of categories, markets and geographies, but all these companies share a firm rejection of 'best practice' and an understanding of the imperative to make their own rules.

Early Majority – for reimagining 'growth'



Can capitalism save the world?

A recent study found that many countries, including the UK and US, have managed to achieve economic growth while reducing emissions. But there's also plenty of evidence to suggest free-market solutions won't move quickly enough. For example, according to another study, the much-hyped electric vehicle revolution has reduced US gas consumption by just 0.54%.

The scale and urgency of the climate crisis have led to private companies making ever-more radical and dramatic moves that push the boundaries of capitalism as we know it. We've seen nature enter the boardroom at Patagonia and Rivian. Resale and circular economy businesses like Back Market and Olio boom. And now the concept of 'Degrowth' is perhaps moving from academia to the mainstream.



The idea is simple. Degrowth is about us all making and buying much less. It's a theory that questions economic growth as an indicator of prosperity and posits happiness and health as far more meaningful and useful measures of success. Several companies might share in some of the values and principles of Degrowth, (for example, building products to last), but few explicitly build their entire business on the philosophy. Early Majority is an outdoor clothing company that's very existence appears to test in real-time whether Degrowth can provide a sustainable and profitable model for business.

Founded by former Patagonia VP of Marketing Joy Howard, Early Majority runs a membership model whereby the company makes products specifically for, and builds lasting relationships with, its members to avoid excessive production and consumption – the root cause of fast fashion's environmental footprint. Member benefits include access to reduced pricing, exclusive online content, early access to new product launches and a voice in future product development.



Products form a system of outerwear with individual items cleverly designed to be layered and unlayered from one another to suit all climates and activities. The aim here is for the brand to provide everything for a long-lasting, minimal wardrobe for all eventualities. Members can even opt-in for weather updates via text from Early Majority which advise on clothing combinations for the specific climate and pursuit users face.

In line with its commitment to circularity, all products come with an impressive lifetime guarantee, and customers can send items that are no longer wanted back to Early Majority to be cleaned, refurbished and re-sold, with the sender getting 70% of the resale value in cash or credit for the full value.

While products like its anorak or puffer are very utilitarian, wearers can customise each item with different badges or logos that attach via magnets to a badge dock on the clothing. The idea is that members can show off new 'brands' or community affiliations by simply updating the badge, not their jacket or wardrobe - an intelligent solution that's far less taxing on the planet's precious resources while satisfying consumers' desire for brands and the 'new'. Members can show off new 'brands' or community affiliations by simply updating the badge, not their jacket or wardrobe.

But fitting the degrowth model within the need to ultimately make a profit is challenging, and this could prove the catch for some. Early Majority's commitment to sustainable and circular business is 'priced in', making its clothing expensive (or perhaps simply representative of what clothing should cost if climate impact was considered). An anorak costs £500 (£350 for members), and the puffer jacket £1245 (£840 for members).

'I'm not anti-growth per se, [...] but the way that we grow is the question that we have to grapple with.' Howard told The Business of Fashion podcast. 'At the core of the business, is the question: what if we try to grow this business by expanding a supportive community rather than proliferating unnecessary product?.'

The membership model is rising in popularity within fashion, with Swiss running brand On experimenting with the model and Swedish giant H&M launching its own in-house membership-based clothing venture called Singular Society last year.

‘This new idea is that people who participate in the brand, can own part of the brand and can benefit from the effort and energy they put into it,’ Howard says. ‘Anybody that comes into the brand has this sense that they’re participating in something emergent and different, and they’re willing to come along for the ride.’

It’s early days for Early Majority, but it may have already changed fashion for good. Will we see the incumbents follow in 2023?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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