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# GROWTH STRATEGIES

## How these tech entrepreneurs built a 'better bra' for runners

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Christinne Muschi for National Post Co-founders Frederic Chanay, left, and Stephane Marceau knew nothing about textiles when they launched OMSignal to make smart clothing. Still, their flagship product — a smart sport bra for runners — racked up 10,000 orders before its pilot launch.

About five years ago, having worked with U.S. giants such as AT&T in the mobile health space, Montreal-based tech entrepreneurs Stephane Marceau and Frederic Chanay decided there was huge opportunity in smart clothing and created OMSignal, backed by venture capital. The flagship product: a smart sports bra for women runners.

The pair approached biometric apparel from a shared background in software, thinking they could outsource **textile development**. **“In hindsight, that was an incredibly naive mistake,” Marceau said. “The software platform and the textiles are intricately intertwined. To do smart apparel right, you have to master the physical and digital.”**

Marceau downloaded the book *Fashion Technology* on to his Kindle. As luck would have it, the first chapter is about a global authority on the subject of smart textile, Joanna Berzowska, a professor at Montreal's Concordia University. **Berzowska has been head of OMSignal's smart textile team from the beginning.**

Marceau and Chanay then set about putting together a multi-disciplinary team as intertwined as the technology and the fabrics they work with.

The team, made up of PhD grads in textile engineering, biology, neuroscience, biomechanics and software designers, has taken the biosignals captured by the fabric and developed algorithms to interpret them. Insights are shared via an app and sent directly **to the wearer's iOS mobile device.**

Two years and 2,000 prototypes later, OMSignal launched OMBra for women runners last month. With no fanfare or advertising, just an announcement that a smart bra was in the works, 10,000 women emailed to place orders before its pilot launch. The bra is now available online at OMSignal.com and in several retail locations in Montreal, including running specialty stores and sporting goods stores. U.S. locations will be announced soon.

*We're saying to women runners,  
‘You already wear a bra when you run. How about you wear a better bra?’*

**“We are trying to be methodical about how we build the business,” Marceau said. “We want to crack the formula end to end, from product development to production to distribution to service to usage. After that we will scale either as OMSignal proper or we'll work with major brands. In both cases you want to know the formula.”**

To date, cracking the formula has involved developing a series of shirts for men that capture biological signals and connect with mobile applications to help wearers manage their fitness. Those shirts led to a **partnership with Ralph Lauren to incorporate OMSignal's bio signal technology into the designer's Polo Tech Shirts.**

Bras for women runners seemed a natural next step. There is an estimated 65 million runners in the U.S. alone, the majority of whom are women. Runners like to track their performance and bras have fabric below the breast at the chest level — the best body real estate to capture biological signals.

“We embed seamless sensors within the bra, which captures deeper data than any smartwatch out there,” Marceau said. “Our app delivers what we call mindful running. The biometric coach offers visual and audio nudges to help you breathe and run better and reduce your risk of injury and fatigue. We’re saying to women runners, ‘You already wear a bra when you run. How about you wear a better bra?’ ”



Christinne Muschi for National Post *OMSignal's smart bra for runners.*

Marceau and Chanay also knew early that developing and managing two global supply chains — one for the hardware connector built into the bra and the other for the fabric — would be critical. Its manufacturing partner is MAS holdings based in Sri Lanka, a multibillion-dollar company that supplies Nike, Lulu Lemon and Victoria’s Secret. MAS recently became an investor and a strategic partner to OMSignal.

In addition to its digital and real-world presence, OMSignal is focused on becoming part of the running community. To that end, it works with running clubs and running coaches and is the official bra of this year’s San Francisco Bridge to Bridge marathon. “We want this to be a product women runners love, not one that’s just nice to have,” Marceau said.

Looking to the future, the company is working on a running shirt for men and prototypes for cycling apparel. The founders have a three part product strategy to grow the company: sports and active apparel, wellness and lifestyle and care.

**“It’s smart to make a product specifically for women, a market that’s hot today and has been underserved for a long time. But it has to be about more than great technology to survive the initial buzz,”** Brad Cherniak, partner at Toronto-based business advisory Sapien Capital Partners, said, warning that staying focused on the value proposition will be key to its growth.

**“Steve Jobs was not a great technologist but he knew at the most fundamental street level why customers should get excited about his product. The entrepreneurs have to pay attention and make sure OMBra is delivering real value.”**

As for their three-pronged category approach to growing the business, Cherniak cautioned there is a risk to **getting distracted too early.** **“These are three massive, holy grail markets and they are on the radar** screens of huge players. The technology may not be as proprietary as they think. They have to be ready for others to **re-engineer what they’ve done. You don’t want to stumble by being too technical or too clever. They have to get it right or fall victim to the weakest link — and they have a bunch of links.”**