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USA TODAY - MONDAY, NOVEMBER 11, 2008 - 38

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**3's company in business partners - and socks**

Eclectic trio sells socks, gloves and more in funky, mismatched sets of 3

By Jane O'Donnell  
 USA TODAY

**NEW YORK** — The founders of LittleMissMatched don't know what happens to perfectly good socks that disappear in the wash. But the mystery of the missing socks led them into a business venture that started small and is growing fast.

Arielle Eckstut, Jason Dorf and Jonah Staw started selling packs of three or seven mismatched socks in 2003 after Eckstut and Staw came up with the idea as a solution to lost socks. Each sock is different, although the colors or patterns stay coordinate.

The three quirky partnerships are unlikely partners. Eckstut is an army West Coast literary agent. Staw is an intense branding and marketing guy. Dorf is a slightly conservative New York garment industry veteran.

But they clicked because their expertise complements each other's as well and because as fast as they can come up with ideas, Staw sets a strategy and timeable to turn them into reality.

That's helped LittleMissMatched quickly turn a cute trend in footwear into something with more legs. In just three years, the company's product line has grown to include gloves and mittens (three of course), underwear, bedding, pajamas and — soon — books and games that tell young girls it's OK to be a little out of step. The company motto: "Nothing matches but anything goes."

LittleMissMatched, which expects \$5 million in sales this year, targets girls ages 8 to 12, although it also sells to boys and girls of all ages and adult women. The products are sold in more than 1,000 specialty stores, about 600 department stores, including Nordstrom and Dillard's, and at littlemissmatched.com. The socks cost \$8 for a three-pack, \$15 for seven. Pajamas, for example, range from \$26 for babies to \$52 for adults.

In September, LittleMissMatched Schwartz store here in Manhattan, David Niggl, president of EMO Schwartz, says LittleMissMatched has the same "breadth of possibilities" for expansion as the American Girl doll brand, but maybe for an artist clientele.

"What we loved about it is that it's really about using your imagination," Niggl says. "We thought it was a terrific concept."

**Kinda, Sorta and Alota**

The founders mirror the three types of customers described on the company's packaging: Kinda, Sorta and Alota.

Dorf, who has been wearing the company's socks since a retail buyer asked him why he wasn't, is only a "kinda" mismatcher. He likes to keep his polka dots with other similarly colored polka dots. Says Eckstut: "To say he's mismatching is stretching it."

Staw is a "sorta" mismatcher, who will wear different shades and patterns but only within the same color family. Eckstut, at least compared with her partners, is an "alota," who will splash two shades of pink with green polka dots on one foot and a pink and green sock with black stripes on the other.

In his 2004 business book *Seed* is the New York, Seth Godin cites LittleMissMatched as an example of a great business idea that traditional sock companies might have been busy trying to copy and others might think wasn't serious enough. "Notice how turning socks into a remarkable collectible is both obvious and satisfying and likely to succeed," he writes.

Godin wears the company's socks whenever he makes a speech. "It reminds me and the people who notice my socks that everything is fashion," he says. "They've taken a commodity that keeps you from getting clothes and turned it into a fashion statement."

**Seeing the potential**

Dorf, 37, knew the fashion industry long before he knew Staw and Eckstut. His father was in the garment industry — Nord's Dorf co-owned a company that made Hanes underwear, among other apparel. And Dorf and his brothers have owned a shoe company Goodnight Family since 1996. Some of the stylish goods



Creative endeavor: Jason Dorf, left, and Jonah Staw, along with partner Arielle Eckstut started with socks. But in just three years, the company's product line has grown to include mittens, underwear, bedding, flip-flops and pajamas.



**"It's about coordinated mismatching — not to be a clown."**

— Arielle Eckstut, co-founder of LittleMissMatched

and nightgowns, called Charlie Goodnight, are sold at Target. He's the only one of three partners with children, three girls under age 7.

"Most of the time Jonah and I are thinking about the products. It's in our own heads," says Eckstut. Dorf just has "to be in his house seeing the girls wearing the socks and the pajamas."

Eckstut, 36, says she was an offbeat trendsetter as a child and the crush of conformity sent her to the Polo and Bonetton socks when she was in her teens. She wants the company's young customers to exercise her early freedom of expression.

"By the time I got to high school, I was more reticent to be lanky than when I was in this age group," Eckstut says of the target audience. "Part of the reason I so wanted to focus on this age group is that it is such an exciting and tender time before the pure teenage years."

Staw, 31, was working as a business innovation consultant for a company called frog designs with clients including Target and Chrysler when he met Eckstut through his mother, Jane Staw, a writing coach, had a client represented by Eckstut, who has been a book agent for 14 years.

Staw also introduced Eckstut and his son to Dorf, Jane Staw's own book agent — and college roommate — as Dorf's agent.

Eckstut and Jonah Staw told Dorf their idea, and he decided "it about two seconds" that it was a winner

The three negotiated a licensing deal with a sock manufacturer, who gave them \$35,000 for the rights to their concept and brand. A year later, the partners decided not to renew the contract. After one more try at licensing, they became their own sock manufacturers earlier this year.

The \$35,000 served as seed money for the young company, bolstering small investments from the founders' families and friends.

The three are only gradually giving up their day jobs. Staw was the first to make a clean break in September 2004 when he left frog design. Eckstut is an agent-at-large for the Levine Greenberg Literary Agency.

Dorf is still president of Goodnight Family where he oversees the licensing business, but he spends much of his time working in the LittleMissMatched office in Manhattan, N.Y. "After 10 years of being an entrepreneur I've learned how to be efficient and get a lot done at once," he says.

Eckstut, the company's "creative director" in the rare instances when titles are used, has unyielding passion, especially for color. This company may be about mismatching, but not when it comes to the individual colors in the combinations, leggings or other products. She will pore over colors for hours to ensure the green in the stripes matches the green in the polka dot. "No one wants to deal with an on color," laughs Dorf.

Eckstut says there's a method to her matching: "It's about coordinated mismatching — not to be a clown."

**Broadening the brand**

Eckstut, the author of three books, including *Putting Your Person into Print*, is writing the LittleMissMatched books.

She says the two-book deal is a big step in the evolution of the brand. The idea is to inspire creativity and provide an alternative to music and apparel that promotes the "sexualizing of girls."

One book will be part of a boxed set of goods on how to throw a pajama party. The other is a series of quizzes to help young girls discover who they really are and why it's OK to be that person.

"There is a kind of freshness and originality to everything that they're doing, which is visually so appealing," says Susan Bolotin, editor in chief of Workman Publishing, which will publish the books. When she first saw pictures of girls wearing the socks, Bolotin felt, "There was a kind of non-groovy innocence that just lit the spirit."

Bolotin says LittleMissMatched's "potential is enormous" in publishing. But as a consumer and mother of a 21-year-old daughter who wears LittleMissMatched socks, she thinks the brand's broader possibilities are also almost limitless. She cites "the care they bring to everything they do."

"They are young and they are moving very quickly but they are not giving up that attention to detail," Bolotin says. "Everything about it feels successful."

**nothing matches, but anything goes!**