

## Swell design idea that wooed a mega brand to wake up & smell the coffee!

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### How S'well Designed Its Way Into 3,300 Starbucks Stores

Anyone who makes a product wants to get it in front of the eyes of as many people as possible. It's why product makers cozy up to retailers, hoping to secure just a few inches of precious shelf space to show their wares in front of the store's foot traffic. Retailers, in turn, are looking for products that stand out, that scream "Pick me up! Buy me!" On today's shelves fashion and **design** matter more than ever. Given that, you can imagine how hard it could be for a product like the humble water bottle to attract attention.

That's just the challenge **Sarah Kauss** was facing in 2010 when she founded [S'well](#), maker of the fashionable utilitarian water bottle that's since captivated the minds of fashionistas, the eco-conscious, and big **brands** the world over.



"**Design** has been important for **S'well** because it has set us apart from other water bottles on the market," says **Kauss**. "Before **S'well** was created, I used to carry another bottle with me and I looked silly bringing it into the boardroom. I knew I wanted to create something that was sleeker, but still had the functionality I was looking for."

But **Kauss**, who founded the company with \$30,000 of her own money, didn't create **S'well** simply to make prettier water bottles. The genesis of **S'well** lay in her desire to do something to help



to address the [disastrous effects of plastic bottled water on the environment](#). It was a cause she first became interested in after attending a panel about the global clean-water crisis at her alma mater, **Harvard Business School**, in 2009.

"Using plastic bottles is not only bad for the planet, but the water consumed in plastic bottles is oftentimes not as pure as municipal tap," says **Kauss**. "Bottled water in the U.S. is regulated by the FDA, where tap water is regulated by the EPA, which has higher standards for ensuring that bacterial and toxic chemicals are not in the water source. So it seems odd to think that we pay 2,000 times more for bottled water than tap, when the water isn't as pure as tap and the plastic bottles it comes in is bad for us and our planet."

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**Kauss** knew that in order to get people to rely less on bottled water you would need to convince them to carry around a reusable bottle. But how do you get people to want to carry a boring and cumbersome item around with them? You make it beautiful through **design**.

The **S'well** bottle best resembles a milk bottle made from 18/8 double-walled stainless steel with a matching cap. Its mouth is big enough to fit ice cubes through and its base is narrow enough to fit in standard cupholders—things plastic bottles or most traditional reusable bottles don't allow for. **S'well**'s unique form isn't its only selling point. Style is also its USP. **S'well** bottles have come in over 93 different colors, textures, and patterns to date. The variety of styles is enough to appeal to the differing tastes of a growing group of people whose idea of personal fashion encompasses not just the clothes on their body, but the accessories they carry with them.



"By using a **S'well**, you're choosing an alternative to a single-use plastic bottle. They're non-leaching, non-toxic, and double insulated, which keeps liquids cold for 24 hours and hot for 12 hours. And of course," adds **Kauss**, "they're not only functional, but fashionable."

It was that first fashionable **design**—the [original S'well bottle](#) came in only one color, Ocean Blue—that was enough to capture the fascination of *O, the Oprah Magazine*, which put it on its chic "O List." After that, other **brands** and retailers came calling.

And then came **Starbucks**. This past August the world's largest coffee chain, which [also sells kitchenware and coffee makers](#), announced that it would be carrying an exclusive line of **S'well** bottles in its 3,300 retail locations across the country.

Having your product in 3,300 of any company's stores would be enough to make anyone happy, but when that store is **Starbucks** it's even better. Not only do **Starbucks** stores feature

some of the highest foot traffic of any retailers, their customers frequently return two or three times in a single day. That means the same individual is potentially exposed to the products **Starbucks** chooses to carry multiple times a day. That amount of exposure creates a **brand** awareness and recognition unmatched by other big box retailers, whose customers usually only visit a few times a month.

**S'well's Starbucks** coup isn't something that happened overnight. It was several years in the making, says **Kauss**.

"We got a call from **Starbucks** back in 2012 and they told us that they saw **S'well** in a magazine, loved the look, and wanted us to come to Seattle to share our story," remembers **Kauss**. She traveled to Seattle and met with some of the chain's buyers. "I remember feeling really excited that even as a small company **S'well** was being noticed, but still a bit nervous about working with a global **brand**."



As for what attracted **Starbucks** to **S'well**, **Kauss** says that in addition to the bottle's functionality and fashion appeal, the coffee chain identified with **S'well**'s message to rid the world of plastic bottles. As water is one of the coffee chain's main ingredients in its drinks, **Starbucks** has taken a [growing interest in water conservation efforts](#) in recent years—announcing in 2008 that it was working to reduce water consumption in its stores by 25% by the end of this year.

Following **Kauss**' first meeting with **Starbucks**, in 2013 the coffee giant agreed to put **S'well** bottles in 120 of its stores in Atlanta and Austin. All locations sold out without any promotion.

After the success in Georgia and Texas **Starbucks** came to **S'well** again to work on creating an exclusive **design** for its Hawaii stores. That was followed by a **S'well** signature New York Times Square collection exclusive to the **Starbucks** store in Times Square earlier this year. And now, both companies have decided to go all-in, working together on **designing** three 17-ounce bottles in unique colors that will be in every **Starbucks** in the country.





"The **Starbucks** team is highly engaged and inspired and it was a collaborative effort between both of our creative teams to land on the **designs**," says **Kauss** when I ask her what it was like **designing** the bottles hand in hand with the coffee giant. "We worked together to create the colored caps and specific **design** elements for the bottles, finding what would be the most adored or collected by our fans."

"It was exhilarating working with a group of such visionaries," says **Kauss**.

While it's obvious the **Starbucks** deal is a big win for **S'well**, it's important to note that **Kauss** just won't take any deal that comes her way. In the past she's turned down a major food chain

that didn't sync with the values **S'well** holds dear.

"**S'well**'s mission is simple, giving back and taking care of our planet," says **Kauss**. "With that said, we look to align with other **brands** that share similar philosophies."

And that mission—one that was born from conservation and implemented through **design**—has paid off. **Kauss** says that thanks to the **Starbucks** deal and the other **brands** **S'well** has chosen to work with the company is expected to grow 400% in 2015.

With the success of **S'well**'s water bottle firmly established, might **Kauss** now take her increasing fortunes and **design** bravado and tackle other "boring" products in need of a stylish makeover?

"We have new colors, **designs**, collaborations, and additional products in the pipeline," is all **Kauss** will offer for now. "Stay tuned!"