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Her Way or the Subway

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Lynne Lambert, founder of NYC Subway Line, shares how she turned an everyday 'aha' moment into a booming business. Her secret? Transforming local iconography into wearable geography.

By: MATT ALDERTON

New Yorkers find lots of things when they're riding the subway. They find trash, for instance, including chewed gum, discarded food wrappers and day-old newspapers. They find living things, including people, dogs, rodents and roaches. They even find human drama, including people engaged in love, hate and various states of sleep. In 1995, however, voice-over actress Lynne Lambert found something far more valuable when she was waiting for a train into Manhattan from Brooklyn. She found inspiration.



"One day, I was waiting for a train and I was looking at the sign and I saw these really flat, round, generic logos," she says, alluding to the 28 simple symbols—numbers and letters inside colored circles—that identify New York City subway trains. "I thought, 'Why hasn't anybody ever done anything with this quintessentially New York City raw material?'"

To find out, Lambert visited the New York City Transit Museum in Grand Central Terminal, which sells subway merchandise and memorabilia. "They had very little in the way of product," Lambert says. "So I approached the manager of the museum store and said, 'I have this idea.'"

The idea was to sell T-shirts, hats and other merchandise adorned with the iconic New York subway signposts, and the museum shop manager loved it. So, in fact, did Macy's, who became Lambert's first client when she officially launched her business, [NYC Subway Line](#), several months later. Now, more than 12 years later, subway ridership is up—the Manhattan Transit Authority (MTA) reported 2.3 billion riders in 2007, the highest annual ridership since 1969—and so are sales at NYC Subway Line, which broke \$1 million in sales for the first time last year.

From Actress to Entrepreneur

Lambert has always had a love affair with New York City. She grew up in Maryland, Colorado and California, but always had her sights set on Manhattan, where she hoped to pursue life as a performer. "No matter where I lived, I always fantasized about New York City," she says. "I still get chills when I see the New York City skyline, especially at night."

When Lambert finally made her way to New York, she did so not as an entrepreneur, but rather as an actress. She didn't have the knockout looks that most casting directors look for, she insists, but nonetheless found work as a successful voiceover artist. "It didn't matter what I looked like," she says. "It didn't matter how tall I was or what color my hair was. It only mattered what I sounded like."

What Lambert sounded like was success. She did voiceovers in commercials for children's toys, including Pound Puppies and Cabbage Patch Kids; she was the sexy lady's voice in early commercials for Amstel Light beer; and most recently she was the voice of all the female characters in Grand Theft Auto 2.

As she aged, however, Lambert noticed that her acting opportunities began drying up. "The advertising industry is all about who's young and who's hot," she says. "They want new girls."

Faced with ageism in the industry she loved so much, Lambert decided that she needed a new way to make money. And that's when she found her muse on a subway platform in Brooklyn.

Fashion 101

Before she could launch her business, Lambert had to solicit a blessing from the MTA in the form of a licensing agreement so that she could use its art and its trademarks. Getting one, however, wasn't easy, as she had absolutely no experience in the fashion industry.

"The MTA was quite rationally saying, 'What's your background? What experience do you have in this industry?'" Lambert recalls. "I was saying, 'None. But look at this; it's such a cool idea. I can do this.' Eventually—I guess because nobody else was beating down their door, and I was—they signed me to a license."

That's when Lambert approached Macy's, who became her first customer when buyers there placed orders for shirts to sell in their young men's, children's and New York-themed apparel departments.

Luckily, Macy's didn't want the merchandise right away. That gave Lambert approximately five months to actually produce it. So, she cashed out her life's savings in order to start her business and do just that.

Realizing that she had no experience in fashion, Lambert took a seminar on fashion entrepreneurship at New York's Fashion Institute of Technology, where she was the only student who lacked both a fashion and a business background. She quickly learned, however, that business ownership couldn't be taught. As with acting, her success came down to innate talent, creativity and self-taught ingenuity.

A World of Opportunity

Lambert's success wasn't instant. People didn't like the subway, after all. According to most stereotypes, it was crowded, dirty and dangerous. Because it was also so "New York," however, New Yorkers eventually began to catch on, wearing Lambert's clothing in order to display their identity, their geography and their pride on their sleeves—literally.

"If you rode the F train, the F train was part of your life," Lambert says. "That really represented part of who you are."

Within a few years, one could see NYC Subway Line shirts in movies, such as 2000's *Bring It On*; on TV, on channels such as MTV, VH1 and BET; and on celebrities, including rapper Fabolous and even President Bill Clinton.

Today, Lambert sells apparel online and in stores nationwide. She's even hired her first full-time employee and developed two additional lines, one featuring official [Coney Island](#) imagery and another featuring maps of [London](#).

Indeed, because the world is full of geography, it's also full of business opportunities for Lambert. And despite a few hiccups—including several trademark disputes and an encounter with counterfeit T-shirt vendors—the self-taught clothing mogul remains optimistic about her future.

"It's a journey," she concludes, offering fellow entrepreneurs the following tips for subway-style success:

- **Trust your gut:** If you think you've got a good idea, Lambert says, you probably do. "When something moves me and grabs me right in my core," she explains, "I feel like I must not be the only one it would do that to."
- **Be conservative:** Lambert says she owes her success to penny pinching. "Some degree of caution is good," she says. "I've let my business grow without putting enormous pressure on it."
- **Get experience:** While she didn't have any, Lambert recommends working in an industry before you start a business within it. "Go get some experience under your belt and actually be making a salary at the same time," she suggests. "Go learn on someone else's dime."
- **Don't quit your day job:** Because success comes slowly, Lambert recommends that entrepreneurs walk before they run. "Success usually doesn't happen as quickly as you'd like it to," she says.
- **Find passionate partners:** Lambert has shared her success with the MTA, who has helped her with intellectual property disputes, and with college interns, who aren't only affordable workers, but also enthusiastic ones. "They're willing to take on and learn anything," she says.

For more information about NYC Subway Line, visit www.nycsubwayline.com.


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