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BY JON FINE

Say Hello to the Alpha Kitty

In certain mediacentric precincts of Manhattan and Los Angeles, a striking and charismatic young woman named Atoosa Rubenstein moves from handshake to handshake, from meeting with advisers to pitching potential financial backers. In this, Rubenstein resembles a Presidential candidate testing the waters in Iowa. But her campaign is to build the next

big multimedia brand around a person. This person happens to be named Atoosa Rubenstein.

She is about to find out if her status within an insular sphere—as a star magazine editor with fashion cred—and more than 43,000 friends on MySpace.com can propel her to something much grander. For this ill-defined opportunity, centering initially on the unbuilt Web site *atoosa.com*, Rubenstein last year dumped her job as editor-in-chief of *Seventeen*. “I saw what was coming,” she said, referring to the ongoing Web-driven destruction of the teen magazine. “What I want to do is gather my tribe”—yes, Rubenstein actually says things like this—“the ones reading *Seventeen*, and the ones who were, and grew out of it.” This tribe is 13 to 30, female, thoroughly digital, and, in Rubenstein’s view, lacking an “alpha kitty” addressing their concerns and sensibility. What she brings is her big-sister, geek-gone-glam persona. She honed this act editing *Seventeen* and teen title *CosmoGIRL*, and now shows it in full plumage in her MySpace blog entries, which are a riot of excessive capitalization and estrogenic display. The ultimate shape of Atoosa Inc. is inchoate, but Rubenstein is certain of one thing. “The next Oprah will not be born on TV,” she says. “I left to launch my brand.”

SHE ALREADY HAS, OF COURSE. Rubenstein’s got the high-wattage personality and presence that gets noticed, and she possesses ambition that’s impossible to miss. It is not just anyone who gets named editor-in-chief of a major magazine at 26, which is how old Rubenstein was in 1998 when she started *CosmoGIRL*. “You thought, ‘she had to do it,’” says Hearst Magazines President Cathleen Black, recalling the first meeting in which Rubenstein described that

magazine. “It was seeping out of her pores.”

These days Rubenstein’s parent company is her own Big Momma Productions, which explains the enormous ring that emblazons “BIG MOMMA” across three fingers, (a gift from her husband, she explains). In a meeting, she says about her audience, without apparent irony: “They are unborn to me, but they’re mine.” Still, her sense of ownership and her furiously fashionista exterior is often punctured by glimpses of the homespun and deeply idiosyncratic. At a meeting with potential investors she skips PowerPoint in favor of construction paper decorated, grade school project-style, with a crazy-quilt of colored pencil notations. Her first offering may be what she terms her “art project,” *Psychic Kitty*, a series of psychedelized videos on her MySpace page. They will star her cat Thurston spouting, in Rubenstein’s

ATOOSA: Aiming to be Oprah to her *Seventeen* tribe

electronically processed voice, brief inspirational tidbits. Rubenstein calls *Psychic Kitty* “the cat in the family,” and she’s mum on a debut date:

“You know how it is with cats.”

You may, like me, find *Psychic Kitty* so bent as to be half-brilliant. But what I find conceptually neat isn’t relevant; the question is how weird the mainstream is willing to get. Of course, well-conceived media brands that assuage the spiritual thirst of American women have an impressive track record. (Ask Oprah.) “I have a dream,” says Rubenstein. “I see a family. I see a tribe. At the end of the day, I know how to connect with this audience.” Rubenstein says her brand attributes—again, she really does this—are inspiration and motivation, sisterhood, positivity, and activism. Wreathed around that is a certain Atoosa-ness: an ease with the off-the-wall, an acceptance of the mess and dorkiness of existence. Rapt comments on her blog suggest at least some receptivity for this message. We will soon see if the smoke signals she’s sending out, in all her inimitable style, can gather a tribe big enough to make a business. ■



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