

The Reality of the Runway – Will Fashion Week Survive?

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Fashion shows are the cornerstone of the \$300 billion dollar fashion industry. Fashion Week presentations in New York (as well as London, Milan and Paris) draw editors, buyers, celebrities and paparazzi, and have become the subject of gossip and entertainment TV shows and magazines.

Everyone loves a good fashion show, but making them worthwhile is equally as important. In this tough economy, can the hefty expense of a show present an ROI (return on investment) that makes sense? And furthermore, is the traditional format of fashion week shows still relevant in this new age of instant access and gratification?

This past July, the Council of Fashion Designers of America (CFDA) held its first Town Hall Meeting in New York City to debate the relevance of runway shows. Present at the debate were Diane von Furstenberg (CFDA's president), Donna Karan, Betsey Johnson, Proenza Schouler's Lazaro Hernandez and Jack McCollough, and Vogue editor Anna Wintour, among many others.

The issue being debated was this – press (and more importantly, bloggers) attending the shows are, within minutes of its culmination, broadcasting images and commentary all over the Internet. Realizing these collections are not due to hit stores for months, it leaves the consumer frustrated, particularly with today's expectations and unlimited access that the online world has provided. To add insult to injury, designers are encouraged to get "early deliveries" of the designs to celebrities, who wear the desired frocks to premieres and red carpet events, then are photographed in the (yet again), unattainable items. The whole cycle continues to perpetuate the problem.

All this brings to mind the old saying, "There's no such thing as bad publicity". Although this press isn't necessarily negative, it certainly does have the effect of negative publicity – as it's not affecting the bottom line at retail. By the time the merchandise actually hits the marketplace, the savvy consumer views these garments as passé, having seen them in blogs and on the backs of the celeb du jour months prior.

This out-of-date issue is causing another problem as well – it's sending the merchandise nearly straight to the sale racks once it hits the stores – not something that's needed in today's already stressed retail environment.

The last of the big issues being debated was that of piracy. With images being released so soon, whatever originality was once placed in a design is all but gone. Six months is more than enough time for the “fast-fashion” and “high street” retailers to put copies into motion – they'll be ready to compete with like merchandise as soon as the designer goods hit retail. This poses a very difficult and challenging situation given the popularity of hi/low dressing. These days it's acceptable for everyone to buy trend at retailers such as Forever 21, H&M and Zara.

Proenza Schouler's Jack McCollough, voiced his concern: "There seems to be a disconnect. For us, the shows have become a press thing. It's on blogs; magazines pull straight from the runways; and by the time it's in stores, it feels sort of old". Donna Karan, who has long been a proponent of selling and showing clothes in season, also wondered about the timeliness of the shows: "We are in a crisis. There's no question about it . . . We spend so much money on shows, but what is it getting us?"

The cost of a typical Fashion Week show can start at \$200,000 and go up from there. At that price tag, it has become a pricey publicity stunt with very little, if any, immediate returns. The shows are not currently open to the public – in the past they were presented to showcase a collection to buyers/retailers and the press; but today, by the time a show runs, most buyers have viewed the line already in the designer's showroom. Now the only real point of the show is publicity.

One step that could change things in the future is the move of Fashion Week from its home in Bryant Park to Lincoln Center in September 2010. According to Fern Mallis, senior vice president of IMG, the company that produces Mercedes-Benz Fashion Week, this move will make including the public easier as the new venue is set up to sell tickets and host the public for events.

A strong suggestion at the CFDA Town Hall Meeting was to set up the shows to

encourage a more “buy now” environment – find a balance between showing the next season’s collection, and perhaps offering a second show featuring more “wear now” merchandise. The idea of making the merchandise sellable at the show, and letting consumers attend the show, spiked much debate.

Young up-and-coming designers, who in no way can afford the price of a fashion week show, are coming up with innovative ways to get around it. And with their innovation, surprisingly are answers to the problems plaguing the industry today.

One such designer is the provocative Jared Gold, who took his runway to the railway, with a viral marketing campaign attracting fans to see his clothes on a several day journey from L.A. to Seattle, sponsored by Amtrak. The show followed the watch and wear motto, inviting guests to purchase what they saw. In a test version of the show hosted at L.A.’s Union Station last year, Gold claims to have sold over \$10,000 in just 56 minutes. He promotes his shows not through expensive publicists, printed invitations and lavish set designs, but rather using social media and sponsorships to keep costs down and attract his perfect audience.

The best part for Gold? With the Amtrak sponsorship and the clothing sales...he’s actually *made* money. A cue maybe the marquee designers need to consider.

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