

MAKING IT WORK

Fashion Business Does its Sexy Little Turn on the Catwalk



So you're done school and you want to break into the Vancouver fashion industry. But there's a problem, you can't design and aren't a top model. The good news is that there is a whole business machine running this industry with a lot of people in the background "making it work" as Tim Gunn of Project Runway says. The bad news is it's going to take a bit more than just a "passion for fashion" to get you started.

The Vancouver fashion industry is relatively small but steadily gaining attention. What are some of the different paths some of those successful in the industry took to get to the top of the game?

Kerry Coombes, a 2002 graduate of the Capilano University Retail Merchandising program has gone on to have great success as a clothing sales representative and now works with such lines as Dex and Espirit. "Being able to apply my retail and wholesale experience with the knowledge acquired in the program made me very prepared for all sides of the industry" says Kerry, "I took the program to learn more about what the average business owner deals with, so that I would be better prepared as a sales person".

Yet, in an industry like this, it tends to come down to the old cliché "it's who you know" in helping you get a job or your next big promotion. Kerry echoes this opinion, "school taught me about the details that every one should know about running a business. It also gave me great tools for merchandising, and maintaining customer relations. But for getting hired in the industry, my previous contacts helped me a lot". Building relationships prior to applying to jobs in the fashion industry and also while working as a sales representative is a major contributing factor to success, "the number one tool any sales person can have, is to be honest. I want to work with my customers season after season" says Kerry.

Another way to get into the industry is by becoming a stylist. Every catalogue and photo shoot in every magazine requires the expertise of a stylist to set the creative direction of the shoot. Stylists also play a huge part in creating a brand's identity and garnering attention for a particular product. Stylist Claudia Da Ponte (www.dapontestyle.com) has worked with a number of big name clients. She too completed a design and merchandising program to give her the background knowledge she needed of the clothing and designers she would be working with "it's useful to understand the process of garments from design to how they end up in the stores" says Claudia, adding that "if fashion is your industry, then the more knowledge you have about it, the better off you are". Claudia herself gained a lot of her experience by helping out on shoots, "I always stress volunteering. People remember when you helped them on a project for nothing and they'll come back to you". Claudia has also found it important to network in such a small industry, "Some people want things handed to

them on a platter. Some people expect to graduate school and go straight into a job. It doesn't work that way. Paying your dues isn't just going to school. You have to go out and meet people. At the end of the day it really is all about who you know".

Fashion blogger Erica Lam started her fashion blog TheStyleSpy.com three years ago. In this short time she has come to be very well known within the Canadian fashion industry. "Networking is very important. Even in the age of social media, people like face to face contact" says Erica. How did she get her start in the fashion industry? "I started working with fashion retailers and shopping centres on events and marketing - using my expertise on the market to help them reach their audiences through new media. Get creative - you make your own opportunities sometimes."

Work ethic, networking abilities, education in the field, and the ability to promote and sell your products and services well is what has helped those in the fashion industry become successful. "It's a really tough industry to break into and can get really discouraging sometimes. If it's really your passion then you just have to keep at it" advises Claudia. The more people that you know and the more you can get your name out there, the more success you will have in the industry as a whole. So pay attention in your branding courses, because what you end up having to sell to people is brand "me".

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