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New light for the industry trade show.

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Fashion Exposed Revived – *a fresh start*

THERE IS NOT one sector that hasn't been touched by the growth of e-commerce.

In the same way it has given customers more shopping opportunities than ever before, it has also thrown open the doors of competition on a global scale.

Where once a regional retailer competed with the shop next door, and drew on a local customer base unable to access products from across the world, the borders are now limitless.

Some businesses have leapt on this opportunity to expand their sales with an e-commerce front, while others have struggled to execute this and match digital competitors on price, nous and variety.

Of course, this is not a case isolated to regional Australia.

Last month, iconic retailer Robby Ingham announced that after 32 years of retail, he was shutting up shop.

Positioned in Sydney's Oxford Street and selling designer wares from across the world, Ingham said he could simply no longer compete.

He cited the embattled foot traffic

on Oxford Street, the rise of online shopping and global fashion brands in Australia as the causes behind his demise.

"It is absolutely ridiculous the amount of product in the marketplace, from a \$10 T-shirt to a \$1500 T-shirt," he told Fairfax papers.

"When you can buy that product from 20 different places on the internet there is no need for the client to come to your store."

So where does this leave trade shows such as Fashion Exposed, which are frequented by owners and buyers from independent boutiques?

Now under new ownership, Fashion Exposed Revived has changed into a one-stop shop for buying, education and entertainment.

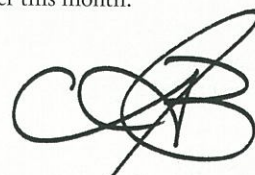
It has also relocated under the same roof as the Home & Giving Fair, offering increased buying power.

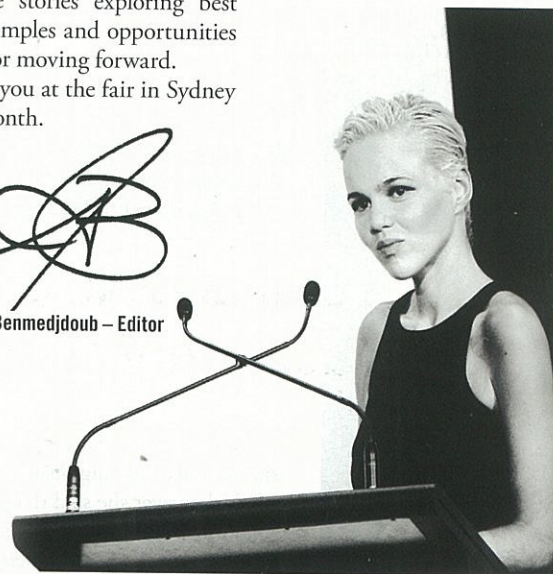
The first instalment of the relaunch will take place this month, and industry feedback suggests this four-tier strategy could be right on the money (page 14).

If boutique owners are struggling to compete, then there must be a serious impetus for them to leave the shop floor and come back in a stronger position.

Of course, e-commerce isn't just about competition. In this edition, we also feature a series of roundtables and feature stories exploring best practice examples and opportunities for the sector moving forward.

We'll see you at the fair in Sydney later this month.


Assia Benmedjdoub – Editor




CWT

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Revival of *the fittest*

Fashion Exposed Revived will take place this month in a bid to bring fresh life to the trade show. **Jessica Power** discovers the signs are looking good.

AS TIMES GROW tougher for Australian independent retailers, there may be light at the end of the tunnel. The Australian Gift and Homewares Association (AGHA) have recently acquired Fashion Exposed – the most prominent fashion trade fair in the country. After subsequent years saw a slump in success and a lack of panache needed to reel in buyers, the new driving force behind the annual trade fair, suitably renamed Fashion Exposed Revived could mean big business for small boutiques.

Formerly under the banner of Informa Exhibitions, the AGHA's takeover of Fashion Exposed was announced in August last year. Despite what seems an unlikely partnership, the AGHA's CEO Omer Soker promises that Fashion Exposed Revived will transform and inspire industry professionals to regain confidence in the independent retail sector.

"What we're trying to do is to revitalise the event. It had been on a decline – I think it lost its pizzazz, it lost its substance. It just became a typical trade show and that's not what the industry needs. So we want to revive it and re-brand it as Fashion Exposed Revived and bring it back to its glory days."

Over the past five years, the globalisation of Australian apparel has sparked a rapid decline for independent stores in the percentage of sales accounted for in clothing retail, from 43 per cent to 32 per cent in March 2014, according to a recent article by retail analyst Michael Baker.

It's a daunting climate for buyers and designers alike, as global juggernauts such as Zara, H&M and Topshop set up shop across Australia, churning out fast fashion at lightning speed. It's no wonder that trade fairs such as Fashion Exposed aren't thriving like they used to. It appears as though what once would have been a vital part of selecting inventory has turned into a crucial gamble for the survival of boutiques and independent apparel companies. As Soker puts it, there has been a distinct loss of confidence in buyers.

"Retail is confidence driven. What you don't want to see is retailers holding back on purchases because they're worried about markets, so they need to be quite assertive in their buying to make sure they're buying the right stuff – a trade show can engender confidence, so for them to come and have a look, talk to the suppliers that are there, talk to the industry as a whole and then feel in a better place to buy the right products and not make a mistake or cut back because that's a vicious cycle."

An integral part of the revival process lies in networking. Around a quarter of the guests this year will come from businesses with over 20 employees and 30 per cent of visitors will have acquisition of up to five stores. This could give independent boutiques and emerging designers the opportunity to speak with some of the industry's most successful small businesses. Soker believes that a shift in focus that will hone in on quality brands over mass produced clothing factories will bring rouse new interest in the independent sector.

"We have focused on quality only. We're an Australian association so we don't want international factories – it's not a sourcing show. So we have cut that element out – we're not concerned about making a profit here, we just want to have quality brands."

Of course, for many boutiques around the country, poor quality has never been the issue. A survey conducted by the Australian Retailers Association (ARA) in 2010 echo some of the key challenges that independent fashion retailers have been facing over the past few years, all of which have contributed to the detriment of trade events like Fashion Exposed.

Some 40 per cent of the survey's respon-

dents agreed that decreasing sales, loss of consumer confidence and competition from major retailers was the main challenge in sustaining their business. Other concerns included increasing costs of wages and rent and continuous discounting to keep up with chain competitors.

Textile & Fashion Industry of Australia CEO Kiri Delly believes these kind of setbacks were evident at previous Fashion Exposed fairs, citing poor quality, underwhelming turnouts and inventory not suited to the Australian market as some of the most detrimental factors in its demise.

Delly does believe in the potential of trade fairs such as Fashion Exposed and is encouraging of the AGHA's move to reinvent the way it's run. Speaking of the event, Delly says, "it's good for start-ups to network and understand how complicated and diverse this sector is. It's ever changing."

Regarding some of the changes that Fashion Exposed Revived will be offering this year, Delly praised the opportunity for forums to discuss the market and provide networking opportunities for industry professionals.

There is good news for boutiques and independent stores. There are distinct advantages that the independent retail sector has over global chains and it all links back to the vital ingredient that Soker emphasises – quality.

According to the ARA report, time, attention and product knowledge are unique to the customer service of independent retailers, which builds the sort of rapport with consumers that will bring in consistent business. The idea that consumers will purchase boutique items at a higher cost than their chain store counterparts makes sense if they know exactly what they are buying and why it's better for them. It's an experience as opposed to a transaction.

TCF Australia president Carol Hanlon says personalisation will become increasingly important for both trade shows and retailers.

This year, the event has teamed with the industry organisation to showcase ten emerging designer labels.

"The old Fashion Exposed seemed to be allowing overseas manufacturers to exhibit with

mass market product and pricing. It changed the look of the event and there was less and less point of difference.

"It is great that Fashion Exposed Revived has linked with TCF Australia to bring back our emerging designer showcases like we used to do in 2012 until the event was sold to the previous owners.

"The industry needs to nurture these opportunities for fresh new talent to gain initial exposure at these trade events."

This year's event may be business for industry professionals, but Soker says there will be value-added elements.

"We are looking at making an amazing event. It is still ultimately a trade show, but the champagne, the runway and the on-site features will actually add to the experience. I think this is really important to fashion because it's all about colours and textures and new and exciting and bold. It's not a

"We have focused on quality only. We don't want international factories – it's not a sourcing show."

boring industry. It needs to be the right environment, so we're going to create the right environment."

Having invested hundreds of thousands of dollars into Fashion Exposed Revived, organisers are also creating greater opportunities for foot traffic.

Held at Sydney's Olympic Park, free air-conditioned coaches will take attendees from Darling Harbour to the venue where they will be greeted with champagne and walk through the entrance to a spectacular static catwalk, just one of the many visual elements that Soker ensures will impress and more importantly, reinvigorate.

"We want to ask all of the buyers who may have gone before – but not recently to check it out...have a glass of champagne, check out the runway, because we can bring those buyers back at what will be an amazing event." ■

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