

Talking Point

Your views on the issues shaping the industry

Is this the most fantastic industry to work in?



DIANE SYKES, owner, Diane Sykes Fashion Marketing

Working recently with a young intern was like a walk down memory lane. She reminded me of my 19 year-old self, so eager to learn, and loving this exciting industry she had chosen for her career.

Thirty years ago this new bright and exciting world of fashion had enthralled me, too. I had previously worked for a large insurance company and just could not believe that my working days

now involved weekly trips to London department stores, dressing real live models (some of whom graced the pages of Vogue) surrounded all day, every day with beautiful designs and above all – free clothes! I secretly felt like I was playing and one day I would be discovered and thrown out.

It was a huge shift in my perception of what I knew as ‘work’. Before I had longed for the tiniest break in the monotony of the Registry Office, but here in this fashion world you couldn’t keep me away.

I was like a sponge, clinging to the pearls of wisdom that dropped from the mouths of the incredible women that surrounded me. It was so different from the corporate world that I had seen and I loved it. The radio played all day long (albeit in the stockroom) and at 5:30pm every night someone cracked open a bottle of champagne.

Of course this was the late 80s and those final years of that incredible decade could not pass without some of the grandest of grand gestures.

My career to this day has never surpassed the excitement of running to the airport with my emergency visa from the American Embassy still drying in my hand to deliver a couture dress to a catwalk show in New York. Or the time I spent

three weeks on the QE2 in the concession shop on board. My friends were green with envy.

That whole period was certainly a memorable time but like the mantra of the film Wall Street, that whole ‘lunch is for wimps’ era, I remember often working until midnight and not always in the nicest environments.

You had to take the rough with the smooth: alongside the dizzy glamour, there was the time I had to pack 100 boxes on a freezing cold quayside, or the time I literally glowed for two weeks after hand steaming 400 suede coats.

Looking back though, I wouldn’t have changed a thing. Naturally things have got tougher and the champagne corks fly far less now, but as an industry we are hardly on the coal face. It is hard work with little of that 80s glamour to show, but I still maintain it is the most fantastic industry.

At times it can seem like an enormous labour of love, but that is the reason I am still here, still loving it. And you know what they say about doing something you love for a living? You’ll never really work a day in your life!

Brave New Digital World



MARTA WISNIEWSKA, founder and creative director at Cashmere Moon, Cambridge

Eeny, meeny, miny, moe, should I stay or should I go – these were my thoughts exactly when, a year ago, my boss, the owner of Baska, a prestigious Cambridge independent, announced her decision to retire.

While her need for escapism had grown with the constantly changing and unpredictable retail landscape, I was faced with the uneasy choice of either taking the business over and continuing on the same premises, or embarking on a completely

new and capricious journey called e-commerce.

Not a complete novice to the concept of digital commerce – I managed Baska’s online store on a daily basis for the last 3 years – it took me a little while to make an informed decision and after a month of researching online competition, talking to my suppliers and with my regular customers, a clearer picture of the future started to emerge. With three available options: a) physical store b) physical and online store, or c) online store, there was quite a lot of data to be processed.

Pros and cons of each scenario were taken into consideration and at a certain point I knew it was time to say goodbye to the security of bricks-and-mortar and embrace the calculated, yet unforeseeable digital tomorrow. How unpredictable can it be, I thought?

Before making this challenging move, I spent quite a few coffee-fuelled days looking at numbers, spending hours evaluating different profit and loss scenarios. While my rejuvenated friendship with Excel blossomed, I knew that numbers apart, I also had to listen to the inner voice inside me that kept on saying, “be brave, but be careful”. Initially, I did consider sticking to the safety of the known. However, faced with the fluctuating retail

patterns, the risk of increasing operating costs, the unstable pound, topped up with inconvenient lease contracts lasting for what seems like an eternity, I have decided to be careful and to trust my entrepreneurial instinct.

Times change. Shopping habits evolve. Although British customers continue to enjoy an occasional shopping spree, over the last five years their spending habits have shifted towards more sociable activities. The fact is that with galloping rental prices, only large-scale national chains can afford to invest in the prestigious retail space at shopping galleries and on the high street. Small, independent accounts slowly disappear from the shopping map of the UK, moving their business either to cheaper (therefore less frequented locations – here is a vicious circle) or online where overheads are much lower.

One rule remains. Whether you are moving into the digital world entirely, or are planning to sell on multiple platforms, before you embark on this exciting trip, ensure you have a business plan. Look at all the costs, from setting up the e-commerce website to the costs of running it on a daily basis. I’ll share more about my journey over the coming months.