

Inside womenswear

Three key industry players give their views on the issues that matter to you.

GOODBYE TO THE NOUGHTIES

The Agent

KAREN WILD, co-owner, Connect 2 Agency

As December arrives, I am struck by how 2009 has been a life-changing year for me: my nephew beat his cancer; my son, daughter and I successfully climbed Mount Kilimanjaro and now at the end of the year I have changed my name from Curtet back to my maiden name of Wild, and the general consensus is that this name suits my character entirely! I now find myself looking forward to 2010 as a fresh start and am excited about what the future holds – not least the new and fresh collections that will be unveiled over the coming weeks!

2009 has been a difficult and uncertain year for everyone, with the retail sector bearing the brunt of the chaos in the financial markets. Retailers, agents and manufacturers have had to look at every aspect of their businesses and find solutions to the lack of credit insurance, the reticence of buyers whether at the retail or wholesale level and the biggest problem we all face, cashflow. As we reach the end of the year I sense that those of us that were fortunate enough to weather the storm are approaching 2010 with a much more positive attitude and that the changes we've all made will ensure we can drive our businesses forward with renewed vigour and enthusiasm.

So, as we leave the noughties behind, with very little regret I imagine, we can hopefully enter the new decade with a sense of positivity and the determination to stand out from the crowd and give our customers what they need to grow and develop their business. A new decade, a new start!

LASTING IMPRESSIONS

The Retailer

PAMELA SHIFFER, owner, Pamela Shiffer, London

I spent the last buying season attending more shows than ever before, travelling far and wide in search of exciting products to bring to my customers, and it was interesting to observe how other countries welcome buyers to their shows/showrooms. It did make me wonder though, that when most companies are struggling to get buyers through the door, why do they treat them with such ambivalence? Of course, independents don't have the budgets of the high-street buyers, but should that make such a difference?

We have found recently that if a brand we stock is in a department store, customers often tell us that "it doesn't look the same" and that "they never saw a given style in the department store" and ask "why is our selection so different", promptly making the sale and adding a couple of extra pieces to her selection. Ultimately, we are part of a service industry that works both ways, and as most of us spend a good part of our working week on the shop floor giving that extra inch, I feel it would be appreciated if, for instance, we were given (albeit small) incentives when attending shows. Go on, organisers, dip into all those profits and give us buyers a FREE coffee/tea/water. It's not that I'm saying we are cheap dates, but it would make a huge difference to us after we've been trawling around all day, and I reckon you might see attendance rise and we would stay longer.

Of course, not all shows and showrooms are mean and stingy; in fact, I've enjoyed many lunches and coffees with fellow colleagues and spent my budget on the right collections – which in my mind is how it should be. After all, the first impression is one thing; however, it's the lasting impression that counts.



KAREN WILD



PAMELA SHIFFER



BEATE KUBITZ

THE JOY OF FASHION

The Brand

BEATE KUBITZ, co-founder, Makepiece

What I really hate about this industry is that look. Blank eyes above a slight, disinterested sneer, a flicker of expression that's barely worth the effort, but it's all that's needed to say: "I'm in fashion. Drop dead mortal". I've seen it over and over again – six seasons at London Fashion Week – sitting on our stand, walking the corridors, hanging out at parties. And every season I come away confused. Where is the passion? Where is the joy?

After all, clothes are part of who we are. They help us make that vital first impression. When we dress we tell stories: about the tribe we belong to – yummy mummy or disco diva, office girl or dreamy artist, lady or tramp. They denote religion, even our politics. They signal our mood, our attitude to life. We use them to cheer ourselves up, to look formal or relaxed, sexy or serious, to gain respect and to show it. We hide behind uniforms and shout rebellion with what we wear. We tend to love our clothes, treat them as friends. We have those that push us forward, those that provide comfort and support. We know which make us look good, which are fun, choosing differently for serious and sensible, seductress and siren. They are our warmth in winter and our summer cool. And in hard times, when we have to think carefully about what we can afford, simply chasing the latest thing becomes increasingly difficult, empty and shallow. In hard times it's how we feel that engages us; and that feeling is what will still engage us with buying clothes. For the last few months I've been on a tour of independent boutiques – taking a set of Makepiece samples and a couple of students who kindly model our clothes. We talk about how they're made – ethically in the UK – and how to wear them. How they'll feel to wear. How to look after them. Little things that will live up a wardrobe for a season and lifelong companions that will see you through thick and thin.

And women leave – clutching parcels – feeling engaged, and warm and passionate about their clothes. These are clothes that come with a story, with love, because ninety nine per cent of clothes wearing isn't about the relentless march of trend. It's about feeling good about how you look and happy with how you live.