

Industry Insight: extended

Courtney Blackman, Founder of Forward PR, full interview.

Courtney's interview appears in abridged form in Chapter 6, page 191.

When do you start to work with a designer or brand in advance of a fashion show?

Ideally, we like to start on a show as early as possible (months, if feasible) so that we can leverage any media previews and build a buzzy foundation around the brand before it hits the catwalk. This is especially important for an emerging brand that is less known in the marketplace. That said, we've filled a show space having only signed a contract a couple of weeks before London Fashion Week.

How does your involvement in the show begin? For instance, do you have a meeting to discuss the vision for the show? Who would you meet and what kinds of discussions do you have?

We like to understand the message of the collection and see a preview if possible – this helps us to communicate to the press what they can expect and get them excited for the show. It also helps us to understand who the audience should be. For instance, if it is a collection based around ethical fashion, then the audience should include media that is appropriate, as well as celebrities and influencers that share the same values. For instance, we've done ethical brand Prophetik's catwalk shows for years, and aside from casting Cara Delevingne to walk the brand's first London show, we filled the front row with celebrity eco champions like Livia Firth, Lucy Siegle and Laura Bailey.

Oftentimes, the designer and the collection is in another country, so we do not get to see the collection first-hand until the day of the fitting or even backstage the day of the show, so we do our best to work with the designer and their collection through FaceTime, Skype, email, texting and WhatsApp – any method that will work to keep the communication flowing and make the show a success.

Typical discussions will include desired and suggested guest list, design and wording of invitations and finalising the show notes (press release on the collection that will be shown) and the credit notes (a full list of who was involved in making the show happen and special shout outs to family, investors, partners, etc.).

What work takes place between the initial meeting and the day of the show?

Lots and lots of emails and telephone calls to editors, stylists, celebrity agents, influencers and influencer agents happen in between signing a designer and the day of the show – letting them know about the show and inviting them to attend. Our main job in the lead up to a catwalk show is getting the right media and influencer mix there.

Once we've nailed down the invitation design, we manage the printed invitation process, which is essentially like managing the invitation process for a wedding, but ten times more political. Who is seated next to whom, and where, is big business.

Each invitation has to have the name of the guest, their publication or company and an outright stated or coded indication as to where they should be seated, all based on a complex mix of criteria – this is for print, which seems to still be alive and well in London, Milan and Paris. You'll end up sending out about 1000 invitations and each one takes time and thought (as well as an address label and a stamp) – it's quite a task! If you're doing this digitally through Fashion GPS or a similar platform, it still takes time to allocate seating, but the process is a little speedier. About a week prior to the show, you're not really sleeping.

We may also help the designer with the casting (if they are new to the catwalk and require assistance) and optioning of models, and we may leverage our contact network to forge partnerships with show sponsors and gift-bag-item purveyors, as well as potential partners that can provide complementary shoes or accessories for the show.

Just before the show, we let photo agencies know which celebrities will be on the front row so that they can send a photographer along to do audience shots.

Who is involved on the day of the show? Do you have a team of people working with you and who are they?

When we do a show, we normally have a team of eight to ten people. I will personally always be present, unless we have two shows that overlap. My right-hand person is our company's VP, Laura McCluskey, and having her by my side is a godsend. She's tall to my petite, can manage a crowd of enthusiastic show attendees and can run the team blindfolded. The bulk of the team will be made up of freelancers and a handful of volunteers from local universities that want to get first-hand experience in running a catwalk show. We'll also have a dedicated person on social media to record sneak peeks from backstage and the event as it happens.

What happens on the day of the show?

Half of the team will have backstage access in order to run to and from backstage and front-of-house, manage any backstage press that had arranged to come back and speak to the designer and to ensure that all is running smoothly (and hopefully on time). The other half will be front-of-house only and about 45 minutes to a half hour before the show, the room will be set – placing a credit sheet and show notes on each seat, along with a gift bag for select rows. Just before the show, the team will split and there will be an account director on the door who recognises guests, along with a few runners who can escort VIPs into the show space. The show space is sat by rows, starting with the front row. We'll also have team members in the show spaces helping people find their seats, and policing show-goers who wish to seat themselves in the front row when they've been allocated a little further back. This happens without fail every season and you have to be prepared. It would be lovely if people sat where they were supposed to (and make a PR's job a hundred times easier, and minimise their own embarrassment when called out), but there is always a handful of people who try their luck on seating themselves in the elusive front row.

What do you do during a show? Do you observe audience reaction?

I definitely like to watch the show from near the photographer's pit, to see which looks get the most clicks from the photographers and to see how the audience is responding to the

show. It used to be the amount of applause at the end of show would be an indicator to the show's success, now it's silence and all audience members capturing the final walkthrough on their smartphones (*please do not use iPads, people). Clapping would indicate that the audience is not taking photos or videos, and I would measure that as not a great response.

What activities take place immediately post show? Interviews? Photographs?

Immediately following the show, we want to get the most important press/influencers backstage interviewing and taking photos of and with the designer. We only have about twenty minutes to a half hour to manage post-show media, get the collection packed up and make the space available for the next show, so it's crunch time in getting the most influential connections, quickly.

After a show, what happens in the next 24 hours and during the next days and weeks?

Within the next several hours, our job is to get the high-res and low-res images from the house photographer and the house videographer. These images and video content will be sent out to press and influencers around the world, along with a press release that outlines the collection that was shown and highlights key attendees (celebrities) that were present.

We monitor the show coverage for the next several days and weeks – across all layers of media: print, digital and social. We then do a post-show report that quantifies the coverage. For a catwalk show over one of the 'Big Four', the media coverage ends up being in the tens to hundreds of millions of dollars' worth of exposure, depending on the designer.

How is social media used before, during and after a show? How important is this and which platforms are used?

Social media is almost like breathing. If a brand is good at it, everything that they do will be recorded digitally for their fans to engage with. The possibilities are endless as to what you can do and how much you can engage – it just takes time. Instagram is so visual; I would say it is one of the most used over a fashion week, and now that Instagram has added Stories, it has made Snapchat slightly redundant. Most designers feed their Instagram feed through to their Twitter and Facebook accounts, so all platforms are covered, as you never know what medium your fans prefer. We also work a lot with influencers that use YouTube and Periscope to communicate fashion week to their own fan bases, which is brilliant exposure for our designers, depending on the reach of each content creator.

Long story short, social media is important, and it isn't going away anytime soon.

How do you and the designers/brands you work with use material online before, during and after a show?

It varies per each designer. Some create pre-show content, some like to keep everything under wraps until the first look exits onto the runway. If a designer does have material to use pre-show, we'll send out to media for catwalk preview stories. During the show, it's mostly imagery and video footage captured during the catwalk show to share on social media, and after the show, it's spreading the professional imagery and video content as far and wide as possible. A lot of PRs try to control who has access to images and video, but

once it has hit the Internet, it's out there. You may as well share broadly with the press release to get the intended message across.