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THE SHEER SIZE OF HONG KONG FASHION WEEK AND WORLD BOUTIQUE CAN BE OVERWHELMING FOR THE UNINITIATED.

Lou Pardi shares some top tips for getting the best out of the events

HONG KONG FASHION WEEK IS RUN TOGETHER WITH THE TRADE FAIR WORLD BOUTIQUE, BOTH OF WHICH ARE PRESENTED BY HONG KONG TRADE DEVELOPMENT COUNCIL (HKTDC).

Over 229 exhibitors from 16 countries and regions including Australia, mainland China, Denmark, France, Hong Kong, India, Indonesia, Italy, Japan, Jordan, Lebanon, Taiwan, Turkey, the United Kingdom, the United States and Vietnam exhibited at the fair in 2012.

The fair, combined with Hong Kong Fashion week, attracted 115 buying missions from 43 countries (around 5,300 buyers from around 3,800 companies) in 2012.

NAVIGATION

Navigating the fair, which is spread over three floors and several halls, in the huge Hong Kong Convention Centre, can be daunting, however thankfully HKTDC provides support to help connect buyers with exhibitors. The Dragon Lounge on the ground floor is a great starting point for buyers and designers, and HKTDC staff are available to help attendees seek out appropriate exhibitors while a downloadable app, which provides information on exhibitors, and their locations, and tools for navigating and taking notes is an essential tool for buyers. If you're keen on using good old fashioned pen and paper, designer Wendy Murray's advice is, "Have a good notebook, have your stapler, have your pen, have your little wheelie bag [of samples] and I would walk up and down and every time you go past [an exhibitor you're interested in], just staple in their card and make a note of what it is in your book. Don't hand your card out to every single person that asks, 'because otherwise you get all these random emails to decipher.'" Murray then reviews her notes and revisits suppliers she's interested in working with.

There are schedules of shows and seminars (trends and other presentations) held each day.

BUYING

Australian designer and boutique owner Marie Linker made her first trip to the fair in 2012. "I have been to many, many fashion weeks before," she says. "I honestly felt it was one of the most wonderfully arranged, well-organised fashion weeks I have ever been to and I've been to quite a few. I've been to fashion weeks in Italy, I've been to Pakistan, I've been to Malaysia. They took very good care of the people that came from abroad. They gave you a lot of information which was well-suited to your needs."

Linker met many new suppliers. "I got to meet people that were very surprising to me," she says, "three Lebanese designers that I probably never would have met. It was an incredible success." Marie also met a Chinese manufacturer for her own designs.

To make the best of your time at the show, she recommends completing the request for information which is provided with the invitation before you leave home, so that HKTDC staff can anticipate your needs before you arrive in Hong Kong.

MANUFACTURING

There are a plethora of manufacturers from mainland China, India and other countries at World Boutique. For Wendy Murray, 2012 was the fourth time she had attended the fair, having come to two July fairs, and one other January fair. "It's more international in January, it's a bit bigger, people don't tend to have many shows in July," she says, adding that she finds both the Winter and Summer fairs useful and July (Hong Kong Summer) often has more fabrics.

She has made connections with beading and embellishments suppliers, and made a valuable contact with a sourcing agent who assists with Chinese-English translation and smoothing issues between suppliers and buyers.

SELLING

There's plenty of discussion about emerging markets in China and Brazil. Shopping destination Hong Kong is experiencing even more growth as retailers are keen to be accessible to people who arrive from mainland China to shop.

Australians make up a minority of the exhibitors at World Boutique. Designer Sara Caverley hadn't attended the fair before bringing Australian shoe label Sole Society (by Krites) over. "It's been a little bit quiet, but I think we've definitely made some good contacts," she says. Caverley predominantly saw mainland China buyers, rather than international buyers, and also met a potential sales agent for China.



COPYCAT THREAT INDIA

With almost every designer, there was an acceptance that bringing products to Hong Kong put them at risk of being copied. One designer commented, "My range, I just add to it all the time, and my best seller's still one of my best sellers, so bringing it here [to Hong Kong] might not be a good idea. It's my thing and it's very unique. So [if I show in Hong Kong] I'll probably make a special one."

"I just don't see how to avoid it," commented another designer on copying. "I have worried about that to be honest. It's just a risk that we had to take."

A delegation of manufacturers from India exhibited, under the banner Brands of India by The Clothing Manufacturers Association of India. Whilst many designers produce in both India and China, many find they have issues with orders arriving late from India, which they do not experience as often with manufacturers in mainland China.

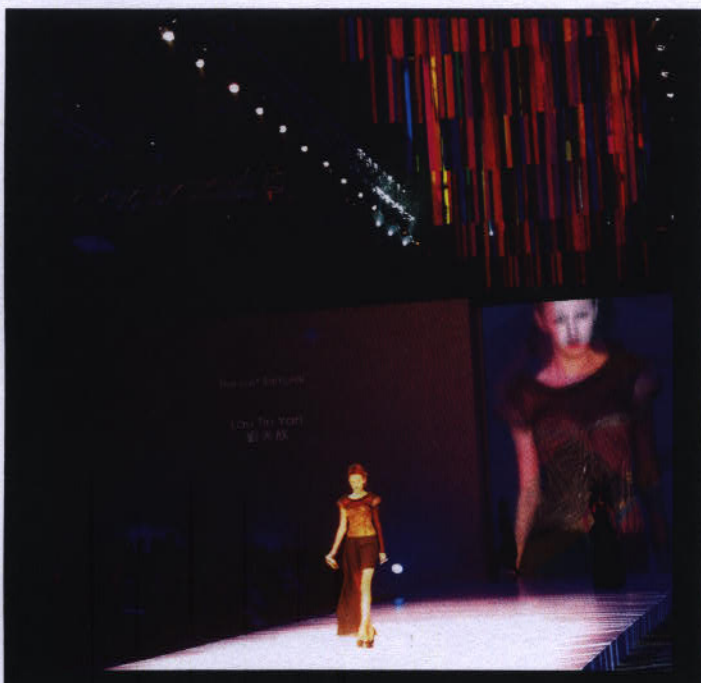
Whilst Australian buyers can attend the fair on their own, coming as a part of a delegation has some great benefits. Clarisse Reynoso of TCFWA (Textile, Clothing and Footwear Western Australia, now a national organisation) who assists manufacturers coming to Hong Kong, explains that there is a sponsorship available for first time buyers. "They can get almost \$US300 worth of hotel sponsorship or they can have travel investment – depending on their profile." TCFWA can assist with applications.

VOLUME

Volumes expected from mainland China manufacturers are traditionally higher than those required by Australian suppliers. One designer suggested that if it's feasible, offering a higher unit price could secure a smaller order size.

Reynoso says that even if designers aren't ready to place a large order, getting a feel for what's available at World Boutique is beneficial. "It's a way to get relationships and try to build something. We try to encourage some of them, even if they have small collections, to actually have a look at what's a bit bigger. So in this case, they can maybe have a business plan that will be a bit more interesting for the future. This kind of fair is actually helping them to see ok, what's available? What can I do if I want to grow? So that's the idea."

As Linker says, once you identify what you're sourcing, HKTDC will assist with the rest. "Everything is done by the organisation to perfection. They seem to know exactly what they're doing and they're doing it very professionally."



TRACING THE JOURNEY OF AUSTRALIAN WOOL

Australian Wool Innovation was flying the flag for Aussie wool at Hong Kong Fashion Week, as Lou Pardi reports

UK designer Craig Lawrence and Hong Kong designer Hidy Ng showcased their knitwear designs at the major Extravaganza event at Hong Kong Fashion Week. Flying the flag for knitwear, Woolmark custodian Australian Wool Innovation (AWI) had a well-appointed stand, and hosted a seminar on wool.

AWI's Alex Lai explains, how, funded by wool growers from Australia and also some contributions from the Australian Government "AWI participates in research on farms looking into sheep husbandry including, "how to raise the sheep, how to look after the grasses, how to look after the sheep's welfare." Scientists participate in the work, he adds

AWI also follows the wool from farm gates to retailer, looking at new product development. "We work very closely with the supply chain, for example in Hong Kong and in China, to create a new innovative product to push out to the market."

Marketing support is also provided, through targeted advertisements, like a sexy video for the fine feeling of Merino. Key relationships are also nurtured, so that new products (yarns, weaves and approaches to dyeing) are brought to the attention of key influencers.

"Every year we create a different collection of new garments and we take it in a showcase to all the major brands like Polo and Hugo Boss," says Lai. "We show them, so they can take these ideas and put [them] in their collection. We push with the supply chain to create a product and we pull with our major brands to take it to the market. Once we do that, we buy more wool and then the wool growers are happier."

PRODUCING in MAINLAND China

Designers Greta Grossberg of Coussinet and Sara Caverley of Australian shoe label Sole Society (by Krites) manufacture products in mainland China and India. They spoke to Lou Pardi about their experiences.

SCALE AND PRICE

Greta Grossberg started out making luxury scarves herself, and then with the assistance of an Australian manufacturer. Once she started to move away from one-off pieces, she found going offshore was the only viable solution. "I was getting price pressure. Once you get past a certain point, you've got to consider all the price points and being consumer-friendly and sadly, the only way to go was offshore. So that's how that happened. I've been manufacturing in Hong Kong, China and India for five or six years."

CHINA V INDIA

Both Caverley and Grossberg agreed that at present, their dealings with suppliers in China were running more smoothly than those with suppliers in India, especially with regard to timeliness of deliveries and communication. Grossberg has had situations where emails hadn't been answered for up to four weeks. "On the whole, it's much more superior dealing with a supplier in China... on the whole. I can't say without exception every time," she says, "I've found the service from China or Hong Kong companies to be very, very good. Very hard working, very efficient. There are issues sometimes with quality control, but you have that even in Australia."

Caverley's experience of manufacturing in India has also been disappointing. "It just takes forever to get to Australia and the quality - there's just mass inconsistencies in all of it," she says. On the other hand though, "they just do really good prices and really good leather and the quality is really good, you've just got to keep your eye on it. But it's easier to manage in China, so that's why we want to move it all over here."

QUANTITY

"It's always a problem," says Grossberg of the quantities required by manufacturers in China. "Australia's a very small population and the sort of quantities that suppliers want to make are usually not suitable for my product. So it's always something that I have to negotiate." Offering a slightly higher unit price for a smaller quantity is an approach that Grossberg finds can work, and is preferable to dealing with surplus stock.

ETHICAL PRODUCTION

With ethical sourcing increasingly a consideration for designers,

Caverley (or her production team) visit the manufacturers they use in China. "They're [the facilities are] so clean, the workers seem really happy and it's a great environment," she says. Materials are also sourced from markets in Shenzhen and Guangzhou, which Caverley visits with the manufacturers she works with.