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The Future of the Trade Show – White Oak Economy

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A couple of weeks ago, **Burberry** announced that they have had quite enough of the fashion merry-go-round and have done away with many of their seasonal constraints. They are showing men's and women's collections together, they have dropped their half-season shows and the biggest change: a proportion of their collection went straight on sale after the runway presentation.

So basically a big shake-up of the current fashion system. Because, at the end of the day, the fashion system is essentially about selling clothes, right? To customers, correct? But are Burberry saying: enough of the buyers, editors, retailers, let's talk directly to our customers and cut out all the people in between? Well, kinda yes but mostly no, that would alienate a lot of people and lose them a lot of sales in our current system. It is, however, a sign that interaction is changing massively, due to the growth in our online lives and the further advancement of social media. If brands don't react to it or embrace it, they will be left behind.

'What's Burberry got to do with us?' I hear you mutter! Well, this applies to our denim bubble too of course. When I was at the various trade shows in Las Vegas, New York, London, and Berlin this season, I posted a few select images from some of the stands; a teaser of what we can expect next winter. And of course Heddels itself post **round-ups** just a few days after the shows, detailing who is doing what.

I get really excited about certain products and items at trade shows but when 4-6 months go by and it hits retail, am I as excited? Nah, because I took photos, I posted them, I saw other people post them, then I saw the lookbook come out, which was posted and pinned and shared and ended up all over my feed and now the next collection is out and I've moved on. My eyes are tired of one thing and onto the next.

Heddels managing editor, **David Shuck**, and I spoke about this topic the other day and he summed it up perfectly: "The end consumer has become much closer to the product, but more jaded as they are also living two product cycles ahead of what's on the market."

Very interesting times indeed and lots to explore, so I decided to speak to a cross-section of familiar faces and industry experts I see on the circuit and get a feel for where this new world is going to take us, and you:

Brian Awitan: Sales and branding creative for LS&Co, BillyKirk, Dyer Brand, etc. Trade show exhibitor since 1994.



Image via Dave Himel.

Phil Proyce: Founder, Ladywhite Company. Co-founder, County LTD. Been attending trade shows for 5 years.



Tony Patella: Co-Founder of Tellason, been attending trade shows since 1990.



Sharifa Murdock: Co-founder of the Liberty Fairs tradeshow, been working in the trade fair business since 2003.



Sharifa Murdock (left) and Groovey Lew (right).

Pep Zorzano: Retail professional and retail/brand consultant, been attending trade shows for 20 years.



All of these individuals are familiar with the current trade show format and are a part of the community in some way. Have they too noticed this change in over-exposure due to the encroaching influence of the internet? Brian Awitan has, and refers to it as 'Buyer Fatigue'. I asked him how he felt about the immediacy we've become accustomed to in the fashion industry due to social media:

"It's a double-edged sword. I am personally a fan and active participant in all the socials. As it relates to industry, though? There's no longer any mystery. There was something nice about coverage being relegated to industry insiders and the fanatic tribes that searched extra hard for all the future fashion bits. It kept the end consumer on a cadence to be appetized at a pace. Now? Everything is immediate. So much so that end consumers can be exposed to thumbnail sketch inspiration before the fabric quality is even selected! That's a little too 'pop-will-eat-itself' for me. There's no magic any longer, it's just ALL out."

So if it's 'all out' are we saying the gap between the brand and the consumer is becoming so narrow that activities such as the trade show aren't needed any more? I personally don't think so because something else is simultaneously shifting that gives trade shows a new and more varied focus. More on that later! Firstly, how does someone like Sharifa, who co-founded one of the newest trade shows out there, view this shift?

"Social media, especially Instagram, has created a more involved and educated consumer. They appreciate that their voices have an impact on the way designers create. [In the future] Social media content will be more curated and linkable, driving the consumer to interact with the brands on a more personal level."

She adds that brands can use the dynamic to their advantage by becoming more flexible:

"With the climb of social media, it is important for brands to become available to consumers as soon as possible. We are the microwave generation, if it's immediate gratification, we move on. By transitioning to seasonless collections, designers are able to better serve their current customers while appealing to a broader range of consumers around the world."



The folks at Liberty are excited by today's changes and can see a future working alongside and with this world of bloggers, Instagrammers, and consumers. The show was founded only three years ago and entered the market at a time that must have caused them to really analyze what was needed and take a different approach. Sharifa continues,

"We knew we wanted to focus more on the customer service aspect for brands. We were going back to the original concept of being a product-driven show instead of showcasing the wealth of each brand. We wanted to curate new and existing product for retailers while also fostering a community of up and coming designers. There was no one else doing that at the time."

"By creating an experience, Liberty Fairs sets itself apart from the tradeshow industry. The purpose is not only service the retailers, but to create a launch pad for designers to make their debut."

This is definitely part of a very big shift that I think will change the apparel system forever. I've noticed a distinct change in the trade show format, mood and approach over recent seasons, where smaller shows are emerging and the larger giants are dying off, but is it really about size? Money? Brands? Or community? Personally, I think community is the key word here.

Phil Proyce of Ladywhite agrees: "Tradeshows mean more than just "sales" to us, it's about the relationships more than anything. Selling the garment is only a small piece of the overall goal for us." An interesting point and one that I wonder was the case 5-10 years ago. When I started attending trade shows in 2008 I have to say the emphasis was still pretty focussed on sales and order forms. Now there is a tangible expansion into marketing, press, community, and a more holistic view of brand elevation.

Just witnessing the demise of the huge **Bread & Butter** trade show in Berlin was enough to see the tide had turned. This was a show that started great but became increasingly about huge, audacious stands with fake beaches or mini swimming pools and cocktail bars. There were A-list celebrity appearances, huge parties and lots of \$\$\$\$ flying around.



Crowds at the Bread & Butter show in Berlin.

Not that I didn't enjoy all of that, but I have to say I get so much more out of smaller, community-driven shows. I look on the traveling trade show crowd as a kind of family, and I probably see some of these faces more frequently than I see my actual family too: we bump into each other in the various trade show aisles, visit each others stands, mix shop-talk with industry gossip and then in the evenings go for dinner with some of our closer 'companions of the road'. It's basically like living in a small town for three days. B&B achieved that feeling with the L.O.C.K. (Labels of Common Kin) area of their show but it became increasingly apparent that L.O.C.K. was the only hall that remained a true success, simply because of this feeling of community.

Tony from Tellason was one of the many faces I'd see at B&B (and still do at Liberty, Selvedge Run and Desert & Denim), he remembers the show "as an impressive, yet overwhelming endeavor, it is pretty tough for any show to compete with what Bread & Butter was able to accomplish all of those years. Founder Karl Heinz and his crew put on an absolutely top-class show – the venue, the mood, even the food and coffee was tough to beat in the fair trade world." But his experience was mostly related to L.O.C.K., and as someone who had to walk every hall in that show, believe me, that vibe wasn't replicated everywhere else!



The L.O.C.K. exhibition space in Bread & Butter. Image via Tribaspace.

So can you maintain that 'small community' feel at such a large trade show? I felt like the mighty Bread & Butter fell at a time when people wanted something else. They were sick of the 'show-off' stands and pomp of other other halls and instead craved genuine interaction and inclusion. Sharifa thinks so too:

"Our motto has always been to 'Brand Together.' This came from the desire to create a collaborative community. In order to achieve anything great, you're going to need to join forces and work together to be successful."

I honestly think this is an exciting but reasonably new concept to the apparel industry. Once upon a time, each brand stood alone in their own oversized, ivory towers, now those walls have literally been broken down and rival reps have become firm friends. Natalie Massenet, founder of Net-A-Porter wrote in a recent article for *Wired* on the future of commerce that, "the most successful businesses will be characterized by collaboration. Between businesses in the same sector, different sectors or with their customers."

But before we think we've solved the problem (and we start creating denim communes in Topanga Canyon) don't brands need to actually *do* business? It's great to talk, collaborate, and gain industry exposure but essentially brands pay big money for stands that they need to make back in sales figures. A large part of the reason those big names left Bread and Butter was because they were spending up to a million on their stand and making sixty thousand of business—a transaction that simply doesn't add up.

Pep has also noticed this shift:

"Trade shows as I knew them a long time ago, were the places we would view new collections and new brands and where we placed orders. Today it's an excuse to have a beer with friends and talk, of course about the business but still, just talk. However, for the investment the brands take in a trade show, the best result are still sales."

Tony tells me it's become harder and harder to work out how to calculate those sales, to see if a trade show is actually worth attending:

"For the past decade plus, trade shows in general have become difficult to quantify as to whether they're a good business decision or not with regard time and money spent versus revenue gained. This is because no one "drops paper" (hands brands orders) at shows anymore. Trade shows of the future will and should be smaller, more localized and be considered 'order shows.'"

Tony's vision of these 'order shows' would certainly not involve the likes of David and I roaming the stands, bloggers nosing about and 'industry creatives' having coffees, these shows would be a very trimmed-back version of what we see right now. Tony says he wants the orders, wants to see retailers and needs the sales, but retailers such as Pep have started to feel less and less welcome in today's format: "For a while it has become clear that retailers are not the most important element for fashion trade shows: stylists, bloggers, putting your name out and marketing and image are becoming more important than the original purpose of the trade show."

So instead of the focus being 100% on sales to store-owners, it's becoming about exposure that will *lead* to sales, just in a more indirect way. And due to the rise in social media, the exposure that leads to sales is starting to become more powerful than traditional store sales and it's alienating retailers. Enter David with his insight into this issue:

"I, as a writer, can walk through these shows and can tell tens of thousands of people what I saw at a moment's notice (and hundreds of thousands a few days later). The difference here though is I'm not backing up what I'm broadcasting with any financial risk (except maybe our credibility). So my validation isn't as meaningful as a store buying the same product, BUT it becomes so when I can reach a critical mass of people X many times larger than the retailer."

"At the same time, I'm offloading much more responsibility to the consumer/reader. I'm just trying to show them stuff, not necessarily whether it's good or bad, so they have to educate themselves to participate. We have super, super savvy readers, some of whom know product better than I do, and are just looking for a window into a place like Liberty or Capsule where they can make their own decisions."

Lately, a few shows have popped up that are either open to non-industry attendees or tailored directly to them. Lightning Magazine's **Inazuma Show** was one of the earliest created with exactly that in mind; to introduce the brands and even the magazine editors to the readers and consumers. In the US, shows such as Pop Up Flea, American Field, and **Northern Grade** have also set their sights on that market. Perhaps the future will mean these shows would become tailored to consumers and 'order shows' solely for retailers.



Inazuma festival in Tokyo last year.

Social media and e-commerce are changing the way everything works right now and, as Brian puts it, “The retailers are the ones in the trenches slugging it out with the end-consumer. Trade shows have to allow retail to take a much more active role in all the moving parts and mechanics.” But for now, what does the next decade hold for the trade show set-up and what’s the key to a trade show’s success? Many people I talk to on my travels believe the end is nigh, but Brian is steadfast in his support, “People are so dismissive of tradeshow today. I still believe it is an important part of the process. In an industry that relied on and continues to rely so heavily on the shows as a platform to present their message, I would caution those so quick to declare them dead.”

Sharifa is excited to embrace all the current change at Liberty and make it a part of the show’s future, “It’s our job to evolve with the incredible brands we work with every season, even if it means stepping away from a long-standing system.” Personally, I think the key is to pick the right collaborators and the right brands. At the end of the day, no brand, show, or person can be popular with everyone, you have to pick your lane and stick to it. As a relative newcomer to the tradeshow scene, Phil has some poignant advice, “The balance will never be ‘right’. Every brand has different goals, and it’s impossible to please everyone. If a trade show was perfect for my brand, it would suck for everyone else. The small communities within the big shows have seemed to be the best route.”



This article has taken a long time to write, simply because there are so many moving parts to the industry right now. It's like a Broadway production where nobody knows what's exactly going on. Once upon a time everyone knew their part in the production, everyone knew their lines and everyone knew how the performance played out and what happened at the end: you counted your orders, packed up your stand and knew if "that was a good show" or not. Now the trade show is about so much more than that, the performers play multiple parts, what was once the leading role seems to get killed off halfway through, only to re-emerge at the end and confuse everyone. There are several conclusions but never a real ending and we all shuffle off afterwards wondering what happened and "was it any good?"

What I think defines a 'good' trade show now is summed up perfectly by Brian:

"In the end, I feel like the biggest takeaway for a successful show is the right brand mix and a great sense of community. As an exhibitor, you're energized by breathing the same air as the 'next big thing' or next up-and-comer offering their take on originality. As a buyer, finding the new-new is always what it's about. Beyond that, I feel like success is measured by overall experience of 'would I like to come back'. It's like a good house party or dinner; did it make you feel good? Did you laugh/cry? Were there interesting people? To me, that's the criteria for ever going back to anything."