



P O R T L A N D  
F A S H I O N  
I N S T I T U T E

# HOW TO LAUNCH YOUR FASHION BRAND

Following your passion shouldn't feel like an impossible task—but launching your own fashion brand can. When your project comes to life, you want to have the tools to put it out into the world. But where do you even begin? From personal connections to social media, there's no limit to the ways you can get your business out there.

If you're still trying to get your business off the ground, there are [a number of certificate programs](#) specifically designed to turn your fashion industry dream into a reality. These programs offer support and supplies,

can give you access to annual events and shows, and provide opportunities to network with industry professionals—whether you want to start your own clothing line or an entire boutique.

> Want inspiration, tips, and advice? Read on!

# KNOW YOURSELF, YOUR VISION, AND YOUR STORY

Before you can put yourself out there it's important to know yourself. Why are you taking on this project? What inspires you to continue to pursue it daily? It's no surprise that launching a fashion brand is challenging. In fact, you may end up winging a lot of it. That's okay, as long as you stay true to yourself.

According to [Sander Lak](#), Creative Director of [Sies Marjan](#), "The process of making it is a lot of choices based on gut feelings. Some things might seem or feel wrong [logically], but if you believe in them, you have to do them. In the end, you are the person who's going to create."



*"Part of giving a good story is leaving room for the recipient to imagine the rest."*

Knowing your vision will also help you avoid getting lost chasing trends, says John Targon, designer and co-founder of [Baja East](#). "Creating a vision and staying true to that vision should be at the core," he adds. "Everything else will follow."

It's also important to know and be able to tell your story. "When there's a wonderful story about the product, it tends to resonate with customers," says [Neiman Marcus CEO Karen Katz](#). This is especially true if you're using social media as a marketing tool. On [Tory Burch's](#) social feeds, "deft editing" and "careful cropping" are put to use.



# KNOW YOUR VALUE ADD

Ask yourself: What are you offering that your customer can't get anywhere else? If someone else is offering a similar product, why should your customer come to you instead?

It's important to not only understand the value add of your business, but to also be able to translate this value add to the customers you're trying to attract.

***"No one needs another [insert here]. Come up with a really compelling reason as to why you're doing something."***

***- Raina Penchansky***

Maybe your value add is your gotta-have-it item, like Diane von Furstenberg's wrap dress or WildFang's Wild Feminist t-shirt.

Or maybe your value add is your niche—something you're really good at. You want to look at the market and make sure your niche isn't something that already exists. According to Fernando Garcia, one-half of [Monse](#), after you identify your niche, you want to identify your cornerstones. "I think if you have a couple of defining cornerstones—for us, it's shirting, stripes, primary colors, and everything that's sort of effortless and easy to wear—and build on those things [you'll be successful]," says Garcia.



# KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE/CONSUMER

While it's important to stay true to yourself throughout your creative process, you also need to stay true to your consumer. This often means identifying not just who you are, but who you're appealing to. Start by asking yourself: Who is my person? Not only do you want to identify this person, you want to empathize with them as well, recommends Yaro Starak of [Entrepreneurs-Journey.com](https://www.entrepreneur.com/journey). What problems are they trying to solve? How do they feel about it? What are they currently doing to try to solve their problems?

Once you've identified your person, you can start thinking about reaching them. Now is when you want to revisit "your story" from the beginning. After you have your story, you can translate it into images. "You need two kinds of pictures," recommends [merchandise-essentials.com](https://www.merchandise-essentials.com), "photos for the webshop and photos for your other communication channel like the website, social media and marketing actions."

No matter which kind of picture you're shooting, you want to remain authentic to your brand and your audience.



## IF YOU WANT DIVERSE CONSUMERS, BE SURE TO INCLUDE DIVERSE MODELS, MAKEUP ARTISTS, HAIRSTYLISTS & PHOTOGRAPHERS

Those behind the scenes are as important as who's in the spotlight when it comes to executing your vision and reaching the right people.

Once you have your pictures, you can really start getting your brand in front of the right people. From engagement strategies to image best practices, [fashion digital marketing](https://www.fashion-digital-marketing.com) can be a useful tool. According to [UHURU Network](https://www.uhuru-network.com), "Fashion digital marketing gets your product in front of your ideal audience so they become aware of your brand, purchase your products, and ultimately turn into brand ambassadors."

A few digital marketing strategies to consider are holiday promotions—which is a discount around a certain time of year—paired with a social media



campaign, or a style guide to show your consumer “how to wear or incorporate your items into their everyday life.” A style guide or look book can also be done seasonally, for special occasions, or around the holidays.

“Guides can be listed as a special section on your website and incorporated into your blog, where you can provide more in-depth information on each item in the collection. Try telling a story with the style guide to interest your customer,” says [UHURU Network](#).

But when it comes to getting your brand out there, assess all your options and don’t automatically assume that an Instagram influencer or B-List celebrity is going to be the best marketing option for you.

Kara Mendelsohn, the founder and designer of [cooper & ella](#), cautions that utilizing a celebrity can be a difficult—and potentially not rewarding—process. “Not only do you have to get a product to that celebrity, you have to make sure that celebrity’s publicist calls you when she’s going to Starbucks, then you have to pay for rights of photos and blast them out to everybody and hope US Weekly actually gives you a credit.”

While it may be career-changing to have someone like, say, Michelle Obama wear your dress, “you have to have the right product for Michelle Obama to [wear].”

The more authentic you are, the more your consumer will connect with you and your brand.





# KNOW YOUR FINANCIAL CAPITAL

The truth is: [many fashion industry hopefuls out there have some sort of financial help](#)—at least in the beginning. How much are we talking? According to Ari Bloom of [A2B Ventures](#), a strategic advisory firm known to counsel young designers, “A designer needs \$2 million to \$3 million to get a ready-to-wear company off the ground.” This cost goes toward everything from renting an office to public relations to the actual production of the clothing line.

But having less financial capital right out of the gate than the next person isn’t a recipe for failure—it’s a prime opportunity for expectation-setting. Would it be wise to pay an Instagram influencer \$500 to promote your clothing line if you only have \$500 to your name? Probably not. Especially if you still need to consider things like order minimums and fabric costs.

If you don’t have a few million to throw at your fashion venture, it’s important to be honest with yourself. Do you want to design and build the next global brand? Do you want to be the next Alexander Wang? Or do you want to create a high-quality product for a select group of people that may not be featured in Vogue when it launches, but will still be revered?

Regardless of your answer, it’s important to go into the business familiar with all the obstacles in front of you—and with good ideas—says Shira Sue Carmi, founder of [Launch Collective](#), a company advising budding designers. “Fashion is amazing in the way it balances art and commerce, but it’s a business.”

Knowing that picking your venture carefully will determine what you’re actually doing day-to-day can be helpful. If you want to start a boutique, your life will look very different from designing, producing, and selling one item.

***“Don’t start a business because you want to design. Start a business because you want to start a business.” – Shira Carmi***

With the diversity of business opportunities in this age, even if you don’t have the means to create a global fashion brand right away, you can start a movement. For example, WildFang began with influencer marketing to answer to a market problem. Women who regularly shopped in the men’s section to get the look and feel they wanted suddenly had a store just for them. Business boomed.

It’s important to think about what elements may come into play as you launch, do you know the right people to get things off the ground? Are you providing something groundbreaking? How can you address a need in the market and make sure that market knows about it? Thinking through promotion and creative angles may mean a different kind of success than producing a similar product to what others have made available. Don’t be afraid to name and know what kind of business you’re building.



# KNOW YOUR CONTACTS—AND YOUR CONTACT’S CONTACTS

It’s not all about who you know, but who you know can certainly help. Many of those starting their fashion venture have the advantage of existing influential connections—whether from their families or other professional endeavors. But again: this isn’t a reason to give up, and is instead an opportunity to get realistic. Don’t be afraid to reach out to who you know (and find out who they know).

As your business grows, so will your list of personal contacts. “Who the person is, where you connected, potential opportunities and how you can help them are all things to keep track of. While it can be a great resource to search when you need something, it can also be referenced when you have an opportunity,” says [Entrepreneur.com](https://www.entrepreneur.com).

If you’re still building your list of contacts, [2-way networking](#) can be helpful. “2-way networking” essentially means that anytime you’re building

connections, you’re mindful of how the relationship can be mutually beneficial. A new contact will be much more receptive if they have the opportunity to also benefit—or if you offer them “an opportunity that helps them without asking for anything in return.”



# YOUR BEST CONTACTS ARE THOSE WHO ARE WHERE YOU WANT TO BE IN 3 YEARS



One of the important elements of going to school in the fashion and apparel industry is the networking you do while you're there. Throughout a certificate program or degree, you'll have access to mentors and professionals. Make sure when you're selecting a program that the people who will be teaching you are actually working in the industry. While many schools offer seasoned professionals, only some provide contacts and teachers who are currently working in the field and can help you make the necessary connections after graduation.

In the fashion industry—as in any other professional field—having a mentor can be hugely beneficial. [Tanya Taylor](#) claims finding mentors early on was a huge factor in her success, and reminds those pursuing careers not to be afraid to reach out to people they've never met. "I asked a lot of people to coffee; I met people at Marc Jacobs who would suggest someone

else to meet, a lawyer they thought would be great at helping me develop a business plan," she says. "Find people who want to support you and who get what you're doing."

It's also important to maintain good relationships with your contacts—whether they're a partner, a buyer, or a manufacturer. And it's just as important to be selective about who you choose to work with. "You are going to be dealing with real things in real time with these people, so if it's not someone you're going to enjoy working with day in and day out, I would encourage you to maybe not work with that person," says [Timo Weiland](#).



# KNOW THE BUSINESS

How does a product go from point A to point B? After all, you can't manufacture your product if you haven't yet chosen a factory to manufacture it in.

This goes back to the initial expectation-setting. How much time are you able to set aside for your fashion venture? How much money? According to [Entrepreneur.com](https://www.entrepreneur.com), you'd be wise to double whatever time and money estimates you've already established.

Part of growing your fashion business means working with buyers, and it's important to remember that buyers might not always have your best interest at heart. "If your gut says don't do it, don't do it," says Kara Mendelsohn. Anytime a buyer asks her to make a modification, she asks herself if she'd be willing to see her name on it.

You also want to be careful not to take an order if you can't deliver it on time—because not only is that bad for business, it's bad for your business relationships. "There is no hand-holding, [it's not okay] if you only had a 30 percent sell-through, you can't even get a [delivery] extension anymore. If you can't deliver, [the retailers will say], we don't want it," says [Oak's](https://www.oak.com) Jeff Madalena.

It's also advisable to spend some time in the stores where your retail could potentially be carried. Says

[Jonathan Simkhai](https://www.jonathansimkhai.com), "It's a big deal when a retailer decides to give a new brand a chance, to take money from another resource and give it to you."

> If you found this guide helpful in getting your business off the ground and out into the world, be sure to check out [PFI's certificate programs](https://www.portlandfashioninstitute.com), in everything from apparel design to the apparel entrepreneur series. We can't wait to see what you can do.

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