

The first attempt



Ashan Winslow

ERIN O'LOUGHLIN DISCOVERS WHY THIS WAS THE YEAR FOR AUSTRALIAN FASHION EXCHANGE AND ITS MANY EMERGING LABELS TO TAKE A CHANCE ON ROSEMOUNT AUSTRALIAN FASHION WEEK.

TAKING PART IN Rosemount Australian Fashion Week (RAFW) is no piece of cake. Hefty financial commitments, preparing export price lists, ramping up press interest – it's enough to do any designer's head in.

For those who are just starting out, says Ashan Winslow, the whole circus can be extra intimidating.

Winslow knows the anxieties of emerging fashion designers because he used to be one. A former buyer, Winslow has spent the past few years designing womenswear and soon hit that familiar stretch of hurdles that lies in wait for so many fashion entrepreneurs. In an effort to tackle them, Winslow founded Australian Fashion Exchange (AFX).

In essence, AFX is cluster of fashion businesses working together to support local talent. While there are fashion labels like Winslow's among its members, there are also experienced pattern makers, fashion photographers, local manufacturers and more. The point is to share knowledge and expertise – and create profitable, successful businesses in the process.

Founded in 2007, AFX has grown to have over 20 members. All of which meant 2010 seemed to Winslow about the right time to take the cluster to the next level: RAFW.

"We believe that the best return on investment from any local trade show is the one at Rosemount Australian Fashion Week for any emerging label, and hence decided to focus on this event this year," Winslow says.

It is the first time AFX members have exhibited together at a trade show.

"As a collective of emerging designers, being involved in a prestigious event such as RAFW was always a daunting decision due to cost and budget restraints," Winslow adds.

Ultimately, the very fact the labels were working together enabled them to overcome such concerns.

Winslow says AFX members were able to collectively negotiate a better price with RAFW organiser IMG Fashion for a space in RAFW's MCA showrooms.

Also making RAFW easier for AFX members was Winslow's thoroughly detailed checklist.

Firstly, AFX members wishing to partake in RAFW had to pass Winslow's assessment of whether they were production-ready. Not everyone passed. Those that did included the 10 labels that formed AFX's RAFW presence: Natalie Chapman, Mimi Designs, Latsamy, Pizzuto, Kiri Label, Little Sparrow, Tsu Jong, Depiction, Dan Jones and The Last Romantic.

Then came Winslow's checklist of goals that were designed to not only make each of the 10 labels truly prepared for RAFW, but also to prevent any sense of being overwhelmed.

For example, each label was required to make a list of stores that were potential clients and to make contact with those stores before the official RAFW delegate list was published. It was a way of capturing buyers' attention before the official RAFW invite onslaught began.

"Give the buyer all the information that they need in order to make a decision prior to the event, so that all that needs to be done at the event is the commitment from the store," Winslow says.

It turned out to be a successful strategy.

"Some of our designers even gained a few new stockists prior to fashion week by simply calling and making the appointment to see the stores."

As to other items on Winslow's checklist, nothing was left to chance. By the end of March, designers had to have their lookbooks ready to go, and by the beginning of April, their websites live and updated.

Not one to be caught out, Winslow also required designers to perform a thorough double-check of their website's functionality some weeks later.

Such things, Winslow believes, too often get overlooked.

Each exhibiting AFX designer also had to produce 10 confirmed RSVPs for RAFW before the event commenced, ensuring the cluster as a whole was guaranteed 100 buyer visits throughout May 3 to 7.

"The key feature about being involved as a collective is that we are able to leverage off each other," he says.

To garner additional support and attention for its RAFW debut, Winslow secured the NSW minister for small business, Peter Primrose, to launch AFX's presence.

Such a thorough pre-show schedule may have left many of the designers fatigued before they hit the MCA showrooms.

"But like any event, it is the strategy and lead-up work that truly makes the difference," Winslow says.

"We as a collective have made sure that we are proactive in our approach in order to maximise our sales potential."

While nothing has been locked in as yet, Winslow can foresee a longer term future for AFX at RAFW, now that the cluster's first attempt at showing is over and done with. First, though, he has some short-term goals, namely getting more fashion businesses – especially retailers – involved with AFX.

"A lot of industry people have the experience to give back to designers," he says. ■



LATSAMY: Among the AFX members that showed at RAFW.