

Q&A

Growing fashion brands: In conversation with Shira Carmi of Launch Collective

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Shira Carmi is founder of Launch Collective

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Ask anyone who has been working in fashion for a while about who has the most power in the industry, and the answer you will get will not be fashion editors. It will not be critics. It will not be bloggers. It will not be designers. It will be the fashion consumer.

The most successful fashion brands today know this well. They are built through their products, designed specifically and uniquely to be worn, and not just talked about.

"I didn't create a pair of shoes because I wanted some editorials. Never. I think of a guy in the club, outside in the street or a friend of mine," said [Demna Gvasalia](#), the Georgian creator of fashion collective Vetements.

This individualism springs from digital culture. Global, fast, abundant, remixed culture simultaneously enables and impresses upon us a need for difference both in terms of our own individuality and the uniqueness of the items we want.

Shira Carmi, founder of [Launch Collective](#), a business management firm working with fashion and lifestyle brands, has always known this.

For the past 10 years, she helped to build and scale culturally resonant, financially successful brands such as [lemlem](#) and [Monique Pean](#).



In this interview, Ms. Carmi talks about pressing topics of scaling businesses while preserving their uniqueness, the art of fashion entrepreneurship, the importance of not obsessing over mistakes, how digital changed fashion and what makes a great fashion product today.

Why do you love fashion?

Good question and a good opportunity to remind myself.

I actually spent the first few years of my career in the contemporary art world. I always wanted to work with creative people and artists, but knew that my skills and passions lay squarely on the business side.

I was drawn to fashion because it's the perfect marriage between creativity, product creation and business.

To this day, the ability to create beautiful, culturally relevant brands and objects, while simultaneously creating large-scale businesses with a real economic impact is totally exciting to me, and fashion is very unique in that respect.

What is the most important lesson you have learned so far about fashion business?

That for better or for worse, there is always another season coming in around the corner, so mistakes are never that terrible and victories are never long lived.

In many ways you are only as good as your last season, and there is something so cruel and Sisyphean about it, but also something quite liberating.

You have been working with fashion startups for the past 10 years. What are the three key changes that happened in the business development cycle for the emerging designers?

First, ecommerce made everything shoppable at any time everywhere no more scarcity.

Second, Instagram made everything visible anytime no more mystery.

Third, people are tired of buying stuff no more desire.

Those three anchors of fashion desire, mystery and scarcity are very much a thing of the past.

That makes everything launching brands, growing them, and making them sustainable much more challenging, and, when you succeed, much more rewarding.

What informs your business decisions today versus five or 10 years ago?

The stakes are higher.

In 2007, if you had a cute product at a reasonable price, you could get specialty store and even department store distribution pretty easily. That would help you lay a revenue foundation for the business, hire some key employees, invest in a PR company, and you were off to a great start.

Today, a brand must have a much clearer reason for being: a real story, an exceptional product, a compelling price and a true knack for marketing/press that cannot be purchased but must come organically through the founder or concept.

Don't get me wrong, the right product in the right place at the right time still sells, but because communication and commerce are instantaneously scalable, you're seeing one to two overnight successes instead of a wider array of gradual organic- growth-oriented brands.

But if you're not lucky enough to be Mansur Gavriel, you need to have the patience, persistence and funding for the long haul of organically building a customer base from the ground up.

What makes a good fashion product?

I always used to say great product, great price, great story. These days, it's the same, just magnified by a thousand.

The fashion bibles like Vogue and Elle used to define what's in and what's out. Today, a new breed of publishers is changing how content is created and consumed. How does this new generation of fashion publishers impact fashion upstarts' marketing strategies?

In a way, there is a lot more opportunity in this wide range of tastemakers, bloggers, influencers, et cetera. And for the lucky brands that have a knack for finding and connecting with these individuals, there's a lot of power there.

That said, there are two main challenges. One, the process of getting to them is a lot less formal, and you can't just pay your way to them by hiring a PR firm.

Second, their reach, while often impressive, is still a lot more limited than the traditional mass publications, so the impact of a single story/hit is a lot more limited.

What are the most inspiring things happening in the fashion business right now? Who has the most power?

The most power is, and always has been, with the consumer.

That's the beautiful thing about fashion no matter how well you sold in to stores, to magazines, to celebrities, you still had to sell through to the end consumer to be in business.

There is honesty in that, something that I could never find in art. It is the selling-in process that has changed, or in some cases, disappeared, and now brands are increasingly selling to consumers directly and relying on word of mouth for scalability and success.

I draw the most inspiration from brands that were able to harness this shift and create a passionate community of advocates around them, where consumers become influencers and influencers consumers.

From brands such as Rachel Comey and A Detacher to Outdoor Voices to companies such as Honest and Apple, when your product and community come together, it's a beautiful thing to watch.

Please share an example of a successful fashion brand launch that your company was instrumental in.

One of my favorite case studies is still my client and friend Monique Pean.

Monique had the vision to start the first eco-friendly sustainable fine jewelry collection.

At the time Vogue had no interest in sustainability, and she was often advised not to say anything about it to buyers or clients for fear of turning them off.

Monique went on to start a collection and a business where not only is the message and social impact strong, the product is absolutely beautiful.

We were so lucky to be there with her for the first collection, the first Vogue visit, the first Barneys appointment, the first hire, the first investor.

Today, the company is thriving and growing in the midst of a very challenging fine jewelry market.

Monique succeeded because she was crystal clear to herself, her clients and employees about the vision of the company, and made sure that the story came across in every facet of the business.

That kind of single mindedness and determination is crucial for brand creation and differentiation.

Another is lemlem by Liya Kebede, where I came in to do a business plan in 2009 and ended up helping pivot the company from children's to women's resort wear, creating one of the largest brands in the world exclusively made in Africa.

Lemlem is an example of how many things need to go right in order to maintain growth in this market. Their story is incredible, with tremendous social impact.

The product is gorgeous, all artisan made with incredible hand-woven textiles.

Liya as a founder is a tremendous marketing asset that generates a huge following for the brand.

And the resort wear positioning, which started by chance simply because the fabric was light and gauzy and the sewing capability was limited, ended up being instrumental because this is one of the few areas that are still growing significantly, with the rise of experiential vacation spending.

None of these factors would have been enough on their own, but all of them in combination, with careful management and a great team, created a brand with an incredible loyal, passionate following and rapid market growth.

What kind of fashion companies and/or designers would you like to work with in the future?

Designers who are both artists and entrepreneurs, who are willing to put in the work it takes to launch something new in this market, and who look at the changes and challenges of the market as an opportunity to do things both

differently and better.

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