

APPAREL AND ACCESSORIES

Industry relationships, advocacy key for UK luxury post-Brexit

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British Fashion Council is working to ensure models, freelancers and other industry creatives will continue to be granted access in and out of the U.K. Image credit: British Fashion Council

By NORA HOWE

The pandemic and Brexit have delivered a double set of challenges for British designers and brands, and they must reevaluate their businesses moving forward.

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The United Kingdom officially exited the European Union in early 2020, however, trade negotiations have continued throughout the pandemic. During a session at the **FT Business of Luxury Summit** on May 20 moderated by *Financial Times* fashion editor Lauren Indvik, British luxury fashion industry experts examined what new challenges mean for the future of British fashion and design and how independent businesses are adapting.

"Toward the end of last year, there was so much uncertainty surrounding Brexit," said Rosh Mahtani, founder of jeweler **Alighieri**, London. "We were still trying to conduct business while also not quite knowing what the regulations would be, all while trying to maintain amazing customer service and other services.

"It's been a rollercoaster of a year."

Fashion adapts

In December 2020, ambassadors from European Union member states approved a post-Brexit trade deal with the United Kingdom which was scheduled to become effective on Jan. 1, 2021.

The new agreement requires that U.K. citizens have a visa if they are staying in the E.U. more than 90 days in a 180-day period ([see story](#)).

Forty-two percent of British luxury goods are exported to the E.U., so trade regulations are top of mind for British businesses ([see story](#)). Additionally, many British fashion brands rely on talent from other parts of Europe, and will now be challenged with ensuring they have access to models, stylists, set designers, make up artists and more.

"The fallout of Brexit and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has shifted the dialogue with conduct with our government," said Caroline Rush, chief executive at **British Fashion Council**, London. "We need the government to understand the importance of the fashion industry.

"Fashion contributes 35 billion pounds in GDP, employs around 890,000 people in the United Kingdom and fits into the government's leveling up agenda," she said. "The only big win we've really had with the government since Brexit is a stop the clock visa' to make sure we have access to the best talent, many of whom are international, and allowing them to work and operate in the United Kingdom."



BFC's "stop the clock" proposal would allow workers to travel in and out of the United Kingdom without time counting towards the "14-days between each job" rule currently in place. Image credit: British Fashion Council

In order to adapt to the various challenges presented by Brexit and COVID-19, fashion brands have had to examine both the logistical and human sides of their businesses.

"Over the last six months or so, 80 percent of my time has been spent focusing on logistics, which is extremely difficult, time consuming and expensive," Ms. Mahtani said. "If businesses are able to come together to try and find the information we need on how to adhere to new regulations and other logistical details, we could save so much time and money."

A major point of discussion during the panel was the idea of coming together as creative professionals and leaning on each other in the face of adversity.

"If there is a lesson learned from this entire situation, that is life is easier when we come together," said Roland Mouret, founder and creative director of fashion label **Roland Mouret**, London. "We must do more than simply work with the government.

"We need to come together as an industry and form a coalition."

While agreeing with Mr. Mouret on the idea of fashion brands joining forces for the good of the industry, Ms. Rush emphasized the importance of maintaining communication with the government to push agendas forward.

"The fashion industry is so interconnected," Ms. Rush said. "If businesses do not consider the entire ecosystem of the industry and the impact that cancelling orders has on, not only the designers, but the manufacturers and supply chains, then the whole industry becomes fragile."

"That being said, regardless of your opinion on Brexit, the deal is done, so now we must work with the government and international territories to figure out ways of dealing with the challenges they have presented," she said. "This is about policy being able to trade, getting access to visas, etc."

Looking beyond Brexit and COVID-19, Alighieri's Ms. Mahtani finds it difficult to be optimistic about the future, but believes the key to preparing for future crises and challenges is to build connections and relationships with everyone in one's business.



Alighieri works exclusively with local manufacturers, emphasizing the importance of personal connections. Image credit: Alighieri

"The way to future-proof is to build connections and relationships with everyone that is involved in your product, including the consumer," Ms. Mahtani said. "Then, when all else fails, you are surrounded by good, trustworthy people."

However, she voiced considerable doubt regarding how the British Fashion Council is protecting or preserving artisanship and craftsmanship, what she considers to be the cog of British manufacturing.

Creativity beats adversity

The panelists agreed that the logistical challenges of the Brexit deal are consuming the majority of their time and energy, but are still optimistic that creativity will prevail.

"Between the pandemic and Brexit, my business has been pushed back 20 years, but the silver lining to that is I can start over," Mr. Mouret said. "I can come out of a box I was put in and start to revisit things, learning new ways to adapt."

During the onset of the pandemic, British fashion house Alexander McQueen came up with an innovative way to engage its audience weekly with a social media-driven concept called #McQueenCreators. Each week, the brand invited its creative community to work together from home on a series of projects, asking consumers to sketch various items from its archive ([see story](#)).

More recently, British fashion label Burberry launched a new augmented reality experience to complement a pop-up series centered around its new signature handbag, the Olympia. Leveraging AR technology from 8 Wall, Burberry's new experience allows visitors at its World of Olympia pop-ups to make classical statues "come alive."

The label has been using AR experiences to boost ecommerce engagement, but this latest offering can only be accessed in-stores as Burberry and other retailers welcome back shoppers ([see story](#)).

"Our purpose, as creatives, is to face adversity," Mr. Mouret said. "The more life throws at us, the more opportunities we have to answer with creativity."