



PERFORMANCE JOURNALS FOR RUNWAY TRENDS WAY

MORE THAN 400 PARTNERS, STAKEHOLDERS AND SPONSORS JOIN FORCES TO **MAKE A FASHION STATEMENT**

WITH RUNWAY SHOWS AND TRADE EVENTS FEATURING HOMEGROWN DESIGNERS FROM STOCKHOLM, SWEDEN.

BY TOM SULLIVAN

Home to global mega-brands such as IKEA, Saab and Volvo, Sweden is probably best known for affordable furniture and durable cars. But the country also boasts its very own collection of up-and-coming hip clothing labels like Nudie Jeans Co. and Filippa K.

Sweden's top designers could already be seen gracing international catwalks, yet they rarely appeared together in their own capital city of Stockholm. With a small domestic market, the country's designers traditionally traveled abroad to present their new collections to buyers and the international media.

To stem the talent exodus—and create a platform for the growing number of next-generation *fashionistas*—a group of event managers and trade groups launched a project to revamp the city's signature fashion event. The Stockholm Fashion Fair had been shut down in 1999 because of low participation rates and competition from the higher-profile show in nearby Copenhagen, Denmark. The Stockholm Fashion Council, a consortium of trade and fashion organizations, began coordinating a small number of events. But it wasn't until 2007 that more than 400 partners, stakeholders and sponsors teamed up to capitalize on Sweden's booming fashion market with a whole new affair dubbed Fashion Week.

"All the main Swedish designers tend to show in Copenhagen, and big Swedish names like Filippa K and Acne had their own shows at different times to Stockholm Fashion Week," says Joakim Brännström, concerts and special events project manager at Berns, one of the Fashion Week venues in central Stockholm.

"So we looked at how we could bring all of Swedish

INVOGUE

2007 STOCKHOLM FASHION WEEK BY THE NUMBERS

30,000 VISITORS

6 TRADE FAIRS

44 CATWALK SHOWS

22 EXHIBITIONS AND SHOWROOMS

40 INTERNATIONAL FASHION MEDIA OUTLETS COVERING THE EVENT

fashion together in one week," he says. "We realized we could not compete with Copenhagen on trade fairs as they have much bigger, [more] centrally located exhibition halls, but we knew we could make an impact with fashion shows."

Mr. Brännström worked with a consortium of eight stakeholders, including the city hall's international fairs company, the local shoe and accessories industry, and an international fashion showroom. Each member of the group had its own project teams to run different events.

Stakeholder communications were handled centrally by the Swedish Fashion Council.

The result, in February 2007, was a week filled with 44 fashion shows; six major trade fairs; and dozens of smaller associated exhibitions and events. The city's first major Fashion Week attracted massive media coverage at home and abroad and pulled in more than 30,000 visitors—outstripping

rival Copenhagen and setting record numbers in attendance.

But appearances can be deceiving, especially in the world of high fashion. It turns out the apparel business isn't always some glamorous stroll down the runway.

STYLE SUBSIDY

Right from when the project consortium first joined forces in 2005, it faced a number of challenges, the first being the lack of available funds. Unlike in Copenhagen or London, England, there is no state or municipal support for Stockholm's Fashion Week.

"We had a problem as most of the up-and-coming Swedish brands lacked funds for marketing and couldn't pay to put on a fashion show. We approached sponsors but it was hard to get them to sign up before we had demonstrated that the event would be a success," Mr. Brännström says.

"So we did a combination of things. First we sponsored all the shows ourselves for the first two years, investing about \$1.1 million," he says. "Then in 2007, we got corporate sponsorship and started charging designers on the basis of their size. It's a bit like Sweden's Social Democratic style tax system—we get the better-off companies to subsidize the others."

The project team regularly reviewed progress in twice-monthly meetings over the six-month planning period, keeping regular contact with designers and trying to manage expectations.

Taking lessons learned from the first shows in 2005 and 2006, team members were assigned clearly defined responsibilities and briefed on how to deal with designers, Mr. Brännström says.

"Working on events for the fashion industry is a lot different from other industries because you're dealing with people who place a lot of importance on integrity," he says.

"They're very careful about their brands and they're wary of selling out.

Your deadlines always slip because it takes longer than you expect to get decisions," Mr. Brännström says. "Sometimes you'll get a call from a designer who doesn't want their fashion show on the same evening as another one. They'll say 'I don't want to be associated with her!' or 'My clothes wouldn't even hang in the same store as hers!'"

Needless to say, this made schedule management a bit messy.

FASHIONABLY LATE?

To avoid misunderstandings and disagreements, project leaders set out to communicate information early and often.

"Everyone needs to feel that they're a winner when the shows are over. We learned quite early on that we needed to be transparent about how we handle costs and to catalog our successes well," Mr. Brännström says. "We keep track of hard facts such as how many visitors we get to the shows, how many international artists there are, what the fashion magazines and foreign media wrote about us, etc."

But the uptick in media attention also presented some challenges. Some designers were unprepared for the unprecedented level of interest.

"We learned that you have to be careful how and when you publicize designers," says Helena Mellström, Stockholm Fashion Week project manager at the Swedish Fashion Council, Stockholm. "Sometimes when new designers got a front-page splash before fashion week had begun, it could easily get to be too much for them." They figured they had a permanent spot in the limelight and wouldn't have to worry about sales, she explains.

Ms. Mellström is responsible for scheduling events and keeping communications flowing between Stockholm Fashion Week's project partners, stakeholders and sponsors. It's a job that often placed her in the firing line when unpopular decisions had to be made.

"The most important ingredients for successful event management are flexibility



THE MOST IMPORTANT INGREDIENTS FOR SUCCESSFUL EVENT MANAGEMENT ARE FLEXIBILITY AND CONSTANT OPEN COMMUNICATIONS. YOU ALWAYS HAVE TO BE AVAILABLE.

—Helena Mellström, Swedish Fashion Council, Stockholm

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—Joakim Brännström, Berns, Stockholm, Sweden

DOWN THE RUNWAY

1999

» Faced with low participation rates and strong competition from a fashion event in nearby Copenhagen, Denmark, Stockholm Fashion Fair shuts down.

2000-2004

» The Stockholm Fashion Council, a consortium of trade and fashion organizations working with the city fairs company, begins coordinating a small number of events.

» By 2004, the group holds six fashion shows and two trade fairs twice a year, showcasing mainly newcomers and foreign brands.

2005-2006

» Berns, an event venue, joins the consortium and begins sponsoring major fashion shows that garner greater media attention.

» Two shows are held in February and four in August 2006.

2007

» Additional stakeholders join the consortium and sponsors come on board as the Swedish fashion industry booms.

» More designers—including the established names—begin to participate in shows.

» The February 2007 Fashion Week features the largest number of shows held and attracts record numbers of attendees.

and constant open communications. You always have to be available," she says. "You always follow up every request and every message and keep discussing and explaining decisions."

Flexibility and communications proved essential to the organizers of the +46 show and exhibition. Also part of Fashion Week, it's designed as an intimate event featuring more progressive fashion. The only problem was that the "intimate" show received three times the number of visitors expected on opening night.

"We only realized the day before that so many people were coming and we had to arrange to get access to other parts of the building we were using and set up new entrances to divide the crowd into manageable groups," says Kristian Rajnai, project manager at +46 in Stockholm.

"Also we discovered that we had to be extremely clear when communicating information to the public about the timing of our events," he says. "Some things that we thought were really obvious in our program were totally misunderstood. You really have to spell things out."

LOOKS AREN'T EVERYTHING

Although some stakeholders measured their success largely in terms of record visitor numbers and the explosion of news coverage, others focused on sales figures.

"The big challenge is to increase the number of buyers," says Anna Wigardt Duhs, managing director of the Swedish Association of Agents. The Stockholm-based group runs the Nordic Shoe and Bag Fair, one of the largest trade fairs of its kind in Northern Europe. "Media attention is important, but you need to do business, too."

Although the Nordic Shoe and Bag Fair is now part of Stockholm Fashion Week, it has been running for more

than 40 years. And in that time, its organizers have developed a clear vision of what they want out of the project.

"We keep the costs of exhibition stands low—100 percent lower than fairs in Europe—so that we can have the maximum numbers participating," Ms. Wigardt Duhs says. "We get bigger and do something new each year but we've found it's important not to stage too many events that attract attention away from business. The main focus has to stay on the exhibition hall so that buyers and sellers have maximum contact."

Her view is shared by one of the largest stakeholders in Stockholm Fashion Week, Modecenter, a fashion showroom housing almost 200 Swedish and international fashion labels.

"The Swedish buyers know us, and we had more than 15,000 visitors," says Nina Back-Sundström, head of communications at Modecenter. "Swedish fashion would not be as strong if it wasn't for the business that we do here."

For Sweden's fashion designers, putting Stockholm on the world fashion map is a matter of pride, but it often has little bearing on their bottom line.

"We attend a lot of fairs and showrooms abroad and work with distributors to be globally accessible. Stockholm is still seen as an extremely small market," says Astrid Olsson, codesigner and co-owner of the Fifth Avenue Shoe Repair. One of the up-and-coming influential labels of Stockholm Fashion Week, it has 150 retailers in 22 countries worldwide—and a focus that extends far beyond the hometown event.

"Our biggest sales are in Europe, Japan and the United States, so we're looking at having showrooms in Paris, London and New York," she says.

Mr. Brännström admits Stockholm's Fashion Week has a way to go before the country's globally minded fashion

designers see it as a launch pad. But he also sees this as a scheduling issue.

"In the past our shows clashed with London Fashion Week and they were a week after Copenhagen Fashion Week. We are too small to compete with them," he says. "The only way we can create a name is by holding our events a couple of weeks earlier."

This is not a view shared by other consortium members.

FASHION FAUX PAS

The coalition's fragile partnership is clearly starting to fray, with some stakeholders threatening to defect.

The group recently split into two camps, each planning its own Stockholm Fashion Week for 2008—one focused on catwalk shows and the other on trade fairs. However, scheduling disagreements are just one part of an overall rift in the project consortium.

Battle lines have been drawn and communications are increasingly strained. "To move Fashion Week will turn everything upside down and other partners don't agree to change the dates just for one venue," Ms. Mellström says. "We don't even want to talk about this yet, we're not happy."

Mr. Brännström argues that his organization sponsors, implements and coordinates events and that project partners such as the Swedish Fashion Council bring nothing to the table.

"The situation now is that we tell the others what we are doing and then we do it," he says.

The result will most likely be two separate events vying for the title of Stockholm's "official" style event.

"Now we have a real problem," says Ms. Mellström. "People are asking which week is the real fashion week."

It looks like this project might turn into a fashion victim. **PM**

THE BIG CHALLENGE IS TO INCREASE THE NUMBER OF BUYERS. MEDIA ATTENTION IS IMPORTANT, BUT YOU NEED TO DO BUSINESS, TOO.

—Anna Wigardt Duhs, Swedish Association of Agents, Stockholm, Sweden