



Fashion Brands Are Looking for Outsiders. Here's how to Get in the Door.

By Cathaleen Chen

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The industry is opening up to talent from the tech sector and beyond as brands adapt to changing consumer behaviour, making it the perfect time to land a dream job in fashion. Top fashion recruiters have advice about getting your foot in the door.

When recruiter Caroline Pill set out to hire a president for a major beauty company last year, intimate knowledge of foundation and mascara was optional. She ended up hiring someone from the toy industry who she found on LinkedIn.

While the fashion and beauty industries still have a reputation as an insular space, valuing style and connections over management skills, hires from outside the industry are fast becoming the norm. A growing number of brands recognise that e-commerce and social media are reshaping how people shop for everything from shoes to toothpaste in similar ways. Luxury brands facing scrutiny over the lack of diversity in their ranks are casting a wider net for talent.

Ultimately, whether it's an online fast-fashion brand or a luxury house, these companies have come around to the idea that they need fresh perspectives or risk being left behind. Consumers demand brands engage with a wide audience rather than portray themselves as purely aspirational. Direct-to-consumer start-ups are flooding the market, convincing more people to shop for clothes and shoes online and redefining the idea of "affordable luxury." Some of fashion's biggest players have seen their status greatly diminished — or gone bankrupt — because they failed to adapt.

Survival means operating a fashion company today requires an understanding of this modern zeitgeist, as well as how to weave technology into every aspect of the business. Recruiters for corporate jobs of any seniority are looking for the type of people who think outside the box and have unconventional backgrounds. Where even a few years ago, the goal was to hire people who were a "good cultural fit," the opposite is true more often than not, recruiters say.



“Fashion used to be a tight clique, and it still definitely has elements of that. But brands and retailers that are modernising finally understand they need to bring different strategic thinking to the table,” said Leonardo Lawson, founder and CEO of recruiting and consulting firm Bond Creative Search. “It’s not about looking for a square peg fitting into a square hole.”

With global unemployment at a 12-year low, according to the World Bank, employers are competing with one another for talent — especially candidates with expertise in technology, data analytics and social media marketing, according to Karen Harvey, whose consulting firm has helped place senior executives at brands like Kate Spade and Peter Pilotto.

“If you have a love for fashion or retail but are in an unrelated field, it doesn’t mean you don’t have a chance,” Harvey said. “The truth is that the industry needs rigorous and highly disciplined people in the marketing, digital tech world because we haven’t developed those people on our own.”

Still, fashion is an enigmatic field, with its own language and tribes. Impressing a recruiter still involves subtleties of conduct, attire and knowledge. Outsiders can capitalise on their expertise, but landing a job at a prestigious brand still requires the right savvy.

Here’s how to break in, according to some of the top recruiters in the field.

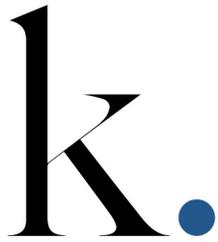
1. Don’t just network, socialise

Nobody likes to network. Lawson recommends job seekers outside of the fashion industry try volunteering instead. Participation in certain fashion non-profits is a subtle but powerful indication that you are already part of fashion’s culture, he said. Fashion executives regularly participate in charities like Dress for Success and the Ellen MacArthur Foundation and plenty of brands get involved in planning events.

For example, volunteering with the Council of Fashion Designers of America for New York Fashion Week preparation would help demonstrate a passion for the industry better than voicing it during an interview, he said.

“If you’re at a charity event and someone [you want to work for] is volunteering, that’s a natural way of getting your foot in the door,” he said.

Networking with the right people is still important. Because most jobs at luxury brands are privately posted to avoid an unmanageably large pool of applicants, knowing headhunters can provide a critical advantage.



When recruiters first begin their search to fill a particular role, they look within their network, including professionals they've met or are connected to on social media. When they exhaust this channel, they turn to friends in the industry and ask for recommendations. Only when neither method works do they typically search LinkedIn.

2. Make the right impression with recruiters

To find the right recruiters, research the agencies first. Make the initial contact through a personalised email that also signals an understanding of the culture of fashion and a familiarity with industry news. Avoid cold-calling, or worse yet, showing up in person wearing an "I HEART FASHION" t-shirt.

And if that initial contact is well-received, make sure to build on it.

"If you build a strong relationship with your first [recruiter], they can guide you throughout your career," said Pill, vice president of global executive search at Kirk Palmer Associates, a corporate talent search agency. "Make sure you trust them and touch base with them regularly and they will give you information on what the industry is looking for."

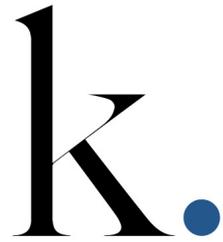
One common mistake is when job seekers spam every fashion recruitment agency with the same generic email, according to Paul Christian Bassett of global recruitment firm Christian Bassett, whose recent hires include the head of human resources in North America for Valentino.

"A big no would be someone that put on their profiles saying, 'job seeker, desperate to work in fashion,'" Bassett said. "We also get the mass emails that you know are sent to hundreds of agencies. It'd be much better to do your homework and identify the correct [firms] and be able to address people by name."

It's also important to look the part when that first meeting comes around, Bassett added. It's intuitive, after all, that a fashion recruiter would be partial to fashionable candidates. That doesn't mean aspirants should wear head-to-toe luxury, but donning smaller, lesser-known brands popular within the industry would be a smart move.

"When you have the opportunity to meet an agent, you have to demonstrate that you understand the field," he said. "You have to make sure you look great."

That said, trying *too* hard may be a risk.



“If you’re not authentic, it comes through,” said Lawson. “I’ll never tell someone to change their style. What I can do is give advice on the environment of the company so they can think about how they’ll pull themselves together for an interview.”

3. Curate your Instagram

It’s common sense to keep a professional social media presence when you’re actively job hunting, but going the extra mile of maintaining a fashion-oriented Instagram could provide an edge.

“These days, the first thing recruiters do is look at your online photos. It gives them an idea of what you like and what you act like,” Bassett said. “If Saint Laurent were hiring, for instance, they’d look for someone cool and hip. If it were Hermès, they’d look for someone more classic ... You should control your social media so it’s in line with where you want to work.”

For candidates outside of fashion, a strong social media profile could provide intangible insight beyond the resume, according to Lawson, because of the visual nature of fashion itself. Instagram posts can indicate your interest in art and design — a recent museum outing, or a showcase of your latest vintage fashion find. And even if you work in a field completely unrelated to fashion, these photos demonstrate that you are creative and fashionable — and may even warrant a direct message from the recruiter himself.

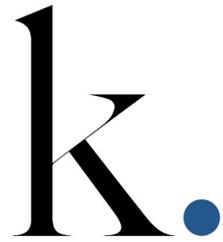
But it goes beyond just personal posts. Lawson and his associates also look at who candidates follow on Instagram to see if “they are keeping in the know for what we need them to know,” he explained.

4. Develop skills outside of your main expertise

The need for unconventional talent in fashion also means that for job seekers within the industry, there is an opportunity to differentiate by adopting a diversified set of skills.

“For instance, even in the creative fields, analytics of any kind is very important, and that could be something as simple as being familiar with Excel sheets,” said Alp Onurlu, the head of client services at 80Twenty.

Another example would be a candidate for a brand’s social media role who knows basic design and Photoshop. Knowing how to write and edit is a good skill in most jobs, Onurlu added.



This is especially salient for junior- to mid-level positions, where employers are looking to younger employees to help modernise their companies. Aspirants could also consider getting a master's degree that's pertinent to fashion, Bassett suggested.

Ultimately, the perfect candidate should check all of these boxes, from social media to extracurricular participation, and beyond.

“Whether it’s through Instagram or a personal blog, they need to make sure to show these other sides to them,” Lawson said. “What’s on the resume is great but for these new positions and companies trying to move into the future, there are somewhat intangible components that make [good candidates] stand out — things that take them above and beyond the standard resume.”