

Lauren Goldstein Crowe looks at two new companies aiming to change the way the system operates

Brave new fashion world



Clockwise from left: Victoria Beckham, Jennifer Lopez and Benny Medina at Marc Jacobs; Marc Jacobs; Gucci

On the surface, they don't look like fashion industry revolutionaries: Edwin Mullan is a computer programmer born in Malawi and raised in the UK whose language is filled with words such as "user interface"; and James Grant is a public relations guru who is fond of terms such as "organic connection", and dropping names like Steven Klein and Daphne Guinness.

Yet both men are radically changing the way the fashion system operates. Mullan is the creator of Fashion GPS and Event GPS, two inventory management computer programs that streamline the processes of loaning and retrieving clothing samples and the organising of fashion shows. Grant's Starworks, meanwhile, is an agency that is positioning itself at the centre of the celebrity product-placement world. And though this may not sound particularly sexy, the implications are big: both have the potential to alter the balance of power in the fashion world.

Both also started out from relatively modest beginnings. Fashion GPS was developed while Mullan was working as a technical consultant to KCD, the PR company that represents Marc Jacobs, Jimmy Choo, Gucci and Yves Saint Laurent (among others), and has offices in New York and Paris. The goal was simple: to find a way to better track the clothing samples brands loaned to magazines for photo shoots. The result: a system that logs the history of a sample for the duration of its useful life.

When a product arrives from the factory, it is given a bar code. The codes are linked to images from the runway and other information, such as fabrics and cost. Magazines with the system (Vogue is the first) will use it to make requests online. When the sample is due back, the system sends out an automatic e-mail, from the publi-



cist's account, and continues to do so until it is scanned as back in-house and ready to be loaned out again.

Other inventory management systems exist, but because Fashion GPS was developed so closely with KCD, the system is remarkably specific to the needs of a fashion house as opposed to, say, a pharmaceuticals company. With the touch of a button, publicists can see how many items a specific magazine editor has borrowed, how many of those have been shot (editors tend to borrow many more clothes than actually make it on to the pages of a magazine), how many credits were garnered and, if the company enters their ad-to-edit valuation, what net worth was earned. The latter is measured by the amount of free advertising versus paid advertising. A company can then make an informed judgment about which magazines represent the most profitable relationships and which don't.

Their leverage over stylists also increases. Using the system, they can easily see that while stylist X is worth \$10,000 in exposure, for example, stylist Y is worth \$50,000, and they can act on that information. If it emerges that stylist X is calling in 20 times as many things as she shoots, then the brand publicity departments may simply decide not to loan her key pieces in future.

Even more extreme, because it deals with people rather than products, is Events GPS, an inventory management program that Mullan

launched last year for fashion shows and parties. It aims to streamline the process of organising a fashion show and keeping track of who attends. Until now this was an ad-hoc process involving personal observation by brands and a lot of sneaking around by guests and would-be guests.

With Event GPS, a single e-mail is sent with the dates, venues and times of all the shows to which a guest has been invited. The guest then RSVPs online, the information is fed into a seating chart, and invitations arrive embedded with either bar codes or chips. When the invitation is scanned at the entrance to the show, all the publicists in the venue can see on their PDAs the name and publication of the person entering and their photo, which is generally taken from Facebook, the social networking website, according to Mullan. Immediately following the show, the publicists can transmit the attendance records to the designer. This is useful information when a company is negotiating the number of ad pages it will buy in a magazine, and at what cost.

And just as Mullan is turning the designer/magazine relationship on its head, Grant and Starworks, a public relations company with offices in New York, Los Angeles, London, Madrid, Miami and Milan, are altering the conventional celebrity/designer courtship.

Instead of trying to get products on to as many celebrities as possible, they work with brands to form a relationship with one or two key celebrities who personify the brand's image. They then approach magazines and offer to unburden them of the tiring chore of booking celebrities, in effect working all ends of the spectrum: they have access to both the star and the editorial products. Starworks now has relationships with 15 titles, ranging from the mainstream - Harper's Bazaar and Teen Vogue - to the cutting edge - Pop, and V - as well as with countless celebrities.

In practice, this means that if, for example, Mulberry hires Starworks to organise an event, it will select which celebrities to invite and which bags to give them, and will invite the usual array of photographers and journalists. At the end of the event, they will buy the photos from the agencies and, crucially, place them in the magazines or internet sites with which they work. "The pictures would get picked up anyway," says Grant. "But it is good to have control over it."

So far, projects have included getting actors Josh Hartnett and Michael Pitt to star in a short film they produced for the New York Times T magazine website and introducing Karl Lagerfeld to the producers of Rockstar Games so his likeness could be used in Grand Theft Auto IV as a "non-playable character". Starworks is also negotiating licensing deals for celebrity product lines, creating a mass-market division and developing an internet division to focus on maximising the work they are doing in the other areas. They are positioning themselves, in other words, just like Fashion GPS, as the spider in the centre of the fashion web.

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