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SPECIAL REPORT

From Couture -- to Conversation

By JESSICA MICHAULT
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The biggest buzz during the last round of fashion shows wasn't about the trends for next summer, the amazing sets or even the celebrities. It was about the ways that social media — blogging, YouTube, Facebook, Twitter and the like — have, almost overnight, become an integral part of how fashion brands get their message to the public.

The shows during September and October were a first glimpse of what the elitist fashion world could soon become: a business where designers take their collections directly to customers, no longer filtered through fashion editors at glossy magazines and buyers at top stores.

Clients could view a collection live on the Internet and decide what they want to buy while giving instant feedback on blogs, Facebook and Twitter.

One company that harnessed the power of social media during the recent collections was the Italian brand Dolce & Gabbana. The designers, Domenico Dolce and Stefano Gabbana, even moved some buyers out of their usual front row seats to give the spots to four fashion bloggers — Tommy Ton, Garance Doré, Scott Schuman and Bryan Yambao — and installed laptops so the writers could blog and tweet during the show.

"Blogs are very important for us," Mr. Gabbana said. "We always keep them informed with our news and we always look them up because they represent a quick and spontaneous way to get fresh information." The designers also posted video diaries on YouTube during the weeks before their signature show, partly to inform fans about the collection and partly to get pre-show feedback.

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The show itself was shown live on the Dolce & Gabbana Web site and on Fashion TV, with cameras on the catwalk, backstage and the audience arrivals. When it was posted later on Dolce & Gabbana's YouTube channel, it helped the channel rank as YouTube's most viewed worldwide for the following 24 hours.

"The Web, for luxury brands, is not the future, but the present," Mr. Dolce said.

Other fashion brands chose different ways to use social media: Yves Saint Laurent and Stella McCartney used their Twitter feeds. Louis Vuitton streamed its fashion show live. And the British designer Roland Mouret used 28 cameras to film his show and backstage activities so future online viewers could choose their own way to watch.

And, in a real example of the power of social media, a tweet from Lady Gaga caused so many people to click on the live streaming of Alexander McQueen's show that the site's servers crashed.

In the aftermath of the collections, brands like Gucci and Burberry have come up with some new ideas.

Gucci introduced its latest line of eyewear, Gucci Eyeweb, with a viral ad campaign. Its site, guccieyeweb.com, lets visitors upload their own photographs and then see the pictures displayed as if they were reflections in the various eyewear styles.

"We see this initiative as a tactical Web promotion," said Patrizio di Marco, Gucci's president. "It is a component in an integrated marketing plan for the launch of this new youth-oriented sunglass collection. Social networking was at the heart of the concept as today it is such an important activity for the target demographic.

"In terms of investment, the cost of building and maintaining the guccieyeweb site equates to just a handful of pages in a traditional media plan," he added. "It is therefore an extremely efficient investment, given that it has global reach being Internet based."

Burberry last week introduced "Art of the Trench," what it calls an "online celebration" of the brand's iconic trench coat. In addition to inviting users to upload their own images and to post comments, the site has sent Mr. Schuman, of The Sartorialist blog, around the world to photograph people in trench coats.

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The variety of platforms shows just how large this new Web frontier is — and not everyone is taking the time to look before they leap. “There is a real ‘bandwagon effect’ going on,” says Uché Okonkwo, founder and executive director of Luxe Corp., a Paris-based consulting group. “People are getting really excited about social media without really asking themselves if there is any reason to really get excited.”

The rise of social networks echoes the introduction of e-commerce more than a decade ago — when many top brands felt pressured to jump in before they even had a strategy.

Some luxury brands shy away from the whole social media aspect of the Web because they like to control their brands, says Tomas Gonsorcik, strategy director of the social media consultancy agency Interaction London. “And social media works completely against that,” he says.

For this article, Mr. Gonsorcik’s agency polled some of the 760,120 fans registered on the Facebook site created by Louis Vuitton, which recently was named the most tech-savvy luxury brand in a study by New York University’s Stern Business School. It showed the site had real resonance with younger users but it had not changed older users’ view of the brand’s luxury image.

In fact, Mr. Gonsorcik says, the fastest growing demographic on Facebook is the over-40 age bracket and Vuitton’s presence actually could enhance their regard and feeling of familiarity with the brand.

But the safest bet for a luxury brand just starting to tap into social media is the blogosphere, Mr. Gonsorcik says. “Blogging has been around for over 10 years now, and today some of the owners of those domains and channels are highly educated in their field and work on journalistic levels,” he says. For brands, “it is a relationship that is easy to understand and build a partnership from.”

But even blogging has been affected by new applications like TweetDeck and Twitterfox, which can update Twitter feeds and Facebook pages simultaneously, or the Social Oomph application, which can preset the release time for posts or tweets — speeding up the social media cycle to a breakneck pace.

“Twitter might be the death of my blog,” Mr. Yambao says with a laugh, referring to his popular blog bryanboy.com. “The intensity has really shifted now, everything is so instantaneous that people are bored with collections even before they make it to the stores.

“I almost think that it’s time that we need to slow down.”