

Retail Unpacked: A Breakdown of How to be Successful in Fashion

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Fashion is a reflection of our values and our times. Art imitates reality, the world is always changing and so is the fashion industry. In an attempt to understand where I fit into the fashion industry as a future fashion professional, I need to understand the present business of fashion and the direction of the industry's future. Therefore, I interviewed three industry professionals Megan Orrell, Danielle Leslie, and Gabrielle O'Brien. An examination of the education and experience of these three women permits a further understanding of my potential career path. Future fashion professionals, myself included, must develop the necessary work ethic, practical experience, strategic flexibility, social, networking, and technological skills to succeed in this ever-evolving industry.

I. Interviewees

Megan Orrell, whom I worked for in high school, has a multifaceted career as a blogger and the store owner and buyer for Boem Boutique in Charlotte, North Carolina, one of the most successful contemporary boutiques in the southeast. Customer service is her number one priority, "I tell all of my employees - retail is dying, but I don't want us to, so if we are not going to, we have to be special." Megan perpetuates her own personal image into the store's offering. Working at a lower price point, her assortments are often trend driven and worn for a shorter period of time. Her main priority is comfort, evaluating how easily a garment comes on and off and if it might squeeze too tight because "I think about it when I'm getting dressed." Megan's buying philosophy for her business is a reflection of herself and what she wants to wear, and her blog provides a face for the entire brand.

Danielle Leslie works as the store manager and buying assistant for Capitol, a specialty store also based in North Carolina but with a new satellite location in Los Angeles. Capitol's entire assortment is curated around the customer. As a buyer, Danielle must find the perfect

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balance of newness, color, and conservatism for Capitol's clientele of middle age to older southern women. She needs to be able to walk on the sales floor, read the room, and know which clients to approach. For her, "the hardest part is putting aside my own personal feelings towards something, my own likes and dislikes, really thinking about our clients, and what they are going to wear." In part because of the high price points, Danielle writes purchase orders with specific clients in mind. The sales staff and buying team have personal relationships with the clients which builds customer loyalty. In fact, garments are often pulled for the client and delivered to her home without touching the shop floor. The client gets exclusive first dibs on a product she did not request, that is instead selected specifically for her without any obligation of purchasing. This is the definition of luxury and impeccable customer service in retail.

Gabrielle O'Brien works as an Account Executive for Rosie Assoulin, a luxury womenswear brand based out of New York City. Rosie is nominated for the 2019 Council of Fashion Designers of America Womenswear Designer of the Year, and the brand was previously awarded the CFDA Swarovski Award for Emerging Talent in 2015 (CFDA). Gabrielle is very careful in selecting new retailers to carry the Rosie brand. She assesses each business in terms of its ability to support the brand image, price, and product within their store environment, what their client finds wearable and desirable, and what she can deliver that fits into their selection.

II. Key Insights from Interviews

Megan, Danielle, and Gabrielle are all originally born and raised in Charlotte, Chicago, and Kalamazoo in that order. These women have a big city state of mind, considering the wider world beyond their immediate surroundings. Furthermore, they majored in Public Relations, English, and Mathematics, respectively, demonstrating that one does not need a major in fashion to succeed in fashion. The majority of Gabrielle's coworkers, excluding those in design, did not

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major in fashion. She has found that “overall, business is business and a lot of the skills that we use here are transferable to other fields. If you are good at your job, you are good at your job, that is not something that would only stay within the fashion world.” Instead of a major, these women emphasize the importance of work ethic and experience.

Success in any fashion market originates from understanding your target customers and tailoring the experience around them, as revenue comes from producing and buying merchandise that will sell. Nowadays, we can order anything from around the world with the touch of a button, so stores have to give consumers a reason to take the time to go shop in person. Smaller, specialty stores like Capitol and Boem are “built on personal relationships by being really nice to people that come in the door, making them feel good and really special” (Megan). Both consumer-oriented stores are incredibly prosperous and considering or currently opening a second location, whereas large department stores are struggling. Their success shows that retailers need to provide more than just a greeting and really put the customer first. This capability stems from having diligent employees operating the sales floor. Megan, who has operated her store for ten years now, is still willing to get down and dust the baseboards because “nothing is above or below any of us, were just going to do what we need to get the job done at the end of the day.” InStyle Editor and Chief Laura Brown takes this further when sharing her career advice at a Fashionista Conference I attended this past summer, “Get the damn bagel.” Her point being, that someone has to and will do that job, so enthusiastically embrace any opportunity in the fashion industry. These women share the same truth, in business there is no guidebook, the only thing to do is focus on the customer and work hard.

Roles in the fashion industry stem from practical experience and learning on the job. Gabrielle and Danielle fell into fashion internships that evolved into full time jobs that

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kickstarted their careers in fashion. Danielle was offered a job at Capitol a month into her internship and has put in the time to work her way up within the same company ever since. Clearly, the right internship can be integral to a successful career. Megan on the other hand, did not have any internships that significantly impacted her career path, just work. “I honestly think everyone at some point in their life should wait tables and work in retail. I do think people get caught up in this getting a huge internship in New York or working for this brand.” There are underlying social pressures at play within the industry, working as a buyer in NYC or LA, or working for a brand with name recognition can appear to be the be all end all. When it comes down to it, there are companies and jobs across all price and quality levels and what really matters is the experience itself. No substitutes exist for actually working on the job, as the classroom cannot teach professional conduct, from sending emails to interacting with coworkers and customers of all ages, ethnicities, and backgrounds. In fact, these are imperative skills in both life and business that can be developed in any job environment from waiting tables to an industry internship.

One of the most impressive capabilities of these three women is their ability to evolve with the industry. They actively identify and react to changes in customer preferences and mobilize internal resources to adapt to the changing market. Having the capacity to think on your toes, operate on a quick learning curve, and take in new situations is necessary in a job where every day is different. To stay flexible and grow in this unpredictable climate, firms need employees that are motivated, professional, self-assured, and detail-oriented.

Danielle looks for employees that can develop alongside the store, “the number one question I ask when I am interviewing is if you are a self-starter and how would you fix a problem.” She values the foresight to creatively and independently solve problems before they

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even materialize. Multitasking and working with teams are two ways to maintain current business operations while looking ahead.

Contrarily, Megan looks to the past, learning from her mistakes to expand the business. Trial and error are part of her business but continuing to fail is a waste of human and financial capital. This means not getting overinvested in one idea and being open to change. Gabrielle has found that being easygoing and not taking things too seriously helps employees stay focused and handle criticism. She recommends to “always think before you speak, take a step back and analyze the situation so you don’t make a decision in haste or when you’re overemotional.” A strong employee can separate their emotions from the work environment and manage their expectations.

Firms need consistent employees who can be relied on to get the job done. According to Danielle, the worst thing an employee can do is “is not be a woman or man of your word.” This means being confident and knowing yourself, including your abilities. Gabrielle reiterates this, “the worst thing an employee can do is lie, step over other people, or take credit for someone else’s work.” Undoubtedly, these women appreciate authenticity. Employees should not overpromise and must have the wherewithal to know when to ask for help.

Lastly, Danielle utilizes time management to learn fast without compromising quality work or getting caught up in the speed of the industry. Over the course of six months, she moved from an intern to an assistant to buying and is now twenty-six with major responsibilities. She calls herself a “master scheduler” and coordinates all of the Capital teams’ buying appointments to put company in the best position possible for this complex and volatile industry. In an industry that doesn’t take it slow, it is important to be able to effectively operate at a fast pace.

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Fashion is an interdisciplinary field, and another key way to be successful is having the ability to work well with others. For Gabrielle, finding employees that are “honest, a team player, and not selfish is important.” She encounters many different people during a given day, working as the in-between for production, logistics, public relations, retailers, sellers, and clients. As her career has developed, Gabrielle has become more client facing, working with retailers to develop initiatives to grow Rosie’s reputation. Evidently, people skills are necessary for prosperous accounts. Likewise, Megan emphasizes maintaining connections and good relationships with everyone both work and personal life; “you just never know where that sales rep might be, where that brand is going to go, how consumer tastes might evolve... who that person is, where they’re going to be, if you’re ever going to need them.” Fashion is not an insular environment, it is an industry built on relationships, so support everyone you meet and don’t burn bridges.

Beyond working well with others, networking plays a critical role in career progression and success. In terms of selecting a career path, Gabrielle recommends to “pick something that you like and that you want to do, and don’t force yourself into something that truly doesn’t fit for you... hone in on your natural skills, it is what will make you happiest because you are doing your best.” She suggests putting in effort and being a friendly person as the easiest and best way to maintain industry connections. LinkedIn is another way to stay in touch with previous coworkers and employers. It is important to let these relationships grow naturally rather than forcing them. Furthermore, experience is experience, Gabrielle shares “if you are good at your job and you are a smart, confident person, that is not something that would only stay within fashion.” Going forward, Danielle suggests formulating a strong resume, “that opens up the doors for everything else.”

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Technology has only expedited the speed of change in this industry with new trends entering and exiting the market in one Instagram post. Danielle uses the app to spot up and coming brands to seek out at market to carry in Capitol. The platform has replaced newspapers and magazines as the primary source of advertising for most businesses, by providing a new way to connect with consumers. Megan uses her blogging career to put a personality behind the Boem brand. In an industry where firms monetize influence, individuals are forward-facing businesses with their own unique voices. Everyone has access, so it is important to make the most of where you are and exist on all platforms to build demand. Telling your life story, creating good content, and projecting yourself outwards into the industry is an easy way to build momentum in this industry. Laura Brown suggests using Instagram to demonstrate branding abilities, “profile pages are the magazine of your life; you control the perceptions and impressions you make.” Unquestionably, tech savviness is important as technology and fashion continue to intersect and evolve.

III. Application to my Career

Megan, Danielle, and Gabrielle are three remarkable women who gave me incredible insight into my goal of a successful career in fashion. I am an honors student double majoring in Terry Business School’s Marketing program with an emphasis in Digital, and the College of Family and Consumer Science’s Fashion Merchandising program with an emphasis in Fashion Brand Management. By comparison, these women majored in Public Relations, English, and Mathematics. Thus, I will be one step ahead by already knowing the ins and outs of the industry and developing a strong understanding of operations from a business perspective.

As a student, I am incredibly motivated; I applied and was accepted into the University of Georgia’s Honors Program my freshman year and have maintained my status on the Dean’s List

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and as a Presidential Scholar ever since. My work ethic in the classroom has permitted my scholastic achievement and is transferrable to any employment environment. In terms of business skills, one of my primary assets is that I am a very logical thinker. I have a predisposition for numbers and understanding how things work. As a perfectionist, I like to plan in advance and am very detail oriented, which transfers well to working in Excel and managing both inventory and dollars. These skills have helped me find success in my core Terry courses and earn membership in Beta Gamma Sigma, an international scholastic honor society in the field of business administration for students in the top ten percent of their class. Furthermore, I have developed a wide range of practical work experience, starting as a hostess before joining Megan at Boem for three years as a Sales Associate. These positions have helped me to develop social skills including customer service and the capability to work with people of all ages and backgrounds. My experiences in both the classroom and professional environments has helped me become self-assured and thus, more productive. My abilities match the criteria that Gabrielle and Danielle look for in building their teams, especially at small companies.

Beyond these applicable skills, I actively work to stay up to date and aware of what is happening in global markets to evolve with the industry. I read the *Business of Fashion* “Daily Digest” every morning along with their weekly “China Decoded, The Week Ahead, and This Week in Fashion” articles to stay on top of fashion business news. In terms of trends, I follow numerous brands and influencers on Instagram and actively read *Fashionista* articles, particularly during fashion week. Furthermore, I read *The Daily Skim* for political and social news and get updates on current events throughout the day from the *New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal* apps. It is important to be proactive in industries where change is constant such as technology and fashion.

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Fashion used to be based around emotion, but technology is enabling big data to inform operations from buying to visual merchandising. We are developing more and more means of distribution to reach the customer, which is where my Marketing major will be incredibly valuable. I utilize my skills in social media strategy and branding in my role of Online Media Director for my sorority, Kappa Alpha Theta. My area of emphasis in Digital will provide an understanding of data analytics and education in the digital consumer environment to help me excel in my career as we become more and more globally interconnected.

I spent last summer interning under Gabrielle and the sales team at Rosie Assoulin. I was eighteen years old working New York Fashion Week and market for a luxury designer. In terms of brand reach and recognition, just having Rosie's name on my resume will carry clout. I took the first step towards my future career, which was getting into the right room. From there, I acted as a liaison between buyers and dressers at the showroom during market week and worked with New York area retailers on a weekly basis on merchandise plans and in-store assortments. Learning in an operational role helped me to see the ins and outs of running an international and domestic business from behind the scenes. Over the holidays, I interned at Capitol with Danielle and was invited to stay on for this upcoming summer. I look forward to trying and learning many new things as Danielle has shared that "I will, and a lot of people in this industry will help you find where you fit." In this role, I will work under the social media manager to earn Digital Marketing Internship credit in Terry, moving me one step forward to meeting my major and emphasis requirements.

I find Danielle's career at Capitol particularly inspiring because I am young for my grade. I am nineteen years old in my second year at UGA, where the majority of my classmates are in their twenties and up. Furthermore, I have enough credit hours to be considered a second

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semester junior. Looks can be deceiving, and firms could easily undervalue me due to my age. Therefore, my mindset is that I will not settle for average; I will be distinctive, indispensable, and desirable, I will show up, and I will be happy to be there. If I keep busy, hustling and working to get the job done well, then I will simply demonstrate that age is just a number.

My experience in Megan's moderately priced store, Boem, and Capitol, a designer store, have given me firsthand experience working with clients across all price ranges and ages. I have found that I am inclined to luxury, partially because I like nice things, but also because of the investment involved. At this higher price point, consumers are purchasing for life, to hand a product down to their children, not to wear once and throw away. We have a finite number of resources in this world, and I want to support conscious consumption. The Capitol team serves as a critical link between me and the luxury brands they carry, some for over twenty years. These interviews provided a learning opportunity on the best ways to maintain an ongoing relationship that could result in a full-time job after college with their respective companies or an affiliate.

To further my potential and understanding of the luxury industry, I am going to the world's largest fashion, ecommerce, and luxury market, China. I am traveling via the Family and Consumer Science College's China Maymester lead by Dr. Medvedev. I will gain firsthand understanding of the US's largest foreign supplier of textiles and apparel, global sourcing, and Chinese retail practices. In order to earn credit for a major required class rather than an upper level elective, I am completing a directed study on Chinese luxury consumer behavior across Hong Kong, Shanghai, and Beijing. This project will successfully combine my Marketing and Fashion majors to evaluate the best ways for fashion retailers to connect with the complex Chinese consumer. I plan to utilize my experience working in retail to examine how employees read the room, which customers they help, and their methods for offering customer service. This

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will differentiate me to prospective employers as I can provide insight in international strategy and market entry tactics. Additionally, I will be visiting the headquarters of Gap Inc. and Levi Strauss & Co. to hear how they source products from China to operate domestically in the United States and internationally within European and Chinese markets. My conversations with Danielle, Megan, and Gabrielle provided insight as to effective communication with industry professionals that I will encounter this summer. I hope to learn more about potential internships at both Gap and Levi Strauss and to position myself well to work with one of these employers in the summer of my junior year.

Megan Orrell, Danielle Leslie, and Gabrielle O'Brien are all my previous employers and established industry professionals whom have shaped my understanding of fashion production and consumption. Despite my lack of experience, Megan took me on as an employee and gave me a start in fashion. These three women have shown me what hard work and dedication looks like and inspired me to pursue a career in this industry. I am immensely grateful for their lessons and time and vow to prove that their investments in me were worthwhile. Through my college education, internship experiences, and travel, I will enhance my work ethic, strategic flexibility, social, networking, and technological skills which will result in a successful career in the fashion industry.

IV. Citations

Council of Fashion Designers of America. (2018, June 4). CFDA Fashion Awards. Retrieved from <https://cfda.com/cfda-fashion-awards>