ARTS & LIFE

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The business of blogging

ALLEN McINNIS/THE GAZETTE

Imran Amed started The Business of Fashion, one of the industry's most widely respected publications, after leaving a plum management-consultant job.

MONTREAL MAKES YOU express yourself, says McGill grad who founded influential Business of Fashion

EVA FRIEDE
GAZETTE STYLE EDITOR

The Business of Fashion is a blog that has gone the way most bloggers can only dream of — but probably don't. Imran Amed's "passion project," launched in 2007, is now one of the fashion world's most widely respected publications, with a community of more than 1.5 million on the web, social media and receiving its newsletter.

There are no pink logos, daily selfies or product-pitching blurbs; instead, the ornate serif BoF logo presides over categories like News & Analysis, Global Currents, Fashion 2.0 and Education, where How to Build a Fashion Brand, posted in 2007, remains front-page fodder.

Amed, 38, a McGill and Harvard Business School graduate who left a plum management-consultant job in London, launched the blog from his sofa as he explored ways to work at the intersection of business and fashion.

And it was in Montreal that he caught the fashion bug, Amed said while in town last month to receive a Desautels Management Achievement Award from bachelor of commerce students at McGill. He is the youngest entrepreneur ever to be so honoured.

In a trim bespoke suit from London's Thom Sweeney and wearing a floral brooch by Lanvin, the wiry, articulate Amed recalled his successful fashion blog foray as well as his Montreal days, working at the Gap on Ste-Catherine St., working on his French and organizing an AIDS benefit fashion show.

"Montreal is one of those secret gems. I remember feeling this energy," he said of his years here in the 1990s.

He is Canadian, raised in Calgary, a city he described as a nice place to grow up but "certainly not a style capital."

"In a way, Montreal forces you to up your game, to express yourself through your style. And that's what I learned here."

Amed says he was a typical "overachieving, nerdy kid" at school, but in the evenings was a "stage kid," trained in voice, theatre and drama, which comes through in his confidence and smooth delivery. He has been profiled in the Wall Street Journal and Paper magazine, and was named one of the most influential men of 2011 by British GQ.

Amed credits the success of his venture to being in the right place at the right time. Blogs were the first kind of new media to hit the mainstream, he noted, and he launched his just as Facebook, the iPhone and other forms of social media were bursting onto the scene.

The new technology, he says, helped him understand how building brands and having conversations in the digital world was possible. But he also saw how social media would come to dominate the fashion industry, how the drawbridge to the rarefied luxury world would come down. Today, anyone with a computer or tablet or iPhone can view Prada or Dior catwalk shows, live-streamed from Milan or Paris. And those products are just a click away on a multitude of sites, something Amed saw but was scoffed at for suggesting in certain circles.

He left his lucrative job at McKinsey & Company in 2006 — not to launch a blog, he emphasizes, but to work in a creative industry. "Something kept drawing me to fashion," he said, adding he worked on a startup incubator for young fashion designers that lasted eight months.

And he was a consultant to LVMH, young designers in London and technology startups.

One year ago, BoF received $2.5 million in investment from Index Ventures (which has invested in Skype, Net-a-porter and Dropbox), LVMH and Silas Chou (the Michael Kors investor), among others. Now, as editor-in-chief, Amed employs 10 staffers in London and draws on 30 contributors from Brazil to China.

The Business of Fashion published its first print edition last fall.

"We are starting to make money," he said.

In autumn, BoF launched its first print edition, with Tom Ford on the cover and the naming of the BoF 500, people shaping the fashion industry. It was sponsored by Swarovski and sold at Colette in Paris, and all over the world. It was slipped under the doors of hotel rooms at Paris Fashion Week. And it sold out online.

Sponsorship may be the key to revenue, the issue plaguing media today, Amed hinted. More projects are planned "that will further help us monetize content."

The buzzword in media is native advertising, he said, which in the old world was called advertorial.

"Our community on BoF, they come to BoF because they trust us. They like the tone, the voice that we use. They like our analytical approach. They like our appreciation of creativity. They like the content we create.

"If we can partner with brands to create content with them, and in our voice, in a way we become both the agency and the distribution channel."

While BoF has not yet done such a project, Amed says when it does, it will be clearly separated from pure journalistic content.

In February, Amed wrote an opinion piece titled The Sorrier State of Fashion Criticism, about the departure of respected critic Cathy Horyn from the New York Times.

"Have we, the fashion industry, nurtured and nourished truly independent, informed voices who say what they really think? I think not," Amed wrote.

In our chat at the Nelligan Hotel, Amed said: "There is a lot of fluffy, pandering, poorly informed content out there."

He grew up watching Tim Blanks on Fashion File. "It is people like that who taught me about fashion." It is from voices "able and willing to state what they really think" that we learn and move forward, he said.

"It also pushes designers to challenge themselves," he said. "I fear that we are losing some of those voices."

This week, it was announced that Suzy Menkes is leaving the International Herald Tribune (recently rebranded as the International New York Times) after 25 years to join Condé Nast as international Vogue editor.

Amed says BoF's independent voice resonates with the fashion community. "We say what we really think. We are always balanced and fair. We check our facts."

The lines between advertising and content have become blurry, he points out. At major magazines, there is often a tacit agreement between advertisers and publishers about the creation of editorial content.

"I don't have a problem with the fact that people are paying for content," he said. "This is where the future of media is going.

"You need to be transparent when that's the case. As long as the reader knows when someone has paid for a piece of content.

"People are essentially interested in great storytelling. If you can help brands tell their stories in a way they are not able to do on their own, and deliver that to a community of people they can't reach, that's very powerful."

On the fashion scene here, Amed says the folding of Montreal Fashion Week is a sign of the times. "There are just too many fashion weeks," he said.

He knows the work of Marie Saint Pierre, Denis Gagnon, and Dexter and Byron Peart of the Want Les Essentiels de la Vie accessories line.

Asked to advise Montreal designers, Amed said: "The fashion industry is a global market. If you want to operate in the market, you need to go to where the market is.

"Follow the example of Byron and Dexter. They have an incredible concept based here in Montreal. I bump into them in New York, I bump into them in Italy. They're out interacting with the market, where the market happens.

"You can't run a fashion business only thinking about Canada, or only thinking about Montreal, because the market here is just not big enough.

"You have to think big and you have to go out and hustle, and you have to compete on a global scale.

"Doing fashion shows in Montreal or Toronto is never going to cut it. It's just a training ground."

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IN CONVERSATION

Click on this story on our Fashion page to see Allen McInnis's video of Imran Amed discussing his days at McGill.
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