

Smart money

Just as the luxury labels have boomed in recent years, so has the influence of online journal *The Business Of Fashion* and its visionary founding editor – and new *GQ* columnist – **Imran Amed**

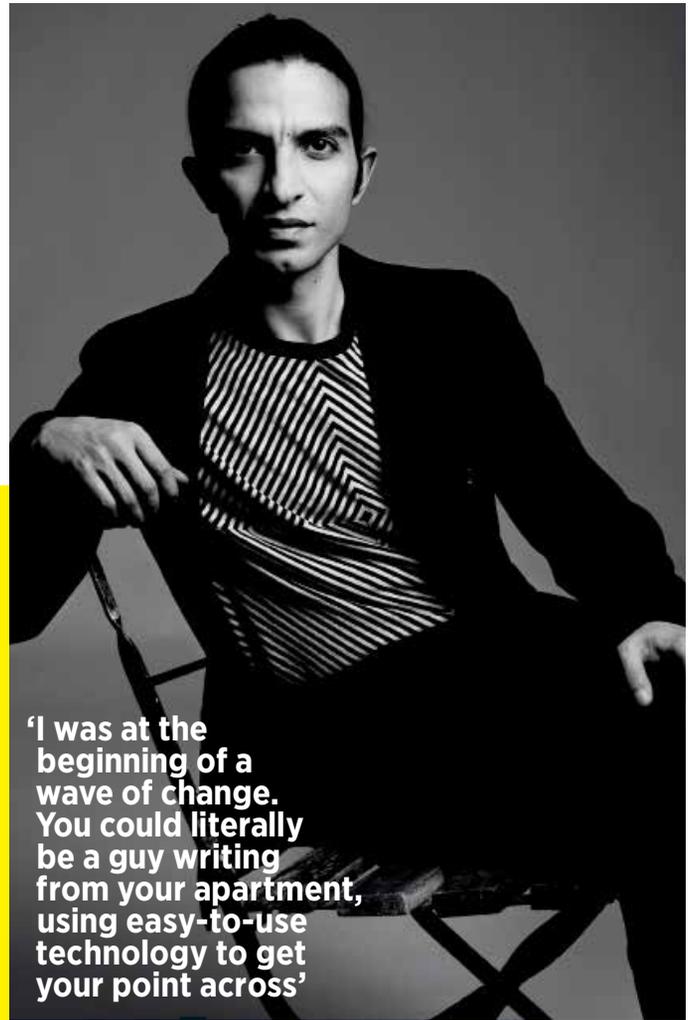


round five years ago, people began to notice that a young Canadian with a ponytail had started to crop up with noticeable regularity at every important fashion event around the world. His name was Imran Amed and pretty soon people began to whisper that the website he edited, *The Business Of Fashion*, was poised to be the next big thing. The predictions soon became true and by 2011 *GQ* had named him one of the most influential men in Britain.

Since then Amed has become one of the best-known names on the circuit and *The Business Of Fashion* one of the most respected reads in the industry. Its incisive coverage and insightful analysis means it is the must-read of CEOs and commentators around the world – as well as anyone with even passing interest in the subject.

Amed was raised in Calgary, Canada, attended McGill University in Montreal and took an MBA at Harvard Business School before joining the giant management consulting firm McKinsey in 2002. By 2006, having moved to London, he had decided, as he puts it, that it was time he fostered the creative right-hand side of his brain. His first foray into fashion was to set up a funding programme for young graduate designers. This proved unsuccessful but Amed had found his spiritual home in the fashion industry and, among other projects, he acted as a consultant for LVMH. A meeting with Diane Pernet, one of the first of the famous fashion bloggers (who looks like Morticia Addams in a

Industrial relations: With his website *The Business Of Fashion* (below), Imran Amed was among the first to recognise the value of online communities to luxury brands



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mantilla), made him consider the possibilities of this relatively new medium and in 2007 *The Business Of Fashion* was born. “No one was actually writing about the industry itself,” he says. And in a world where the outfits tend to be more interesting than the intellectuals, his McKinsey background made him stand out.

From those early days blogging from his sofa, the website soon attracted attention and became a serious force in fashion. Amed found himself spending half his time travelling around the world and became ubiquitous in the big fashion capitals of New York, Paris and Milan.

It may be the norm today, but Amed was one of the first to identify the potential of social media for luxury brands. “It became apparent to me that fashion was then at the very early stages of digital disruption. Music was easily digitised – MP3s simply displaced CDs. But as physical products how could fashion be disrupted? It seemed to me it was communication and engagement with consumers.”

He was initially laughed at. In 2007 he was at a seminar on luxury retail when the question

of how Facebook would influence the industry came up. Amed’s view was that if people were having conversations on social media about Prada shows and Gucci bags then the labels themselves would have to become involved. “I got ripped apart,” he recalls, “but I ended

up being one of the first to address these issues head on. Within a year of starting *BoF*, the first iPhone launched and Facebook and Twitter started to hit. I was at the beginning of a wave of change where you could literally be a guy from outside the fashion industry writing from your apartment, using cheap, easy-to-use technology to get your point of view across.”

The site received a serious tranche of funding from a group of prestigious investors in 2013 and today is read in more than 200 countries and talked about in the same breath as the *Financial Times*. Now the luxury industry itself has become the darling of the City, with stellar growth and billion-dollar IPOs. So read all about it, as this is the business to be in. **Robert Johnston**

Turn the page to read Imran Amed’s new column.



Photograph Scott Trindle

Log on, link up and cash in

Since the smartphone became our personal pocket window on the world, viral campaigns have given commerce the chance to cast a wider net than ever

NEW
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When Dylan Jones first asked me to write this column, I hesitated. Upon reflection, I decided I would only do it if I could expand the remit to

go beyond my normal beat of fashion and luxury to include technology and design.

These days, I live in awe of how quickly our lives are being transformed by technology; how quickly I have become used to the idea of ordering groceries, televisions and taxis from a handheld device and being constantly connected with everyone who is important to me, including millions of members of the community that grew around the blog-turned-website I founded from my sofa.

I'm not the only one. In their book, *The New Digital Age*, Google's Eric Schmidt and Jared Cohen call the internet "the largest experiment involving anarchy in history". The authors say there are now two billion people online. In the next decade, six billion more will join them, in many cases leapfrogging analogue technologies into the digital age, unleashing previously unimaginable opportunities for economic growth, collaboration and interaction.

So, while I still worry that we spend too much time on our mobile devices, I have been amazed by the power of digital technology to spark emotion and human connection, especially when technology has long been seen as faceless and impersonal.

No more. Technology now enables highly emotional shared experiences. Live global events, from the Oscars to the Olympics, commencement speeches by living legends at the best universities around the world, music videos from my youth and a stream of clips of my niece and nephew all become instantly accessible in vivid colour on a device that fits in my pocket. It connects me to that moment and to other people who also experience it.

Smart companies have been quick to capitalise on this. During the week of

celebrations held last year to honour the life of Nelson Mandela, countless images of him were broadcast and shared around the world. Indeed, my social media feeds had never been awash with such universal praise and celebration of a single human being. But it wasn't until the Soweto Gospel Choir performed in a supermarket in that a video from the week of mourning went viral.

Shoppers at a Woolworths in Pretoria, South Africa, were treated to a surprise performance of Johnny Clegg's "Asimbonanga", a call for freedom written during Mandela's incarceration. Choir members, dressed as Woolworths employees, broke into song, leaving onlookers to stop, pull out their phones and capture the moment on social media. Some were moved to tears.

That moment was amplified and widely shared across social media, and soon a three-minute video posted on the Woolworths YouTube channel, seizing the global emotion surrounding the passing of one of the world's greatest ever statesmen, clocked more than 2.5 million views in less than a week. The video was also broadcast on national newscasts all over the world.

Back in my home town, they have been betting on digital emotion too.

WestJet, the underdog air carrier based in Calgary, created a video which was viewed more than 25 million times in the first week after it debuted on YouTube. The company had set a target of 200,000 views, so this kind of online reaction blew their minds.

Before boarding, one plane-load of WestJet passengers engaged with a Santa Claus in video booths at the airport lounge. Each described what they wanted for Christmas and by the time they landed in Calgary a few hours later, WestJet had procured all the gifts, including a widescreen TV. Down they came on the baggage carousel, each wrapped and labelled, sending the passengers into waves of delight – and sometimes heartfelt tears.

Emotional connections with consumers can be genuine business drivers. And as the real and digital worlds integrate, even more emotionally charged experiences will be on offer

Net value: Beyoncé appears on stage after her new album thundered online with its overnight web launch, December 2013



The online reaction came from around the world. A post containing the WestJet video was shared an incredible 1.5 million times on mashable.com alone, and was also posted by other online heavyweights including the *Huffington Post* and the *Daily Mail*. All of this for a simple video from a small Canadian airline whose only scheduled flight outside of the Americas is to Dublin.

At over three and five minutes respectively, both the Woolworths and WestJet videos are far longer than the usual 60 seconds that people recommend for online video success. Yet the popularity of these videos proves that if you can tell a story, with compelling visuals, music and purpose, you can keep a user's attention for much longer.

Which industry has perfected this formula best? The music industry, of course. With star power, storytelling and huge online followings, smart musicians have the ability to create digital emotion on a massive scale.

Last December, Beyoncé created an internet earthquake when she released an entire album as a pre-Christmas surprise for her fans. A few weeks earlier the ubiquitous young men from One Direction launched their latest album with a seven-hour, live-streamed global event on YouTube, where they have more than 2.5 million subscribers. Their video for "The Story Of My Life", which features the band-mates' real families, has all the hallmarks of digital emotion and at last count had over 100 million views. Who needs to pay for advertising when you can just engage with your fans and followers directly?

People don't seem to mind marketing like this. Because it is authentic it creates emotion that is replicated online millions of times. According to the latest neuroscience research, human decision-making is fundamentally emotional; we are not just the rational animal of traditional economic theory. Emotional connections with consumers can be business drivers. And as the real and digital worlds integrate, even more emotionally charged experiences will be on offer.

As Mandela said following a performance of "Asimbonanga" in 1999, "It is music and dancing that makes me at peace with the world." It seems that is more true than ever before, as technology reinforces the power of shared experiences at a global level.

● **Imran Amed** is editor-in-chief of *The Business Of Fashion*. businessoffashion.com

