Do you thrill to the thought that brown might be the new black? Do you tire of fashion trends before they even hit the stores? Then a career in fashion could be the right choice for you. Those who truly love the field say that the perks—fabulous clothes, exposure to famous people and brands, extraordinary diversity, awareness of upcoming trends and cool job status—are worth the struggle. Still, the fashion industry is not all glitz and glamour. Even more than talent, an understanding of the industry is what lands the job.

Even though the fashion industry is difficult to break into, there are a variety of different types of opportunities—creative jobs in design and marketing; retail sales and buying positions; and corporate careers in finance, planning, and distribution.

Whether you are seeking a place on the catwalk or in the haute couture clubhouse, the fashion business is just that—a business. Insiders from all over the fashion world say that their jobs are high on stress and low on pay. Moreover, insiders conclude, people are judged as much on looks as on performance. With its rigorous hours, capricious culture and wobbly corporate ladder, the fashion industry certainly isn’t for everybody. Yet for a dedicated few, there is no more exciting and inspiring place.

If you want to get into fashion or retail, get an internship or even a part-time job in sales or merchandising to get started. Finding internships and jobs in the fashion industry can be tricky. Because many are never publicized, networking to find opportunities is critical, but each experience on your resume will help land a better internship or job the next time.

To get into the creative end of the industry, you need a proper education. You need to study design (at a design school). Technical people, such as buyers and inventory planners, might benefit more from business, marketing, communication, or English classes.

Staying on top of current industry trends and forecasts by reading industry publications such as Women’s Wear Daily is also very important.

Sources: The Vault College Career Bible 2005 and Career Opportunities in the Fashion Industry
Job Positions in the Fashion Industry

Designer
Designers are involved in the development and production of a line of clothing from concept to finished product. A knowledge of textiles, garment construction, sewing, pattern making, and other technical skills gained from a degree in fashion design or clothing and textiles is required. Many apparel designers specialize in either children’s, men’s, or women’s wear and/or a specific type of fabric and/or a specific type of apparel (such as swimsuits, evening gowns, uniforms, etc.). Salary median: $64,000.

Assistant Designer
Assistant designers help the designer with sketches, sourcing fabric and trim, and preparing presentation materials for the line. Salary range: $22,000 to $33,000.

Pattern Maker
Either by hand or using computer software, the pattern maker creates a pattern piece for each part of the garment as well as specifications for how the garment should be constructed during the manufacturing process. Salary median: $39,000.

Merchandiser
Merchandisers are high-level executives in apparel manufacturing who use both their creativity and business acumen to determine the product direction the manufacturer will take each season. They research, plan, and decide which fashions and/or accessories the manufacturer will produce, and the most profitable way to produce these items. A degree in fashion merchandising, apparel production, fashion design, or marketing is required. Courses or other types of training in advertising and promotion are also helpful. Many merchandisers have MBAs. Most began their careers in either retail or wholesale sales or as a buyer. Salary range: $50,000-$100,000+.

Buyer
This is the person who is involved with and responsible for planning sales, monitoring inventory, selecting the merchandise, and writing and pricing orders to vendors. Being a buyer is the ultimate exercise in living on a budget. You’ll be told what you have to spend for a season, and your job will be to get the most and best for your buck. Buyers get their positions after spending 2 to 5 years as an assistant or by completing a management-training program sponsored by the store. A lot of people want this job, despite its increased emphasis on sales and inventory management and the relatively low pay. Be prepared for some fairly stiff competition. Salary median: $48,700.

Assistant Buyer
If buying is your goal, this is where you begin. Assistant buyers typically help in merchandise selection, deal with vendors, write orders, and learn how to operate within a budget. You’ll need a good head for numbers and the ability to juggle too little time and too much information in stressful situations. Be advised that some retailers are eliminating this position, relying instead on automated processes for some of the more mundane order-taking, delivery, and follow-up aspects of this job. Most assistant buyers have a college degree, and many major in retail management or business. Salary range: $25,000 to $45,000.

Retail Management Trainee
If you’re accepted into a store’s management training program, this is your title for the 4 to 9 months you’re learning merchandising, finance, marketing, operations, and personnel management. Typically, sales associates and others who excel in various departments get first crack at these programs, though company recruiters hire college grads and other outside experienced talent as well for the openings that remain. Salary median: $34,900.
Department or Sales Manager
For management training program graduates and for very successful sales associates, this is typically the first rung in the retail ladder. This is one of the lowest levels of management, but a useful one for those who want a long-term career in the industry. Department managers supervise the sales staff, control the sales floor inventory, and often work closely with buyers. Candidates need to prove that they can sell, work well with people, and keep careful track of inventory. Salary range: $30,000 to $60,000.

Merchandise Manager
Often known as a divisional merchandise manager (DMM), this job oversees several merchandise departments and their respective buyers. Buyers typically move into this position after 6 to 10 years. They help to ensure consistent quality, proper amount of merchandise, and value to customers. They also manage vendor relations, market visits, and the ongoing education and development of their buying teams. This is a senior slot, and if you do well, your next step is the upper ranks of executive retail management. Salary range: $50,000 to $150,000.

Market Analyst
Both retail and wholesale have a growing need for accurate and ongoing analysis of what customers are buying, when and how they’re buying, and what all the data mean for buyers, advertisers, and strategic planning. Marketing majors who understand how to model demographic information and analyze the volumes of transactional data generated by customer purchases will find numerous opportunities in this field, both inside large companies and in a proliferating number of independent research groups. Salary median: $61,600.

Director of Marketing
Many retailers are now focusing on loyalty programs and efforts to more accurately predict their customers’ needs and behavior. Seen as distinctly separate from sales, marketing directors and their staff manage external research and coordinate all the internal sources of information to retain their best customers and attract new ones. This is an increasingly visible slot, and e-commerce is now an integral part of the job. Salary range: $85,000 to $135,000.

Information Technology
Big retail outfits employ complex technology systems and specialized software—everything from logistics and supply chain software to Web servers and e-commerce software to POS (point of sale) systems. For those interested in networks and systems, this is still a relatively open arena. Job titles in this area include Web designer, e-commerce manager, system applications programmer, system developer, project manager, and point of sales administrator. Median salary: $70,900.

The Business Side of Fashion

The retail fashion industry provides great opportunities for the fashion conscience person who is interested in the business side of fashion. Many retailers offer internships that often develop into buying positions or a place in their management training programs.

Here’s what most employers look for when they hire at all levels:

• With the ever-increasing focus on keeping customers happy, you need to enjoy serving people and be perpetually alert as to how to serve them better. There is also a lot of teamwork in these jobs, often under fairly stressful conditions.

• These marketplaces are constantly changing and so are the customers. The more attuned you are to the shifts, the more successful your retailing career will be.

• You need to be self-motivated and aggressive—whether you’re making a sale or improving the new orders and transactions systems. And when you take on new responsibilities or make decisions under deadline pressure and they don’t work out, you have to know how to handle the repercussions.

• Perhaps even more sought after than the ability to sell just about anything to just about anyone are the problem-solving and data-analysis skills that marketing needs. You’re also eminently hirable these days if you understand technology and enjoy the architecture of systems and networks.

• Love the store, love the merchandise it sells, love the prestige and cachet of your particular niche in the industry. The pay is low, the hours are long, and advancement is never easy. Insiders are unanimous: If you’d buy what this company is selling, you’re a much stronger potential hire.

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