

Written by By Corbin Chamberlin

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Nearly a decade ago, the *Financial Times* never imagined that there was not only a demand, but also a refreshingly pragmatic approach for a regular contribution with its business-minded readers within the high gloss world of fashion. Vanessa Friedman was the first to hold the title of fashion editor at the *Financial Times*. Friedman's blog "Material World" offers a refreshing take on fashion and its business matters. Her work is free from any type of gloss and illustrious fashion-gossip, Vanessa's lean and fluff-free content helps clear the fog on the sometimes mystifying industry of fashion with her clinical approach to journalism.



Friedman admitted that it was a little tricky to convince the international newspaper that it needed fashion content on a regular basis. "In the begging it was really convincing the newspaper, that fashion belonged in the *FT*. It was not something that they had done regularly. But the size of the fashion industry has made it a natural subject for the *FT*. It now is about balancing everything."

Before joining the *Financial Times*, Vanessa was the fashion and fashion features director for UK *InStyle* and was also the European editor for American *Elle*. I was able to speak to the very humble and noble fashion editor, on her work with the *Financial Times* and fashion as a whole.

What is the *Financial Times* view on fashion? What angle does it take?

I think we try to look at fashion as it fits in peoples' lives. Our readers are people who care about clothes, that have to wear clothes and spend money on clothes, but primary focus and concern on life is not clothes. We go into it with that assumption.

Before working at the *Financial Times*, what did you do?

I've been with *Financial Times* for seven years. I lived in London for twelve years. I've been back in New York for the *FT* for two years. I was the fashion features and features editor when they launched UK *InStyle* in London. I did that for two years. Before that, I was a freelance writer, and European editor for American *Elle*. We moved in '96 from New York to London. I did a lot of stuff. I then joined the *FT* in 2003.

What is the *FT*'s stance on having a blog or online content?

It's a slight obscure blog for the *FT* to do. Because most of our people who go to our blogs are going for Martin Wolf or another famous economics commentator. They are not expecting to find fashion, and most fashion people don't necessarily go to the blogs. It's getting a creeping audience.

What is the most challenging part of working for the *FT* and approaching fashion journalism?

In the beginning, it was really convincing the newspaper that fashion belonged in the *FT*. It was not something that they had done regularly. But the size of the fashion industry has made it a natural subject for the *FT*. It now is about balancing everything.

Does the *FT* plan to push the blog more than they are currently?

It goes up and down. I think the biggest question is what other news is happening that day. We have a limited amount of space on the homepage for things to be promoted. When things like natural disasters and wars are going on, it's hard to argue your piece on the Dior-guy. Which I understand completely.

Cathy Horyn really thinks the world of you. What is your relationship with Cathy?

I would say a mutual respect. Maybe comrades-in-arms? {laughs}. People who go through fashion collection-wars. You know, you essentially spend a month sitting next to someone on very hard benches at all hours of the day and it is a very strange and specific world; it's somewhat bonding.

"Lazy design hides behind expensive materials." What are your thoughts on this statement?

I don't think it hides behind expensive materials because in fact you can have very simple design and in expensive materials, like the Birkin, case-in-point. And in fact you have Jil Sander, another case-in-point or Céline, very minimal lines in very expensive fabrics, which is very hard to do. I think poor design often hides behind a lot of decoration. It does not have to be expensive. A lot of bells and whistles, sequins and beads. The more stuff you put on top of seam, the harder to tell if it's any good.

From a economic standpoint, what did you think of New York Fashion Week?

I thought it was pretty good. I actually thought last season was good. The designers seem slightly more relaxed about what they're doing or more willing to go back to their own core-aesthetic. It's my claim, usually that's a good thing. Sometimes they're worried they will seem boring, especially if they have been around for awhile, and they start "experimental things" and that often does not work so well. So I think it's better when someone has a good idea once. It's still a good idea.

Do you think changing the core-aesthetic is the biggest mistake a designer could make during these unstable times?

Clearly you have to push yourself, no matter what profession you're in. You must stretch your talent, thinking or your own ideas, and you have to experiment. But I think what's really imperative when you're doing something like a show is that you are able to recognize or able to work with someone who is able to recognize something that is not working. It's very good to try, but until you have succeeded you shouldn't show us anything. It's an issue where there is a lot of "Oh god, it's time to show. Let's put something on the runway and see what happens. We don't have to make it, we'll put it on the runway and we just won't produce it."

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What were the standout collections of NYFW for you?

I thought Proenza Schouler was really good, as well as Narciso Rodriguez.

Countless shows, weeks of traveling and a overall demanding schedule. How do you unwind from fashion week(s)?

I play with my kids. Kids are a pretty good palette cleanser.

Which interview/profile was your most challenging?

It's actually not a fashion profile. The hardest profile I ever did was with Robert De Niro. He was just totally uninterested in being interviewed, even though he had agreed to it and it was like an intense paralysis every time I asked a question. In terms of fashion, Rei Kawakubo was interesting. Partly because we were working through her husband, who was doing the translation and she was very hyper-sensitive about certain things. But it wasn't bad, it was just a kind-of an interesting experience. I much rather talk to someone who has strong feelings and strong opinions instead of someone who is just smiling all of the time.

Like the "Pucci" book, do you have any special projects in the works?

I don't. "Pucci" was a kind-of close to my heart book because I know Laudomia and I've always loved those clothes. It was really interesting because I learned a lot that I didn't know when I was doing it. There are lots of people I'm interested in writing about, so we'll see.

Was there ever a point in your career where you thought or realized that you had arrived?

Hopefully there is room for improvement. {laughs} I like to think that I can still get better. No, I think everything that I do, I try to do the best that I can. I do think I can be better.

How do you think the recent disasters in Japan will affect its fashion industry and the rest of the world's?

Funny, I was just writing about it. A friend of mine Lucien Pellat-Finet, who is a french cashmere king has four stores in Japan and his sales are up like 30% since last week. Which I don't quite understand. There was a lot news today about luxury stocks falling because people are worried that Japan represents a giant chunk of their revenues and this will hurt them. But the thing is Japan as a luxury market has been stagnant if not contracting for a decade. Even though it's still a large chunk of sales, it's not as big as companies think. It will disappear anyways. So, this won't hurt the companies as bad as it might hit other sectors like automobiles, computers, but we'll see. I think the other question is when terrible things happen and people tend to feel guilty or feel that is inappropriate to spend a lot of money, that may kind-of have a knock on psychological effect with consumers on the Western world. Then again, it remains to be seen.