How to organise a menswear season... without fashion shows

By Dominique Muret - 11 April 2020

The textile and apparel industries have virtually ground to a halt in Europe - and are gingerly getting going again in Asia - and the decision to cancel the majority of men’s Fashion Weeks and the main trade shows in June has caused major repercussions. How can fashion labels manage without the huge visibility opportunity afforded by catwalk shows? Where and when will they showcase their Spring/Summer 2021 collections, now that they won’t be able to tap the scores of international buyers flocking to the world’s fashion capitals?
These are the questions luxury labels are currently mulling, having been caught short by the cancellations decided by the leading fashion industry bodies in Paris, Milan and New York. The Paris Fashion Week scheduled on June 23-28 has been cancelled. The Milan Fashion Week Men, initially planned on June 19-23, has been rescheduled in September, and will be staged during the womenswear Week, on September 22-28. The New York Fashion Week was due to be held on June 8-10, but has been postponed, with no indication of the new dates.

Following these decisions, the trade shows usually held in Paris at the end of June (Man, Splash Paris, Tranoï, Unique, Interfilière and View) have also been cancelled, while Pitti Uomo, the marquee menswear event which usually opens the season in mid-June, has been pushed back to September 2-4, and will last three days rather than the customary four.

FashionNetwork.com has contacted luxury labels like Louis Vuitton, Dior, Giorgio Armani, Ermenegildo Zegna, Valentino, Brioni and Berluti, but the majority of them declined to answer. According to some, “it’s too early [to say],” or “we are assessing the situation,” or “we are working hard on all fronts to deal with the rapidly evolving situation,” or “we are still reorganising internally, and we need time before we can make a statement.”

Reactions that offer a glimpse of the disarray fashion labels are experiencing at the moment, faced with a highly uncertain, ever-changing situation. Only Kering-owned Gucci took a clear stand, and announced that its menswear collection will be showing in Milan in September, “in line with the decision taken by the Italian Fashion Chamber (CNMI).” More generally, Gucci too thinks “that it is still too early to take a decision on future sales campaigns,” but that the label will be ready “whatever the final decision will be.”

Meanwhile, Gucci is relying on e-tail, like many other labels ever since lock-down measures were first imposed. The Italian luxury label, capitalising on a pilot project trialled in recent months, has “activated a digital showroom experience accessible to all the buyers and clients who would normally travel to view the collection.” This has enabled Gucci “to digitally replicate a showroom experience in an innovative way, giving the possibility of accessing 360º views of the various garments, to zoom in on certain details and to buy the items selected, all through the same tool.”

Lardini, an Italian high-end menswear brand which is also a supplier to other labels, will present the collection to international buyers online, while in Italy it will be presented at its regional agents’ showrooms. However, Creative Director Luigi Lardini thinks that it will not be possible to sell the Spring/Summer 2021 collection in September, despite the fact that Pitti Uomo and other menswear shows are going to be staged that month.

Some of Lardini’s multibrand clients, especially from the label’s second most important market, Japan, are pushing to receive the first samples by mid-May. “For this reason, we won’t take part in the next edition of Pitti Uomo. We think that holding the show in September is pointless, since no one will want to buy then, given that the summer collection must be shipped to overseas clients from November-December. It would have been much more helpful for us if Pitti had staged a virtual show in June,” complained Luigi Lardini.

He has already ordered the fabrics for the collection, and isn’t worried about producing it, provided that the factories which are currently closed will be authorised to re-open “by April 18-19 at the latest. The main problem is lack of clarity from the government and public authorities. People want to have a degree of security and assurance,” said Lardini.
Pal Zileri, another luxury Italian menswear label, which usually presents the new collection for its young line, Lab Pal Zileri, at Pitti Uomo, has confirmed it will attend the Florentine show’s next edition. “There will be a big rush in September, but it's important for the whole industry to get together at the show, because business must re-start. We must broadcast a strong message; the whole fashion system needs it. We are actually going back to the way things were in the 1980s, when the menswear collections where presented with womenswear. And this might turn into an opportunity to change the current Fashion Week rhythm, which everyone is complaining about,” said Maria Rosaria Lombardi, Pal Zileri’s communication and marketing director.

Carla Sozzani, at the helm of Milanese luxury concept store 10 Corso Como, is of the same opinion: “Rescheduling in a less cluttered period, one that is more consistent with the seasons, would allow for more innovative content to be developed,” she said, adding that “these are very difficult times.”

Pal Zileri has already designed the summer 2021 collection, and its production has started. But the Covid-19 emergency forced the group, like its competitors, to change plans. “It's clear that the summer sales campaign will be scaled down. It will be absolutely impossible for foreign buyers to come to Milan in June. As a result, we’re about to start setting up a virtual showroom,” said Lombardi.

“If businesses in Italy were able to start working again after Easter, on April 16 or thereabouts, this would make it possible for summer collections to be delivered by the end of June, and for work on the winter season to begin. Actually, what's good about not having shows in the month of June is that labels no longer have a sword hanging over their heads, and enjoy more flexibility in creating their collections,” said Claudio Marenzi, CEO of Italian outerwear label Herno and president of Pitti Immagine and Confindustria Moda, the association of Italy's fashion and textile industry companies.

According to Marenzi, it is impossible to imagine now, in the midst of Italy’s lock-down period, what the mood of retailers and buyers will be in June. “We must figure out when they will be mentally prepared to make purchases for summer 2021. I doubt this will happen in June. The sales campaign will probably extend until September. That will be the crucial time of the season, and sales will either be made virtually or, as in the old days, by packing up the new collection in the car and going out to show it to distributors,” he said.

“Labels looking to sell between June and August will surely end up selling less than those that are aiming for September, because retailers won’t be ready to buy so soon. And there will be more time to produce the collection. Surely, the industry will begin to get going at the end of August,” said Marenzi.

Questions abound and rumours are rife, given the current uncertainty and the lack of clarity about the type of measures that will be implemented once the lock-down will begin to ease. In September, the Fashion Weeks will probably be forced to adopt a different, more streamlined format, with limited audiences.

It has been quietly whispered that London and New York may cancel the September fashion weeks too. Like Milan, Paris might stage mixed shows, presenting menswear and womenswear together. According to some, a pared-down menswear week might even be tacked on the end of the Paris Fashion Week Women at the beginning of October.

The French Fashion and Haute Couture Federation has said that planning the September ready-to-wear Fashion Week isn’t yet on the agenda. Given the situation, all scenarios are still possible. But as of today, nothing has been decided.

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