

Top tips from top fashion designers

The fashion industry can be a notoriously fickle one, with young designers dreaming of runway success as their designs are adopted into the industry after just one captivating collection. This is, however, far from reality...

Just ahead of Mercedes-Benz Fashion Week Cape Town (MBFWCT) and Women's Month, three of South Africa's leading female designers share their experience on the fundamentals to creating and sustaining a successful fashion business.



Jenny le Roux of Habits.

Jenny le Roux from Habits, Leigh Schubert and Shana Morland from Stefania Morland have all built successful fashion businesses, having also participated in the event a number of times.

Organisers African Fashion International asked these qualified, well-known designers for their insights about what it took to build solid, sustainable businesses around their well-established brands, with all three agreeing that success did not happen overnight for any of them - it's been a long journey of determination and commitment to making it work.

Building and sustaining a successful fashion business requires insight, time, dedication, and a thorough understanding of finances, labour law and marketing.

What was the hardest business lesson you've learnt?

- Jenny: My toughest lesson was not to start something new without being fully informed of the facts. When I started www.habits.co.za, the online shopping portal of my business 13 years ago, nobody understood what I wanted to do, and nobody would help me. It was an expensive undertaking, but I got it right, and now my website contributes to one-third of my business' sales. I'm glad I was brave enough to dive into the world of online shopping!
- Leigh: I had to learn that customers don't always want to buy what I would choose for myself!
- Shana: Having a store in a great location has been the key. Our Kloof Street store has benefitted the business, while others in less appealing locations detracted from it. We have been resolute in our strategy to deliver great quality and the best service, and these have allowed us to stay true to our ethos.

Are there business challenges that are unique to the South African fashion industry? What have you done to overcome them?

- Jenny: South Africa is a challenging place to produce clothing. I run a factory and the challenges are enormous. If one adheres to everything the unions require it's incredibly difficult to make a profit from your output as our overheads are extremely high. I haven't overcome these challenges yet, but I'm working on it.
- Leigh: I feel that our economy cannot afford 'designer' prices for unique and exclusive designs, so we need to be price conscious. We're competing against mass-produced goods, and imported high street brands, which are dominating the South African marketplace. It's also difficult to find a good factory to work with. I've been with the same factory since 2002, and have worked with other small factories to build and nurture new skills.
- Shana: The South African market is much smaller than many overseas markets, and we are also a very seasonal market. The local market is also largely obsessed with fast fashion largely driven by overseas markets, but we are lucky to have loyal customers who choose quality over quantity.

What was your aha moment when you realised that your designs could form the basis of a viable, sustainable business?

- Jenny: Definitely when I won the first SA Fashion Award in 1992, and again for the following two years. This made me realise that it wasn't just the media who loved my work, it was paying customers too!
- Leigh: I knew I was doing the right thing when I was called urgently to repeat the styles I had delivered, within a week of my first delivery. I also knew I was doing the right thing when customers started calling me to buy what they had seen on the ramp, which meant that my collections could translate easily from ramp to rail.
- Shana: My background as a wardrobe mistress for TV commercials gave me great insight about what people really want, as well as an understanding of body shapes. This has helped us carve our niche for custom-made garments, which complement our ready-to-wear collections.

Which local designers with successful businesses inspire you?

- Jenny: I admire Gavin Rajah. I saw his first show way back when, when he was a struggling one-man show, and he's built up an extraordinary brand that extends beyond clothing. I can add that even though South Africa was behind the global fashion world 10 years ago, we're now up there with the best of them!
- Leigh: Amanda Laird Cherry and Colleen Eitzen have always understood the business of fashion, and their brands have stood the test of time. They have also created a platform for South African designers to retail from in The Space, addressing the most challenging part of having your own brand.
- Shana: I believe it's important to look at international fashion brands that have set the mark for other labels to position themselves. Marketing plays such an important role in how far you can get with a brand.

What advice would you offer a designer entering the fashion business?

- Jenny: Make sure you've got a good relationship with your bank manager! Start small. Employ the right staff, who are prepared to go the extra mile. Exceptional client service is essential. Make sure you have a serious passion for the business, and that you love what you're doing, because it's not easy. Make sure that your loved ones support your dreams.
- Leigh: The business of fashion is not just about creating pretty clothes - it's about making products that people want to buy, so that you can make a profit. Learn about the foundations of the fashion industry before you launch your own brand.
- Shana: Learn as much as you can before you go on your own. Do internships, understand the retail side, the business side, and what goes into making garments that consumers will want to buy.

Leigh Schubert, Stefania Morland and Habits will be showing their Spring/Summer collections at MBFWCT. The showcase takes to the runway this evening, till 1 August 2015 at the V&A Waterfront's Watershed and North Wharf. Ticket prices range from R100 to R250 depending on the show and can be purchased on [Webtickets](#).