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Fashion journalism and PR

By Carole Watson

Introduction

You won't survive for very long as a fashion journalist if you don't understand the importance of public relations (PR for short) to anyone working in the media.

There won't be a day that goes by when you aren't communicating with a PR by email, telephone, social media or, if you're lucky, over a glass of bubbly or a posh breakfast.

Fashion journalists need to communicate with PRs for a whole host of reasons: to provide them with sample clothes and accessories to shoot or review, for images and prices to use on product pages, for information for news stories and trends, to request interviews with designers or celebrities involved in high street collaborations, and of course for invitations to press events and fashion shows.

But what is public relations, what do PRs do, and how can you make excellent contacts who will give you exclusive stories? And what about the much-discussed argument that fashion journalists are merely PR poodles who mindlessly write what they're told to write, namely gushing positive editorial, in exchange for expensive designer freebies and long lunches?

This chapter will give you an overview of the fashion PR industry so you can gain an understanding of all these issues, with useful hints and advice from both PR practitioners and fashion journalists.

What is PR?

The word PR is thrown about a lot but you really need to have a keen insight into what it means and what public relations executives and press officers do if you are to succeed as a fashion journalist.

Perhaps you think all fashion PRs are like *Absolutely Fabulous'* Edina Monsoon (played by Jennifer Saunders) who swans around shopping in Harvey Nichols all day, or glugging champagne and schmoozing with celebrities and important glossy magazine editors.

Well, we're not saying that never happens but there is much more to it than that.

In a nutshell, fashion PR is a actually huge powerful industry with its professionals playing the middle man (or woman) between brands and their customers via various different types of media. Whether it's a huge designer name like Chanel, a high street chain like Topshop, a make-up range or a small online jewellery retailer, most companies employ someone, or a whole team of people, to act as their representatives in dealings with the press. That could mean anyone from the editor of Vogue to a fashion intern on a newspaper style supplement or a high-profile blogger.

There is a lot of debate, in academic and professional circles, as to what public relations exactly is. One useful definition from the Chartered Institute of Public Relations (CIPR) website states: "Public relations is about reputation - the result of what you do, what you say and what others say about you. Public relations is the discipline which looks after

reputation, with the aim of earning understanding and influencing opinion and behaviour. It is the planned and sustained effort to establish and maintain goodwill and mutual understanding between an organisation and its publics."

So this means that PR executives in the fashion business are employed to positively promote their brand and its products and services to their customers, and potential new customers, using the right target media. The dream result, of course, is to sell more clothes, handbags, perfume, whatever.

As Arieta Mujay, UK PR manager for River Island, defines it: "The main part of a PR's job is to generate noise around the brand which would translate into sales."

If you think about it, what is the point of, say, Mulberry bringing out a fabulous new tote or Zara some seriously-gorgeous heels if the very people who might want to buy them don't even know they exist? So PRs need to identify which particular magazine or blog or style supplement is either going to reach the largest number of potential customers, or the ones with enough disposable income to afford their wares.

Equally, you as a fashion journalist can't tell your readers about the hottest new flats or best skinny jeans on the rails if you don't have access to that information. Sadly, you can't just meander round the shops all day aimlessly hunting for the perfect products or trends to write about - you want to be ahead of the curve and find the next big thing. And it is your job to know your reader - what he or she can afford, desires and needs in their wardrobe. This will help you identify which brands you should be featuring and which PRs you should therefore be contacting.

To complicate things further, the people you will need to speak to are not always called PRs. Sometimes you are called press officers or publicists who work in press offices, or media relations, press relations, or corporate communication. But they all more or less mean the same thing and fulfil the same role.

So how does it work? Global fashion labels such as Dior and Prada usually have their own in-house press offices in key cities around the world with full-time staff employed to do their PR. So too do bigger high street names such as Marks and Spencer, Selfridges or New Look whose press offices are usually based in London with a team of press officers assigned to dealing with the media.

As River Island's Arieta says: "As an in-house PR, you only have to push the core values of this one particular brand and ensure that brand is part of every fashion conversation there is going. So, in terms of a high street brand like ours which is a lifestyle brand, we need to appeal to all sorts of customers: the aspirational costumer and then your everyday customer who doesn't follow trends so much. We have a body of research so we know exactly who our customers are."

Smaller brands and fashion labels, however, usually do not have the budget to employ their own permanent staff PR teams. So they will choose to hire the services of a freelance consultant or an external public relations agency, which is an independent PR company with a portfolio of different clients whose interests they represent in dealings with the media.

There are thousands of PR agencies around the world, specialising in everything from showbusiness to cars or charities, and of course fashion, lifestyle and beauty brands. So

you may find that any given fashion PR agency simultaneously acts on behalf of a variety of different fashion-related clients, such as an upcoming swimwear designer, a handbag designer, a watchmaker and a firm specialising in yoga outfits.

Whether they work in-house for a fashion chain or for an external agency, PRs, are just as keen to foster good relationships with the right fashion journalists as you are with them. It is their job to get what is basically free editorial in the right targeted media for their clients (and ultimately reach out to potential customers) whether that is a six-page fashion shoot featuring their products in Company magazine or a small mention on Grazia's 10 hot pages.

Of course, a lot of fashion labels and stores buy advertising space in appropriate media platforms too. But this can cost thousands of pound per page in a glossy monthly, so it makes sense, particularly in a tough economic climate, to also ensure you receive as much free positive publicity too.

But, as any reader of glossy magazines knows, readers often flick past those endless pages of adverts without thinking or stopping to look at them, whereas they might take more notice of a respected fashion journalist's advice on what to buy in an editorial fashion story such as "the 10 best strappy sandals this summer."

According to the website Introduction to Public Relations (www.ipr.org.uk): "The public reacts very differently to an ad than to a newspaper's article or a TV report. They know very well when they are reading/looking at an ad and the information they are communicated is perceived with a certain degree of skepticism. They know that the ad wants to persuade them to buy a particular product or service and will either believe or disbelieve the information they are communicated. But when they are communicated news about a new product or service through a third party, for example a newspaper or online article, they perceive it as informative and worthy of their attention."

It is estimated that "the value of editorial is four times that of advertising in terms of its effect and influence." (Haid, Jackson & Shaw, 2006, p173)

So you can see why all PRs, whether from Prada or Primark, are eager to get their positive PR message out via fashion journalists rather than just through buying pages of advertising. Although, of course, unlike adverts, PRs cannot usually control exactly how much space they will be given, or what the journalist is going to write.

What do PRs do? And why do they matter to fashion journalists?

The actual role of a PR varies a lot depending on the company they work for, and their seniority.

But overall, they are tasked with making sure the right journalists receive the right information about their right products, launches, collections and events. A lot of journalists complain they are bombarded with thousands of irrelevant badly-written emails every day from PRs who obviously do not understand who their readers are, or what their job is. Or that they receive emails with such massive image files that they crash their computers. Not surprisingly, they are usually deleted unread or unopened. Or they receive a phone call from a PR who seems bored, reading from a script and talking about something which

would never make the pages of that journalist's particular publication as it isn't suitable for their readers.

Good PRs, however, are highly clued-up about the circulation, demographic and editorial requirements of all sorts of different magazines, style supplements, websites and blogs so they can contact the right journalist with useful information.

Harriet Walker, fashion news editor at neverunderdressed.com and the ex-style editor of the Independent, says: "A good PR would know the publication really well, so they wouldn't be suggesting, if you work at a luxury publication, this thing at Dorothy Perkins. It's a big ask, but they should know the tastes and interests of the big editors or it's a waste of that editor's or PR's time to go in with things that are never going to fly. And they need to be aware of the climate in which you're launching your product – when things are difficult, it's not necessarily the right time to be going to somewhere with a general news base like a newspaper with a £3,000 handbag. Conversely, something as simple as 'the sun is out, this is the time to get people to feature your sarong', that stuff works, that stuff is useful – reactive, themed things that go along with the weather, a TV thing, what's happening in Parliament even, as long as it's tailored to the right publication.

"You get those blanket emails, which are "Dear insert-name-here", and it's for a thermal vest, and you think 'really? why do you think I'm worth telling this to?'"

Emma Hart, the founder and managing director of leading London fashion PR agency Push PR, used to work as a fashion writer and columnist for the Evening Standard newspaper before moving into public relations, so she understands both sides of the business intimately.

She says: "When I was a journalist, I was dealing PRs constantly on the phone, day in, day out - this was before people used email so much and I was working on a daily newspaper with three editions. What I was finding was I would phone PRs to get the information I needed, but it was unbelievable how they didn't get back to me, when I was on deadline, either because they were out or not working on that particular account that day, and I was thinking 'I am about to give you a whole column!'"

"It was virtually impossible dealing with 90 per cent of PRs. Because I wasn't a name, they would think, well who are you?"

"It's so so important that fashion journalists and PRs communicate, it's the backbone of the industry. The journalist needs to trust the PR, because they are so busy and bombarded with emails. If you know someone and trust them, it cuts through the noise.

"It's a PR's job to know who the target reader is of each magazine and newspaper. Why would you bother contacting a teen mag with a £1,500 necklace, for instance? On what planet will a 14 year old have the money to buy it, unless it's Teen Vogue?"

As Emma has explained, good PRs will be contacting you because they think the information they have is relevant and interesting for your readers. She is also a firm believer in face-to-face contact and her staff are instructed to build strong relations with the right journalists over a coffee or breakfast so they can regularly discuss how they can help each other out.

But, equally, it is your job as a creative journalist brimming with ideas to track down the right PRs to help those ideas come to fruition.

Take Grazia fashion writer Hannah Almassi, who uses her bank of PR contacts when compiling trend and shopping pieces.

Hannah explains: "It's a matter of timing - when I first started I'd be quite ahead in thinking of trends, but I began to learn that sometimes it's too soon, because you don't have the right imagery or the right products to back it up.

"But it does have to feel fresh and like we haven't already covered it, and someone else hasn't covered it in the same way. You look online, look through lookbooks, contact PRs ... it's a process of elimination, really, speaking to as many people as you can. PRs now know how much of a deadline I'm on for my news stories, so the good ones do get back to me quickly if they can.

"I do have quite a lot of freedom with products, I try to contact as many people as possible and I do use new brands and smaller designers if I can. Because my stories are always really specific it can be quite difficult - a lot of PRs will phone up and say 'What are you working on?' and the other week I started doing a thing on single earrings, which is something we've noticed a lot of girls doing, and it's such a specific thing that there are barely any PRs who are going to go 'Oh yeah, I've got that.' So it does take quite a bit of research to do some of those stories and I don't have a lot of time, so you start to get to know who's going to have the right thing, which websites are the best to check out.

"I don't think I've ever had something where a PR has said 'Oh you should do a story on this trend' because we're always ahead of that."

But she warns she has also experienced the downside of trusting some PRs with her exclusive ideas, explaining: "Often I'll speak to a PR and say 'We're doing a story on, say, a certain type of dress,' and then a day later I'll suddenly have a press release saying 'Oh you should try this trend, this dress' that's gone out to everybody. I'm like 'That's our story'. That happens A LOT. It is flattering but it can be a bit annoying."

And she is not alone in thinking that relying on spoon-fed press releases is just lazy, uncreative journalism without the effort of thinking of any fresh or creative ideas for your Editor.

Hannah adds: "I think there probably is an opportunity for people to sit back and just go for press releases, but not at Grazia where things move too fast. The instances where we do get stories from PRs tend to be them contacting us saying 'we've got this new brand, you may not realise but this person and this person and this person's been out wearing it. We've got these pictures, it's really great, it's selling out on Net-a-Porter'. That's how you may get a story from a PR. We love to see the kind of girls in the media whose style we like - it's really great to see them all wearing a certain thing, because then that is a story for us, it's interesting why they're all wearing it, why is it so cool, where can we get it from."

Lucy Wood, fashion news editor at Look magazine, explains how she monitors press releases and may use them to help her identify hot trends "almost like you put things together like a jigsaw."

She adds: "PRs are useful but they don't spoonfed me. Nine times out of 10, they come up with an idea you've already thought or and dismissed. What you do find is one person will

send an email about something and it plants a seed, then a couple of weeks later, you get another email about it, and you think 'maybe there's a trend here.'

"I hadn't ever had a release hit my inbox that I've just turned into a page, that's pretty lazy. But PRs are integral in keeping us up to speed with facts and figures, they let us know about styles that are going into stores before everyone else, it's how we keep ahead of the curve.

"And we have a call-in list of all our PR contacts, so we can send them all an email saying what we're working on, and to ask if they have anything that might fit the category, so we can have a look at it and consider using it on our pages."

As we have seen, having excellent contacts with the right PRs is the lifeblood of first-class fashion journalism.

Whether you are a recently-graduated intern needing to call in or return samples to fashion labels or a senior Fashion Director requested a coveted front row seat at Dior for their autumn/winter show, you will need to liaise with a PR in some shape or form.

Madeleine Bowden, a freelance stylist who works as an assistant to X Factor stylist Laury Smith, says: "I talk to PRs more than I talk to my boyfriend! I'm on the phone talking to them and emailing them all day every day.

"It's a give-give – they want their products in your magazine or on your client, and you want their product. I think it's the most important relationship you'll ever make in fashion. A lot of their job is to schmooze and take people out to dinner, and I think the more chatty you are, and the more personable you are – still professional but approachable – the better they will relate to you. Lots of drinks, boozy lunches – I've just been to a few press days and it's champagne all the time. You look at the collection then you spend 20 minutes shooting the breeze with the PR. If there's one sample and there's 50 people gunning for it, if you're mates with the PR and you say 'Can I just borrow this for three hours for a shoot?' the PR will always slide it over to you first rather than to someone who's a little bit cold in an email or they have a fraught relationship with."

Of course, you might be contacting a PR for all sorts of reasons - to call in dresses, shoes and accessories like Madeleine, to ask if they have any appropriate products for a trend story you're researching, or to ask for an exclusive interview with the latest celebrity who's done a high street collaboration.

How to build the right contacts in PR

But how do you initially build good contacts within the PR world in the first place when you are new to the job and it seems every other established fashion journalist has already built strong relationships?

Emma Hart, founder and managing director of leading London fashion PR agency Push PR, has some excellent tips for both fashion journalism students going for job interviews or work placements.

She advises: "Social media is so important. You should research and follow the people you're interested in, do your research via social media platforms, and look at their clients.

It's amazing how many people we interview and ask which of our clients they like, and they are not sure who they are really. If you don't know that, you haven't done your research.

"Also engage and interact, send a message explaining you are a student, ask if you can pop along for 20 minutes to have a look at their samples and take a few pictures. If you have a blog, see which clients they have and offer to do a blog post on that client. Or ask to do a guest blog post on their blog and write about the brands. It's all about going that extra mile and talking about how you can engage with the brands and the agencies so it's a win-win situation.

"If a PR company doesn't have a blog or twitter account, tell them you've noticed that and would they consider it, because you could come in and help set it up for them, especially for really smaller brands which can't find a social media intern anywhere. It's about finding opportunities and being proactive in suggesting a solution.

"Social media is an incredible information tool and if you aren't into that, we wouldn't really consider you. We've had people saying 'I don't like Twitter' but it's not about whether you like it or not, it is vitally important to the industry and to everything we do.

"When you are a student you are looking for every single avenue of information. So I recommend going to Fashion Weeks, and events, even just hanging out, taking pictures, using the same hashtag other people are using to get yourself on the same news feed as them."

And there is nothing like good old-fashioned research to track down the sort of people you should be introducing yourself to. Any good journalist knows exactly who their reader is, perhaps by their age, their income, or where they live. Thousands of pounds is spent researching this and you can always ask to see that research and look at your employer's media packs online which also provide this information for potential advertisers.

And once you know your reader, you will know what sort of stores, brands and websites they may use to update their wardrobes. Then it is a matter of researching who is responsible for the PR for those stores, brands and websites. This is often supplied under the "Contact us" or "Press" sections of their websites with a list of the PR team's names, email addresses and phone numbers. In the case of Vogue, for example, try looking up Chanel's press office. Or for Woman's Own, perhaps Monsoon's.

There is then no harm sending a press officer or PR manager a polite and friendly email introducing yourself, explaining where you work and asking to be added to their contact lists and if you can pop in sometime to say hello.

But be careful when doing this, especially if you are an inexperienced intern trying to contact a very senior PR. Arieta, at River Island, explains: "It's very important to get fully involved in an internship and not the glitz and glamour side of things. A lot of people are too obsessed with the celebrity side of things. For example, I was getting a lot of emails from interns during our Rihanna collection. I think they all thought Rihanna was going to be in the office with me while I was working! When they realised she wasn't going to be there, I was getting excuses as to why they couldn't come and see the collection.

"And don't send me emails saying 'hey lovely' with kisses and smiley faces when you don't know me and I'm UK PR manager of a high street brand. It's not professional - I wouldn't

email Anna Wintour or the CEO of a company saying 'hi lovely.' You need to approach people politely and professionally. My other major bug bear is text slang in an email."

So ensure any messages you send, whether via Twitter or email, are correctly spelled, with good grammar and, above all, courteous. The same ethos applies to phone conversations. You may be asked on a work placement, for instance, to call in sample products from a PR to use in a fashion shoot, or to check prices of items being featured in the magazine.

You must always be polite, introduce yourself and take a good note of the information to ensure accuracy, which is, of course, the cornerstone of good journalism.

Both Emma Hart, of Push PR, and Arieta Mujay at River Island complain that there is a growing tendency for inaccuracies, whether wrong prices, wrong websites or missing credits, in fashion journalism which they blame on a lack of checking on the part of journalists.

Emma says: "It is really frustrating because you've put a lot of work into it. In the past, you could ask for a correction in print but that never happens now. The quality control of credits and information has really gone downhill. We recently had some amazing coverage in a big name Sunday supplement but they didn't put a credit on the product at all so you're thinking how is the reader going to find out how to buy it?"

"It makes your heart sink when they misspell a brand or they put a wrong phone number in. It's just sloppiness when you have given them the right information. Accuracy is everything."

When a PR is unhappy

It's not just sloppiness over prices and missing credits which might upset PRs. Fashion journalists are often accused of only writing positive fluffy copy, but more of that later. However, there may be times you are required to write something negative or critical about a brand or a collection.

You will see in Chapter xx (pxxx) that journalists are perfectly entitled to be critical (and even bitchy) about any item of fashion, or a designer's latest range without fear of legal consequences, thanks to the honest comment defence to libel and as long as it is your honestly-held opinion.

But what is more likely to be a problem is that you have upset a good contact which may have repercussions for your future relationship with them, or upset an advertiser who spends thousands of pounds with your employer.

Fashion journalists anecdotally complain that some PRs will phone up to shout at them over negative reviews or threaten to pull their advertising spend from their company. It is never acceptable to be screamed at, but as an inexperienced fashion journalist, the best course is to politely take a note of their concerns, their contact details and speak to a more experienced colleague for advice on how to deal with it.

Good PRs, however, know how to take the rough with the smooth. They understand that some journalism involves reviewing products and that they have to take any critical press on the chin.

Emma Hart recalls: "We had a recent situation where one of our clients was featured in a white T shirt review in Good Housekeeping and they only got two out of 10. We spoke to the client beforehand and they wanted to do it, so we had to say to them when it goes out, it goes into their hands, there are no favours going on. It was a product review and that's how it should be. It was tough for the client because it wasn't an amazing review. But we had to tell them we can brand-manage you to a certain extent but if you are going to put yourself up for a review, you have to embrace editorial independence.

"I've had PRs screaming down the phone at me when, say, I was doing three of the best mascaras when I was working at the Standard. But they had put it forward as a tried and tested, and maybe they didn't get as glowing a report as the one next to it. All you can do is fully respect the opinion of the person doing that review. It is important to manage your client's expectations, which sometimes isn't done that well in PR. Sometimes you have to say yes, your product is good, but I can't guarantee I can get your product into Vogue or Grazia or whatever."

It is much more likely you may write something negative if you decide to work on a newspaper than a traditional fashion magazine, as papers do not rely so heavily on advertising revenue from the fashion world and can therefore be much more independent when it comes to their journalism.

What is much more common, for magazine journalists, is simply not to feature a product or collection they dislike rather than write negatively about it - basically criticism by omission.

Victoria White, Editor of Company magazine, says: "No magazine could survive without a strong sense of identity and ethics – we would never feature something if it wasn't fabulous. At the same time, we wouldn't slag it off. Why would you give up a page to do that, when you could highlight a great product? You have to have an environment that's right for the brand – they go hand in hand. We don't critique – we highlight and showcase. There's so much fashion – why waste space on it if it's rubbish? Or saying this one's collection wasn't good, because the next one might be great?"

Are fashion journalists and fashion PRs too cosy?

Fairly or unfairly, the biggest criticism aimed at fashion journalists is that they are no more than the unquestioning mouthpiece of fashion PRs who tightly control what journalists feature and write.

This accusation has many reasons behind it - lazy journalism with practitioners simply being spoonfed press releases, the pressure to keep advertisers happy in an ever-more difficult financial climate and amid falling magazine and newspaper circulations, or the thorny issue of an industry built around gifting writers with thousands of pounds worth of freebies in the hope of winning positive editorial coverage.

Fashion journalism and academic Brenda Polan suggests: "In the often too-cosy relationship between media and advertisers, the latter long ago usurped the upper hand. PR executives, initially a conduit for information and access, have become the enforcers of the industry, doling out threats along with the champagne breakfasts." (2006, p155)

She claims that has led fashion journalists to be merely "uncritical chroniclers of brands and labels, the corrupted or intimidated mouthpieces of a mighty PR machine that exists to part the punter from her money." (2006, p157)

It is a damning indictment of fashion journalism, which is fiercely denied by many writers who say their day to day interactions with PRs are more subtle and do involve journalistic skills such as editing out press release material not suitable for their readers.

Of claims that writers are simply spoonfed by PRs, Harriet Walker says: "Who isn't? At a newspaper, you see how much of the news cycle is PR driven .. and it's, what, 70%? Very few publications are big enough to have roving reporters out all day looking for stories, that's just not how it works any more. No-one can afford to do long-term investigative programmes very often – the Telegraph did MPs' expenses and that was the most expensive thing every, and that's just not feasible, and you do rely on people sending stuff in.

"But obviously there's a taste level – you use your judgment. If someone sends you a thing that says 'we've taken a survey, apparently 32% of women have one foot bigger than the other,' well, that's really boring, and it's obviously been done for a horrible corporate reason. You just have to filter it. But if there are any ivory tower academics out there thinking 'I don't want to read anything generated by PR', then stop reading everything."

But, certainly, when a magazine's profits rely on the millions of pounds spent by advertisers, one cannot deny that they have some influence over what brands Editors feature within their supposedly-impartial fashion pages. You only need to watch The September Issue, a documentary about the workings of American Vogue, to see Editor Anna Wintour scanning page proofs of a multi-page fashion shoot to ensure certain designers' outfits were included.

Fashion journalist Caryn Franklin explains: "Fashion is an industry that has very cleverly created its own media to support it. If magazines were upfront about it, maybe their readers wouldn't feel that they were buying into some sort of magic. It didn't used to be like this, but a magazine has to observe an agreed code with each of its advertisers, and advertisers are very powerful because they are the ones that fund the cost of the print and paper run. The cover price is neither here nor there these days, with many magazines heavily discounted to keep up their readership because they have huge competition online.

"So is a journalist really free to make choices about what they will feature, and what they say about the products they feature? I certainly question that because of the pressure they are under to retain advertisers."

Emma Hart, at Push PR, says this once-unspoken pressure from advertisers is less subtle post-recession, but conversely she sees no problem with positive uncritical editorial coverage of brands and labels who advertise their wares just a few pages away from that article.

She says: "I think the industry has changed beyond recognition since I started, no one knew how good they had it. It's much tougher now we've been through two industry recessions. We used to have massive budgets where you could spend ridiculous amounts, now it's much tougher and more carefully-considered.

"The words cosy and gushing? Yes, there are close relationships. But teams are limited now, you need those close relationships. Where there used to be four fashion assistants, there's now one. So to the outside world, who really is being targeted is the reader. If they are not finding it offensive, I don't really see much harm in it. There is so much negativity in the media about economy and banks, but isn't fashion and beauty and picking up your favourite glossy about escapism and positivity?"

"Everyone reads things with a pinch of salt. Just because someone writes you should buy this Dolce et Gabbana outfit they are wearing doesn't mean they will do that, consumers make their own choice. What they are looking for is a bit of inspiration and information."

"At the end of the day, fashion is a serious business and you need to support your advertisers which is done much more blatantly now. We want print magazines and you have to play the game. Once upon a time you couldn't have a conversation with a Fashion Director about this as blatantly as you can now. We've had to adapt to an industry that is very very stretched."

Equally, Emma says the culture of gifting free clothes, handbags, jewellery and beauty items to journalists is a lot more considered and targeted in the light of financial constraints, although she accepts that senior influential fashion journalists are still the happy recipients of goodies that a fashion journalism student can only dream about.

Perhaps this is a shift away from the notorious free-for-all culture described by journalist Liz Jones, of her days as editor of Marie Claire in the late 1990s.

In her 2013 memoirs, *Girl Least Likely To*, Liz recounts the bounty of freebies she received in one Milan Fashion Week alone: "A Prada bowling bag, a Tod's evening bag...in all, I counted 15 bags, all bigger than the bags received by the more junior members of the team. I received a Louis Vuitton traveller worth £1,700 with LJ on the handle, embossed in gold. I must have arrived, surely?"

"The gifts make you feel all warm and fuzzy inside when you come to write your catwalk show review."

"Ever wondered why all the glossy editors applauded when animal-rights protesters were dragged by their hair from the Burberry catwalk by bouncers? They each had shiny Burberry totes at their toes, delivered to their hotels that morning."

It is easy to see why junior fashion journalists, often on low wages trying to survive in expensive cities with huge rent bills, could be easily influenced by receiving a lovely gift. Anecdotally, the most hard-up journalists are rumoured to have sold many freebies on eBay. Others become so used to all the gifts that they simply gave them away to friends and family.

Liz Walker, former executive fashion and beauty director at Marie Claire, recalls: "We used to get really nice Christmas presents, and we certainly got a lot of handbags. People like Tod's who in the beginning had no advertising money would give out handbags to personalities so they'd be seen around with them – I used to be given an outfit by Alberta Ferreti every season. You were invited to choose and you never quite knew if you were paying or ordering wholesale and you had to bear that in mind."

"They stopped giving to one of our fashion directors – they're very savvy if you never wear it and put it on eBay, you're off the list next season. Because everyone's a bit broker these

days, handbags still get given to the more senior people, but you mostly dress because you get quite good discounts, so most savvy editors would wear a mixture of a key blazer by someone or other mixed with Zara."

As you may expect, glossy magazines with targeted readers interested in trends and fashion are more likely to receive a fabulous gift-wrapped present than a newspaper fashion writer.

The Guardian's Jess Cartner-Morley says: "Freebie? I wish. It's a common misconception that I get to keep the clothes I wear in the "how to wear" section, sadly it's not the case. Of course you get lots of dinners and more champagne than you can drink, and I'm not complaining.

"Are we too close to PR in fashion journalism? Some are, as in all fields of journalism. PR contacts are essential - they are invaluable colleagues. If you let yourself get turned into a mouthpiece for them, though, that's sheer laziness."

Many publishers today have ethical codes regarding receiving gifts and this is something you must check wherever you begin working, whether as an unpaid intern or salaried member of staff. In practice, many magazines simply keep all these freebies in a storeroom until they have a charity sale, selling them to staff for a much-lower price then giving the money to a good cause.

Another reason, alongside the constraints of a recession-hit fashion industry, why this freebie culture may well be changing is the recent introduction of the Bribery Act (see law chapter, pxx) which could potentially see journalists jailed if they accept money or gifts in exchange for positive stories. It is important not to get so starry-eyed at the prospect of a £1,500 "It bag" that you compromise your position as an independent impartial journalist. Always stop and think: Would I be writing this article about this product or label in the same (positive) light if the PR hadn't sent me a nice present?

Conclusion

This chapter has discussed the pivotal role which public relations plays in helping fashion journalists access information, images and invites to media events, launches and catwalk shows.

Both journalists and PR practitioners agree it is an essential relationship which, if handled professionally, can yield the right results for both sides, namely free publicity for brands and labels, and engaging exclusive editorial copy for journalists and their readers.

It has also revealed how to ensure you build the right PR contacts for your reader, as well as the difficult ethical issues and financial constraints caused by those relationships in terms of pressure from advertisers, PR control over the industry, and the somewhat declining culture of freebies.

Jessica Bumps, fashion features editor of vogue.co.uk, says: "I remember at university, a tutor saying to us 'look around the room, these people will be your contacts in future.' We laughed but actually a handful are, because they became PRs and I know them.

"It's a two-way relationship, a 'you scratch my back, I scratch yours' thing. After all, if you want to break the news, it's them that have it. They're also the guardians of the designers you want to interview. It's such a key relationship."

It is never too early, as a fashion journalism student, to start building those contacts. Start following in-house press officers and PR agencies on Twitter today, begin a contacts list of which PRs looks after which stores and labels, and you will start learning how to keep abreast of the work they do and its importance to your future career.

Ends

Breakout box if required

The three most important skills in a fashion journalist, from Push PR boss Emma Hart

1. An eye for something different. Anyone can churn out content but someone who has an instinct for an interesting story, not obvious.
2. An individual voice, especially with the rise of the columnist. You like their tone and what they're writing about because you'd quite like to have a drink with them.
3. A hunger for information. There's nothing worse than talking to someone who sounds like they're not interested and can't be bothered. If you are genuinely phoning someone with something you think will be great for their page, at least hear them out, have that interest and step outside the normal routine of their contacts. It frustrates me when you see a product page with five pieces from netaporter, it's just lazy rather than hunting around for the right brands for the readers.

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