



**MICHAEL BASTIAN '87**

FOUNDER OF MICHAEL BASTIAN



# They Got the *Look*


Alumni talk of  
high heels, celebrities,  
and the business  
of fashion.

BY *John Crawford*

PHOTOGRAPHY BY  
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*M*ichael Bastian '87 remembers the first time it happened. He was in Manhattan.

Sitting in a taxi at a red light, he glimpsed something familiar among the hustle and bustle on Sixth Avenue. Crossing the street, a man wore a peacoat that Bastian had designed. Never before had he spotted a stranger wearing his clothes. "That was the best," says Bastian, the owner and designer behind Michael Bastian, a New York City-based clothing line. "I was so proud."





any more strangers now wear Bastian's clothes since that indelible day. His line, launched in 2006, is available in about 50 stores worldwide, including Neiman Marcus and Saks Fifth Avenue. He has found fortune in an industry that can be harsh and competitive. "It's hard for a lot of designers to get up and running," he says. "It's a super complicated industry."

How complicated? To reach that person in the hustle and bustle, that stranger crossing the street, fashionistas must raise money for inventory, find factories for manufacturing, navigate changing tastes, sweat the critics, court retailers, and, ultimately, connect with consumers on a personal level. Clothes are part of a person's identity. "You're dealing with a person's idea of themselves," Bastian says.

Despite the challenges, the world of fashion holds an allure of glamour, fame, and, of course, money. Exactly how much money is out there for the taking depends on how the market is defined, which can be difficult. One person's idea of fashion may be just a tube sock or T-shirt, says Kenichi Matsuno, associate professor of marketing and holder of the President's Term Chair. However, if broadly defined as apparel for men, women, and children, the U.S. fashion market alone is valued at roughly \$350 billion.

A number of Babson alumni, striving for a piece of that pie, have tried their hand at fashion. Making it in the industry requires talent, hard work, and guts. A solid education doesn't hurt either. When Bastian launched his own line, he thought about the chance he was about to take, about the headaches and hurdles lying ahead. He went for it anyway. "It's a very Babson thing to do," he says.

### Starting Out

Gayatri Khanna '97 knows what it takes. As she prepared to graduate from Babson, she watched friends land high-paying jobs. She was holding out for a fashion position. "I was very focused," she says. "I left Babson

with no job." Eventually, she worked as a buyer for Saks Fifth Avenue, and then following an entrepreneurial hankering, started an embroidery business in 2000. "I borrowed a crazy amount of money from credit cards at 22 percent interest," Khanna says. To find customers, she prowled New York City's fashion houses collecting business cards and then cold-called her way through the stack, trying to ooze confidence and sound as if she were with a big company instead of just a one-person shop. "One customer became two, then three and four," she says.

Today, that business, Milaaya Embroideries, is based in Mumbai and works with some 150 fashion houses around the world. Milaaya means "to unite" in Hindi, and Khanna says that's the business's mission, to take Indian craftsmanship to the globe. Milaaya's embroideries adorn a host of apparel, including dresses, jackets, blouses, shoes, and pants.

Khanna also launched an eponymous brand in 2006 that offers Western-style attire. She describes her clothes as classic yet edgy. "I was missing the fashion of the Western world," says the Mumbai native, who has 190 employees working for her, with marketing offices in Paris, New York, and Milan. About 20 stores in India carry her brand, though selling Western-style clothes in such a tradition-minded country can be challenging.

Still, times are changing. *Vogue India* started three years ago, and few saris are seen anymore on the red carpet at movie premieres. Khanna remembers the first time she saw a Bollywood star wearing her clothes. "It was very exciting," she says. "I felt great."

### Reaching Customers

Getting the proverbial foot in the door of the fashion industry is only a first step. Other tests await. A big one is reaching customers. Standing in the way are critics, who can pan a new collection, and retail stores, which can choose not to carry it.

The Internet alters that dynamic, Bastian says. If a fashion house has a show, consumers can see the clothes immediately, despite what critics think. And online retailers have popped up offering clothes that traditional stores have passed on. "The Internet is a more direct path to your customer," Bastian says.

## Fashion Challenges

Work in fashion, and you'll confront numerous business challenges. Here are some that Babson alumni face.

### THE ENTREPRENEUR

ALISON BARNARD, MBA '04

owner of two Boston clothing boutiques, in-jean-ius and Twilight

### THE CHALLENGE

#### Finding time to expand.

"The foundation of in-jean-ius was the process for fitting jeans and the one-on-one relationship between the customer and me. I was the one who researched the brands, the fits, the styles. Customers became accustomed to my knowledge and presence. Unfortunately, running a business requires you to wear many hats. Acting as the store manager with very few employees limited my ability to engage in other important business matters, therefore prohibiting the business from going beyond a certain point. I had to develop a training process and manual and invest

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Check out Bastian's clothes, and you'll see that he's inspired by the "classic American style" of chino pants, oxford shirts, and V-neck sweaters, though he puts his own spin on this preppy look. Bastian likes to take perfectly designed items and make them a little ragged. "The beauty of American style is the ability to look like you didn't think about it too much," he says.

Bastian's first job was as an assistant buyer for Abraham & Straus, and after working for upscale brands such as Tiffany & Co., Polo Ralph Lauren, and Bergdorf Goodman, where he was men's fashion director, he launched his own line. At first, he seemed lucky, finding an Italian partner to handle some of the difficult aspects of starting out, such as finding fabrics and factories. Unfortunately, this arrangement meant the partner owned the license to produce and distribute Bastian's products. "I had no control over my pricing," Bastian says. With his clothes priced too high for many potential customers, he cut ties with the partner last year. "We hope to reduce our prices by 15 to

20 percent and make up any lost ground," he says. "We're taking a step back to take 10 steps forward."

One big step forward is the collections he started creating for Gant last year. The clothier reached out to Bastian to help rekindle its brand, which has fallen off the fashion radar in America. Bastian's Gant work will include a women's collection, a first for the designer, for this spring. "That's being in a whole different league," he says, for women are much more open than men to trying new looks.

## Point of Difference

Another challenge in fashion is the clutter of the marketplace. "Ideas are a dime of dozen," says Ruthie Davis, MBA '93, the owner and designer of her eponymous line of shoes and handbags, which are available in about 40 stores, including Neiman

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in hiring good salespeople to represent the in-jean-ius brand. This enabled me to open my second store, Twilight, and plan the expansion of the in-jean-ius brand."

### THE ENTREPRENEUR

PATRIZIA DAMIANI, MBA '09 owner and "chief shoe officer" of Fit in Clouds, which offers foldable, portable shoes that can be carried in a purse

### THE CHALLENGE

#### Spreading the word.

"Without a multimillion dollar advertising budget, we rely on word of mouth and PR. To make matters worse, a national brand with deep pockets and established distribution entered the market with a similar product at a lower price

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### GAYATRI KHANNA '97

FOUNDER OF MILAAYA EMBROIDERIES AND GAYATRI KHANNA HOUSE OF FASHION



**RUTHIE  
DAVIS,  
MBA '93**

**FOUNDER OF  
RUTHIE DAVIS**

takes inspiration from the sleekness of Apple products, as well as from James Bond movies. “My muse is a James Bond girl,” she says. “My shoes are for the girl on the go.” Her best-selling shoe sprouts tiny spikes. “It doubles as a weapon,” she quips.

Like anyone else in fashion, Davis faces challenges. There’s the competition her small office faces from bigger labels (“I’m competing with people who have hundreds of employees.”); the upfront capital needed every season to launch a collection (“It’s not cheap.”); and the harsh what-have-you-done-for-me-lately attitude of retailers (“You’re only as good as your last shoe.”). But Davis loves her work, the journey it takes her on every season, from sketching new shoes to overseeing their manufacturing in Italy. “For me, they are like my children,” she says. “Each has its own personality, its own identity.”

Before starting her New York City-based brand, Davis worked at Reebok, Tommy Hilfiger, and Ugg Australia, where under her initiatives as VP of marketing and design, a sheepskin boot predominately worn in California and known as a “surfer dude brand” became an international fashion trend. A major factor in that transformation was the critical exposure offered by celebrities, who started wearing the boots after Ugg gifted them pairs.

With firsthand knowledge of PR’s importance, Davis employs an agency to work with celebrities for her own brand. Many famous ladies, including Beyoncé and Lady Gaga, wear her shoes. “No one needs \$950 Ruthie Davis shoes,” she says. “They buy them because Beyoncé is amazing and that’s what she’s wearing.” Of course, celebrities must like the shoes to wear them. “There are large brands that gift

many pairs to celebrities, and they are never worn,” Davis says.

## An Established Brand

Russell McKinnon ’84, of sporting apparel company Stall & Dean, also understands the influence that celebrities can wield. One day, without warning, rapper 50 Cent strolled into Stall & Dean’s New Jersey office and asked for some jackets that had caught his eye. Soon, a number of other celebrities, including hip-hop royalty Jay-Z and Eminem, began sporting the company’s clothes. “Think about that,” says Stall & Dean’s president, CEO, and owner. “They can wear whatever they want, but they’re wearing my stuff.”

Marcus and Kitson Melrose, in some 20 countries. “Some designers have gorgeous shoes, but there’s no point of difference.”

That’s not a problem for Davis. Her shoes, to put it in a word, are bold. They’re full of bolts and buckles, studs and zippers. “I’m an athlete, but I’m also a girl who loves high fashion,” Davis says, so she transplants the “colors, energy, and youthfulness of a Nike” to a high-end shoe. She also

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To see a slideshow of the many fashions available from Babson alumni, go to [www.babson.edu/magazine](http://www.babson.edu/magazine).

Beginning as a clothing manufacturer in 1898, Stall & Dean has a long history that intertwines with legendary sports teams and players. It outfitted the original six NHL teams, for instance, and had endorsement deals with stars such as Ty Cobb and Babe Ruth. The company, headquartered in Westborough, Mass., stores some 50,000 pieces of memorabilia in a secure off-site location. "It's a whole history of sports," McKinnon says.

McKinnon bought the company in 1996, even though, unlike his fellow alumni Bastian, Khanna, and Davis, he had no fashion experience. He was a lumber salesman and real estate investor. "The move made no sense whatsoever," he admits. "I just go with my gut." He found himself with a company far removed from its glory years. Stall & Dean once had 150 employees, but by the mid-1990s, it was down to 35. "It wasn't flourishing," he says.

Trying times followed. McKinnon closed the company's unviable factory. He sunk money into marketing but soon was running out of funds. Later, he brought on a president with fashion expertise and ended up wrestling with him for control of the business. McKinnon eventually fired him.

Another threat came from the large sports apparel companies. Through the 1970s, 1980s, and

1990s, those companies eroded the sports uniform sales that Stall & Dean had at the professional and college levels. By last decade, the large companies moved into the high-school uniform market, thus eating more into Stall & Dean's business. "They flushed all the little guys away," McKinnon says.

Despite the setbacks, Stall & Dean still had life. With its long history, it owns the licenses to many old team uniforms, so the business repositioned itself. With the help of its celebrity boosters, it carved out a place in the throw-back market. It sells jackets and hats of Negro League baseball teams and Ivy League colleges, among others. In the past 10 years, the company did about \$150 million in retail.

Staying relevant after 110-plus years selling apparel is no easy task. Competition is fierce. Tastes are fickle. For those in fashion, just making it from season to season requires mettle. "The formula changes every day," Khanna says. Regardless, the fashion world remains enticing. Designers create beauty, after all, and their work is an intimate part of people's lives. Think of the stranger on Sixth Avenue wearing Bastian's peacoat. "When I see guys wearing something of mine on the street," Bastian says, "that's the reward."

**RUSSELL MCKINNON '84**  
OWNER OF STALL & DEAN



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point. We had to work even harder to differentiate ourselves. We leveraged group buying sites to reach a large audience. We improved our packaging, focused on customer satisfaction, and used PR to get visibility in fashion media. We geared ourselves to say, we are not selling foldable shoes, we are selling a fashionable alternative to heels. Big difference."

**THE ENTREPRENEUR**  
KERI BARRETT '07  
co-owner of First Date, a clothing boutique in Andover, Mass.

**THE CHALLENGE**

**Choosing the right inventory.**

"Buying for your customer is truly an art. You must buy what your client base desires and, at the same time, you need to evaluate a product's fit, uniqueness, quality, value, price point, and delivery timing. This all has to be done within your set budget. It's easy to buy beautiful clothes that sell at a high price point but finding items that have a nice fit and a unique style at a lower price point is a constant challenge. We laugh when customers or friends say that it must be fun to go to trade shows and buy clothes for upcoming seasons when, actually, it can be overwhelming and exhausting."

**THE ENTREPRENEUR**  
CANDICE CABE, MBA '10  
owner of Day 2 Night, which offers high heel shoes with heels of variable heights

**THE CHALLENGE**

**Dealing with different cultures.**

"We work with manufacturers in China, which can be difficult for several reasons. One factor is the obvious language barrier. I asked some of my fellow Babson classmates to help me in translating and communicating with factory representatives. Another factor that's challenging is the culture differences. Americans tend to stick to their due dates more often than not. The Chinese folks that I've dealt with will tell you they can get something to you in 10 days, but it can take weeks and even months before they deliver. I've adjusted by demanding products be sent to me much earlier than I need them."