

How to turn a passion for

The Norwich Fashion Week Designers Show saw many Norfolk makers showcase their bespoke collections on the catwalk, many with the aim to get snapped up by a retailer or gain commissions. So what does it take to make it in the retail industry? **EMMA HARROWING** talks to Steve Balmer-Walters head of retail and e-commerce at Norwich City Football Club, the sponsors of the show.

One of the aims of Norwich Fashion Week is to provide a platform for up and coming fashion designers in a bid to get them noticed by retailers and fashion lovers alike. In the five years that the week for fashion and style has been running, success stories range from King's Lynn headwear designer Mystic Magic Mask being commissioned to design pieces for an episode of the BBC's *Strictly Come Dancing* and Norwich milliner Betsy Hatter gaining commissions from as far afield as America, to Madara Rozensteina, fashion student at the Norwich University of the Arts, being shortlisted for this year's Golden Shears Award, known as the Oscars of the tailoring world, as the most promising student tailor in the UK. This year the standard of work by up and coming designers was higher than ever. From quirky coloured wire dresses from Jo Randall to Emily King's tailored culottes, delicately hand printed maxi dresses and pig skin clutch bags,

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Norfolk designers proved that they have what it takes to design for a commercial environment - which is important, says head of retail and e-commerce at Norwich City Football Club, Steve Balmer-Walters: “Retail has always been and will continue to be a very unpredictable environment. However, at the moment we are seeing generally that price is still a very key factor and quality brands are really leading the way. Customers are far more aware of what they want and they continue to mix and match price driven products with high-end quality to complete their outfit.”

Norwich City Football Club sponsored The Designers Show at Norwich Fashion Week this year to help and support up and coming designers longing to get their products into stores.



■ Steve Balmer-Walters, head of retail and e-commerce at Norwich City FC.
Picture: ANTONY KELLY

“I think it is really important that Norwich City FC support the city where and whenever possible and offer our support in terms of experience and knowledge,” says Steve. “On this occasion it is the up and coming local Norwich fashion designers at the start of their journey.

“I am personally always interested in finding that new item that makes you feel so special and makes the hours of looking online and in-store worth it. All those products start as an idea, then with someone's dedication and creativity it becomes a product that you can buy.”

With 28 years experience in the retail industry, Steve's passion for

supporting up and coming designers by offering advice and opportunity is timely, especially as consumers are increasingly interested in buying homegrown fashion. As part of Norwich Fashion Week, Steve has set up a competition with Norwich City Football Club to give aspiring designers the chance to design their own NCFC t-shirt and to have their design taken through to production and then sold in the Canaries Official shops.

“My advice for aspiring fashion designers is to always think about the end user when designing and making, without losing any individuality or your original idea, as you always want more than one person to buy your products in the end,” says Steve. “Always think about the market selling price of your products as this will impact on what fabrics or raw materials you will use.

“This is one of the reasons why we have launched this competition. It gives a designer the chance to get their design on a t-shirt that will be sold through our shops.

“I want Canaries Official to lead



the way within the football industry by giving customers fashionable clothing, accessories and gifts that wouldn't feel out of place on the high street. I want to continue adding good quality products that are current and competitively priced. I am also working very hard on improving the customers' shopping experience both online and in-stores.”

Steve has already brought in new collections that work towards making the shops more than just a

football fans domain. The clothing collection Inspired by Laura Ruddy, wife of Norwich and England goalkeeper John Ruddy, in particular has proved popular.

“I have added new categories to the product mix such including lifestyle leisure and accessories. I have created essential ranges of products that supporters can buy for everyday use. The biggest shift with products in general has been improving the quality and usability thinking about the supporters' end

Television highlights

Catch up with highlights of Norwich Fashion Week on two special programmes from Mustard TV. The first runs on Monday, March 23 (8pm), with part two at the same time on Wednesday March 25.