

IMRAN AMED

## FASHION 2.0

IMRAN AMED AND THE BUSINESS OF SOCIAL MEDIA

STORY: *Craig David Long*  
 PHOTOGRAPHY: *Evaan Kheraj*  
 STYLING: *Luisa Rino*

IN HIS 1960 BOOK *Crowds and Power*, Bulgarian intellectual Elias Canetti describes the attributes of a crowd: they seek density; they love to grow; within themselves, they uphold equality; but ultimately, they need direction. When all of these elements are at play, crowds can become powerful entities with the capability to influence minds, overthrow governments and altogether shape society and culture. But often the process of getting there is as confused as it is chaotic.

People are coming together in ways we have never seen before, seldom manifesting in any physical form, and it is not only shaping the way we do business, but the way we live and understand our lives. At boardroom tables behind closed doors, it brings the same two hushed words to everyone's lips: social media. The question is, what can we do to create influence online? What can we do to give direction?

Imran Amed is a Calgarian-cum-Londoner whose ideas on the subject matter, among many other accomplishments, have earned him an induction into *British GQ's* recent ranking of the 100 most powerful men in the U.K. Earlier this year, he was invited by Alexandra Suhner Isenberg of the sharp-tongued Vancouver fashion blog *Searching for Style* to give a presentation on the subject of "The Business of Fashion and the Digital Revolution". Arriving in town a few days early, Amed agrees to give me a bit of time to pick his brain on the topic prior to the event. We meet at a Commercial Drive café, where Apple-toting technophiles congregate to plug in and tune out. Though the crowd of introverts may appear asocial, it's safe to assume that the majority of their MacBooks are sending zeros and ones to some other vast and virtual network of peers. He and I, however, have opted to have our interaction face-to-face. I take notes the incongruously old-fashioned way, with paper and pen.

The first thing I jot down is the figure 500,000. That is the combined number of impressions that content from Amed's blog, *The Business of Fashion*, and its newsletter and RSS feed receive every month. The number of followers he has on Twitter is 150,000. Both of these illustrate perfectly how quickly ideas can spread over the Internet: the blog was launched only four years ago. At the time, Amed was a style-savvy Harvard MBA grad who was working for management consulting company McKinsey. He noticed a serious lack of analysis about both business news and creative aspects of fashion online, so he set out to create a website that provides both curated

content—a round up of the day's most pertinent news stories from around the web—as well as exclusive interviews with emerging designers, corporate CEOs and fashion industry pioneers. Those have included such luminaries as Karl Lagerfeld, creative director of Chanel and Fendi, Natalie Massenet, founder of *Net-a-Porter*, and Robert Duffy, president of Marc Jacobs.

As you subscribe on a more regular basis to his blog, however, the cumulative effect is more than reportage; the sum is greater than its parts. *The Business of Fashion* offers an insightful and analytical outlook on the direction the industry is heading. There is no wonder it is attracting such a crowd. For Amed, the value of this audience is not just reflected in the numbers—though his daily newsletter reaches a subscriber-base of over 10,000—but as he says, "in seeing who was reading it. There are important names from around the world of fashion on our list of subscribers. I feel a responsibility to create content that is valuable to these influential people, as many of them start their day reading it. I want them to find value in everything we publish."

That is a sentiment not uncommon to many brand managers as they begin to consider how they might create influence in the fully democratic fora of the Internet. It is not about constant communication, but meaningful communication. The challenge is that the users of these new channels can embrace you just as easily as they can chew you up and spit you out. Fortunately for Amed, he is an expert in the area. The discreet management consulting firm he launched alongside his blog, Amed & Co., advises CEOs from the luxury sector in the realm of strategic planning, recruitment of creative talent, brand management, and digital strategy, and has provided counsel to some of the world's most influential brands.

"The days of carefully constructed brand images are starting to crumble," Amed says of traditional corporate communications. The two streams—paid advertising, where brands have complete control over how and where their brand images are projected, and "below the line" marketing, such as publicity and public relations, which Imran says "they were controlling that too"—are outdated models. "The Internet has changed all that. Consumers are remixing what they see, mashing it up. It's consumers who are now defining the brand."

For luxury brands, this has presented a bit of a conundrum. Their successes have been built on the idea of creating a lifestyle image that people aspire to associate with, and today it is no longer as simple as "putting that



*Alexander Wang t-shirt and Acne blazer, both available at Gravity Pope Tailored Goods; Indochino pants; Harry Winston Ocean Project Z4 watch; stylist's own belt; Imran's own socks and boots.*

# MONTECRISTO



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image on the consumer”. While many CEOs may still scoff at the idea of talking about their brand on Facebook, or inviting bloggers to sit in the front row of their fashion shows, others have realized that if they don’t join in the conversation, they are going to be left behind. Brands that were known for their creativity and innovation in design, have had to bid adieu to conservatism and start applying those ethos to the business model. “The brands that are succeeding online today, are the ones creating inspirational content,” Amed says. “If people are inspired, if they feel a sense of desire, if something moves you or shocks you, your first inclination is to share that.” Social media are what Amed calls “earned media”. Brands earn their place in the conversation by enabling consumers to share what they see with friends and colleagues through these channels.

Unfortunately, it’s not enough to simply have the youngest person on staff open up a Twitter account. Success in online communication requires a complete shift in the corporate mindset, right from the top down. One that acknowledges that social media are just like any other business tool, in that they are only useful if they are accomplishing something of the business’s needs. “Digital media thinking needs to be embedded right into the business strategy planning process,” Amed says. “The first question I always ask clients is ‘how does this link back to your business strategy?’ Although you may be adopting a new communication medium, there are certain things, certain core values, that never change. Not every brand needs to be on Twitter. Not every brand needs a blog.”

It is about thinking on multiple levels at once: short-, medium- and long-range planning. For example, about 10 years ago, Burberry found themselves in a rut (“or, in ‘the chav’, as they say in the U.K.” Amed jokes). On the medium range, they knew they needed a few new fresh perspectives, so they brought in Christopher Bailey as creative director and later Angela Ahrendts as CEO. Knowing that Burberry’s heritage is in trench coats, and that they still made up the majority of Burberry’s sales, the duo launched a website in 2009 called *The Art of the Trench*. It invited Burberry customers to send in photos of themselves wearing trench coats, which would then be featured alongside candid photographs taken by street style photographer Scott Schumann of *The Sartorialist*. “This was a street level view of an iconic

brand and how consumers are integrating that brand’s products into their daily lives. A luxury brand can create buzz online by doing something that pushes the brand forward in the short term, but as Burberry illustrated, it also has to be consistent with the long term heritage. They are, in my opinion, among the world’s first truly digital luxury brands.”

Recently, Amed co-founded another remarkable Paris-based website, *Luxury Society*, which is helping to introduce top professionals to the world of social networking. It is an exclusive online community connecting a global network of 15,000 individuals who work in the luxury business, whatever facet that may be. It is perhaps the first time these fragmented industries—fashion, watches and jewellery, automotive, wine and spirits, tourism etc.—have ever been brought together in one place, and it is an opportunity made possible only by the Internet. Furthermore, it also allows the creators of the website to mine its members for data, and communicate that back in the spirit of enhancing the collective knowledge of all these disparate groups. The first *Luxury Society* report, edited by Amed, was based on human relations and recruitment information accumulated from a survey of over 1000 luxury professionals; the second report, not to much surprise, will look at digital luxury.

As I sift through the *Luxury Society* website, I see that indeed, some of the leading luxury professionals are starting to fully get on board with social media. As their profiles pop up under the “featured members” section, I am somewhat astounded that I could send them a message or invite them to join my network, with nothing more than a click, if I so chose. Yes, conversing online can speed up the lines of communication, allow us to better understand our existing audience, expand our consumer-base and enhance our responsiveness to the market. But all this underscores the importance of constantly listening and constantly monitoring what is being said about your industry and brand. “While you may not be able to control the conversation,” Amed says, “you can certainly influence it.” Or, in the words of Elias Canetti, give the crowd some direction. — CDL

**ABOVE:** Brooks Brothers shirt; Alexander Olch bow tie, available at Lark; Imran’s own blazer.

GROOMING: LUCYANNE FOR LIZBELL.AGENCY.COM USING MAC AND TRESSEME