

A Passion for Fashion

FINAL REPORT

PREPARED BY YOUTH EMPLOYMENT SERVICES YES FOR THE MINISTRY OF ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND TRADE



Born out of a partnership between two cutting-edge organizations, A Passion for Fashion marries Youth Employment Services' YES expertise in youth entrepreneurship with the Toronto Fashion Incubator's (TFI) success in inspiring new fashion design talent. Launched in May 2009, this exciting program gives young fashion designers and entrepreneurs the opportunity to explore the world of entrepreneurship in the fashion industry, for free. A Passion for Fashion is funded in part by Ontario's Ministry of Economic Development and Trade through their Youth Entrepreneurship Partnerships (YEP) program.

Marketing and outreach initiatives were conducted from May to July through flyers, posters, e-blasts, faxes and presentations at job fairs. Marketing initiatives were focused on attracting youth from priority neighbourhoods. Interested youth were invited to attend one of our thirteen "Orientation Sessions" which were held at various locations across the GTA.

In August 2009, the workshop phase of PFF began. The overwhelming response in registration for workshops led us to add one more scheduled session for each of the six workshops. The workshops were split into "Business" and "Fashion" though the two were quite linked in terms of content. A total of six workshops were offered, five times each between August and November.

As the workshops concluded, PFF participants had the opportunity to be paired up with a mentor. A Mentor Meet and Greet night was held and was very successful. Several matches were made; some lasted beyond the programs conclusion months later, though the majority of youth did not pursue the mentorship opportunity past the Meet and Greet night.

The final phase of the PFF program was the Fashionista's Den Competition. Modeled after the CBC show "The Dragon's Den", contestants had the opportunity pitch their fashion business idea to a panel of industry experts. To enter the competition, participants had to prepare a 12-page business plan and a "fashion presentation board." To assist participants with their submission package, two "business coaching sessions" were held whereby youth received feedback on their business plans.

A total of twelve participants entered the competition (two of the participants entered the submission together as a pair), each with their own impressive business plan and presentation board.

The judges selected one winner who they felt represented the essence of the program – someone who showed promise, drive and could truly benefit from the cash, hours of mentorship and TFI membership.

The winner of the Fashionista's Den, Stephanie McNeil, was announced on March 11 2010 at the Passion for Fashion Awards Ceremony. This was an evening cocktail party held at the Toronto Fashion Incubator. After the ceremony, Stephanie was interviewed on CBC Metro Morning.

Notes on Discrepancies in Deliverables¹

A SUCCESS STORY SEMINAR:

In the interest of time and scheduling, the Success Story Seminar was not executed as planned but was combined with the launch of the mentorship program at an evening event called the "Mentorship Meet and Greet Night." (For details on the mentorship phase, see 2.c.) Whereas the original plan was to schedule a separate seminar event whereby youth participants could listen to the experiences of both a young and a seasoned entrepreneur, YES relied on the volunteer mentors to share their success stories at the Mentorship Meet and Greet Night.

Though this was not the original plan for the Success Story Seminar, this was found to be quite beneficial for the young participants as it was a much more interactive experience than a traditional seminar setting.

MENTORSHIP:

To launch the mentorship phase, we held a Mentorship Meet and Greet night held in December 2009. At the event, youth participants had the opportunity to meet a dozen established professionals, the majority of whom were entrepreneurs themselves, and ask them about their experiences one on one.

After meeting all the mentors, each participant was given a Mentor contact sheet with info about the mentor's areas of expertise, email and phone number. The participants were then told to follow up with the mentors that they clicked with the most or those who could offer them assistance in an area relevant to the mentor's field of expertise.

Though some introductions were facilitated by YES, the mentees were informed that it was their initiative to follow up with mentors and request meetings. Each mentor agreed to volunteer a minimum of 10 hours of their time total to one or more mentees.

Though the mentorship aspect of the program was offered to all participants, only sixteen participants seized this opportunity. Out of those who pursued a relationship with their mentor, anecdotal evidence suggests that very few reached the 10 hours offered to them.^{2, 3}



1. Supporting documentation and notes on deliverable for Marketing and Outreach, Orientation Sessions, Business Skills Workshops and Fashion Skills Workshops were included in the Interim Report.
2. For more on how YES plans to improve the mentorship piece of Passion for Fashion see the "Moving Forward" section.
3. For success stories about mentorship, see the "Success Stories" section.

FASHIONISTA'S DEN COMPETITION:

YES aimed to select 20 finalists to present to the Fashionista's Den. However, the amount of participants who entered the competition was much less than anticipated. Only 12 participants (one group of two participants) entered the competition and thus automatically becoming finalists.

Several factors could have contributed to this low participant response. It was thought that perhaps the submission guidelines were either too demanding or the workshops, though valuable, did not adequately prepare the participants to develop a 13-page business plan. It is important to note however, that many of the workshop instructors commented that participants in their classes were very eager, understood the material well, but did not have a solid product or service idea.⁴

4. For details on recommended changes to the Fashionista's Den Competition, see the "Moving Forward" section.

Success Stories!

STEPHANIE MCNEIL: WINNER OF
THE 2009–2010 FASHIONISTA'S
DEN COMPETITION:

From Stephanie's bio:

"Stephanie McNeil is the daughter of a self taught dress maker from the beautiful island of Jamaica. As her mother's assistant, Stephanie was first exposed to the world of fashion and design when she was 8 years old, she would spend her time watching her mother make dresses for young girls vying to be the next Ms. Jamaica. At the End of each school day she would eagerly return to the studio to lend a hand. It wasn't long before she started designing and sewing various garments for her doll collection.

After immigrating to Canada in 2000, Stephanie focused on making Fashion design her career path. During high school she took on numerous design and alterations projects for herself, friends and family.

Stephanie went on to study Fashion Design at George Brown College and graduated in 2005, she was nominated to participate in the George Brown College Annual Fashion Show 2005.

Stephanie has also held part time and full time internship positions with several Toronto designers between 2005 and 2009. With Izzy Camilleri she focused on hand beading for various projects. With Monica Mei of Aime Luxury she focused on pattern drafting and technical specifications. With Nada Sheppard of Nada Designs she focused on quality control."

Stephanie entered the Fashionista's Den Competition and captured the minds and hearts of the judges with her presentation. The judges were attracted to Stephanie's positive energy and her unwavering dedication to a



fashion design. Luckily, this love for all things fashion was coupled with a pretty strong business plan, an obvious talent for dressmaking and a superior work ethic.

With overwhelming gratitude, Stephanie accepted the Fashionista's Den Award, and vowed to be an active member in the Canadian fashion industry. There was no doubt that with her can-do attitude and entrepreneurial character, Stephanie will make the most of her membership at TFI and the 50 hours of mentorship provided by YES and TFI.

KEVIN NAULLS: FASHIONISTA'S
DEN PARTICIPANT:

Another participant that stood out for his charisma and exciting passion was 24-year-old Kevin Naulls. Kevin's interest in the fashion industry lies in media and public relations. The company he pitched to the fashionista's den was a "Men's Lifestyle publication that explores the many facets of men's fashion in a clear, informed manner. Its purpose is to show consumers the benefits of a sophisticated, timeless wardrobe (in a way, it mimics the magazine, as its aesthetic on its own is one that does not go out of style)".

Kevin was matched with a mentor named Gail McInnes, a very well-known Toronto fashion blogger, PR rep and event producer. Out of all the mentorship relationships formed through A Passion for Fashion, this pair was without question the most destined to be together.

Gail brought Kevin to all sorts of industry events and introduced him to number of important people in the fashion scene. Here is what Kevin says about his mentorship experience with Passion for Fashion:



"The introduction of a mentorship program was integral to my overall performance in the program, Passion for Fashion. Meeting Gail McInnes made me incredibly nervous, yet hopeful — I had known about her presence in Toronto's fashion community prior to meeting her and knew that she would be able to teach me how to navigate (what I believed to be) the shaky waters of Toronto media. Having a mentor is essential; because a participant will tap into the knowledge, experience and connections of someone who is already doing what you aspire for yourself. Gail introduced me to Tim Chan, editor in chief of one of my favourite New York magazines and she graciously introduced me to influential people within the fashion community — these experiences have no monetary value and since Gail saw something in my idea, she was willing to assist in the growth of my dream. By the end of Passion for Fashion, I received much more than the experience of competition. Because of the mentor-mentee program, I now have a friend and colleague in



the industry with the fullest heart and most genuine attitude toward young Canadians in fashion. I couldn't have done this without YES/TFI! Thank you so much."

— Testimony from Kevin Naulls

Since the program's conclusion, we are happy to report that Kevin has received more journalistic opportunities in fashion. He now writes for the BlogTO and will soon have a fashion column with Sun Media!

Lessons Learned

VALUE OF MENTORSHIP NOT ALWAYS RECOGNIZED BY YOUTH:

As mentioned above, youth participants were not as active on the mentorship opportunities as anticipated. YES has encountered this type of hesitancy from youth in other programs as well.

The mentorship relationship can be difficult to navigate for young people. It appeared many of the youth felt like they weren't "prepared enough" to meet a mentor, or perhaps felt pressure that they wouldn't be using the mentor's time valuably. Some, admittedly, just simply let the opportunity fall to the wayside due to other commitments like work and school.

Despite a mentorship orientation night which set to break the ice and explain in detail what mentorship is all about, quite a number of young people either didn't pursue their mentor's time any further or simply never signed up for the mentorship program in the first place.

It is clear that we have to think of creative ways to increase the rate of participation in the mentorship program for PFF participants. In the "moving forward" section, you will see some ideas of how we can foster a better understanding of the purpose of mentorship and ways we can help young people navigate these relationships with greater confidence.

FASHIONISTA'S DEN COMPETITION:

Though the Fashionista's Den Competition was a great success and pushed twelve amazing youth to challenge themselves and put their ideas to the test, we did not reach our target amount of submissions. The underwhelming amount of submissions forced us to realize a few things about our participant group and the challenges we will face in holding a competition:

1. A significant number of the participants completed all the workshops and demonstrated great promise, but had no product or service in mind. That is, they knew they wanted to be in fashion, they were very attracted to running their own business, but in the end, they hadn't a clue what their business was going to be. Though the competition allowed for people to enter with a "fake" product, the submission

process was perhaps too cumbersome for someone who wasn't trying to advance a real business.

2. Anecdotal evidence from the instructors and observations from the PFF coordinator suggest a very diverse range in fashion and business skills and experience. Many of the participants found the workshops extraordinarily informative, but were simply not at a stage to consider entrepreneurship.
3. The business plan was likely the part of the competition submission that was the most intimidating. Next year, the creation of a business plan will play a much more prominent part in all workshops.

BUSINESS SOFT SKILLS – THE ART OF
SOCIALIZING AND NETWORKING:

The old adage “It’s **who** you know” applies without question to the fashion industry. Almost more than any other industry. Though seemingly a superficial notion, the act of “seeing and being seen” is actually one of the most crucial rules of surviving and succeeding in the fashion industry.

After some long discussions with the instructors and TFI about the weak attraction the participants had towards mentorship, we all came to realize that the problem is not simply with mentorship. Rather, the issue seems to be a discomfort with socializing and networking amongst established professionals in general.

It was agreed upon that one of the major obstacles facing the participant is what one could call “business social skills” or the ability to comfortably engage people in the industry. This was evident at the Passion for Fashion Awards Night where we noticed very few participants used the event as a networking opportunity. Many of them were quite shy and stuck to themselves and their peers.

Networking and social skills play a very crucial role in advancing one’s career in this industry. Those that excelled after the PFF program had a tendency to be more outgoing and knew how to “play the game” in social settings or at events.

Though Passion for Fashion will not provide formal training on business soft skills, the instructors have agreed to address the social aspects of business a lot more in their workshops. Using their own experience as an example, we have asked them to share the techniques and secrets they have applied to feel confident in public settings.





Promotional Efforts

STEP 1: THE CREATIVE

Promoting A Passion for Fashion began with the production of a catchy and glossy flyer for distribution. Though producing a professional looking flyer is a costly initiative, past experience has shown us that we cannot underestimate the power of proper design and marketing in attracting youth. Young clients at YES have confirmed the importance of marketing, many of them stating they select the services and agencies they approach based on whether an organization's branding speaks to them.

STEP 2: BLASTING THE NETWORKS

TFI and YES are fortunate enough to have very easy access to young people, particularly those interested in advancing their careers. One of the most effective tools to attract participants to A Passion for Fashion was posting information on TFI's e-newsletter that reaches hundreds of people every week interested in the fashion industry.

Similarly, YES has a very strong network of community agencies that serve youth and it is quite common for these agencies to cross-promote each others programs. An e-blast was sent to all our partner agencies and many received hard-copy flyers.

Another helpful method of promotion was utilizing free Toronto-based bloggers and event listings. These are especially useful in reaching youth interested in fashion.

STEP 3: ORIENTATION SESSIONS

Strong efforts were made to reach youth in Toronto's 13 priority neighbourhoods as they are generally less exposed to positive examples of entrepreneurship and face barriers to programs like A Passion for Fashion. In addition to this, many of them face the added barrier of being quite outside the TTC grid which often results in less career fairs, outreach programs and free youth activities.

PROS & CONS OF ORIENTATION SESSION:

PRO	CON
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Face-to-face program promotion. Ability to answer questions as they arise.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Extremely time consuming as a promotional activity. Not just in prep and paperwork but the hours of travelling. I.e. Though the orientation sessions lasted on average about 45 mins, the travel there and back would tack on about 2 or more hours.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Actively closing that gap between priority neighbourhoods and the services offered at downtown agencies.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• With internet being so prevalent, it is debatable whether we could have attracted the same amount of priority youth through key online resources and networks.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Minimizing travel expenses for youth in distant areas.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Efforts to advertise the orientation session to youth in remote areas of the GTA was dependent upon the partner agency in that area. Difficult to find time to poster and distribute flyers in these areas.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Very effective in educating other community agencies and their staff about the program. This would often result in referrals.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• It was found that youth from all over the GTA preferred to attend orientation sessions at our downtown locations.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Attrition rate of the amount of youth who signed up for an orientation sessions compared to the amount that actually attended was quite high. This made the orientation sessions feel, at times, an ineffective use of time. At one point we had 13 people sign up for an orientation session in Victoria Park and only 2 actually show up.

Moving Forward

The following section outlines a number of goals for next year's run of A Passion for Fashion and how they can be achieved.

GOAL 1:

Increasing the rate of participation in Fashionista's Den

- Workshops will speak to how the information being presented is useful for the Fashionista's Den Competition. Instructors are to treat the Fashionista's Den Competition as the goal of the program.
- Instructors are much more informed about the competition and the submission process than they were last year. This means they can address questions and provide advice.
- A "Meet the Panel" event to be scheduled towards the end of the workshops where participants can ask the panel of judges what they are looking for in a "pitch" and any other advice on the competition.

GOAL 2:

Improving understanding of creating a business plan

- A business plan template will be handed to participants for their first class and will act as a unifying document throughout all workshops. Every instructor will relate material back to business plan template.
- One-on-one business coaching sessions proved very useful for participants. This will be implemented once again.

GOAL 3:

Increase participation in mentorship

- Instructors are to speak to the importance of networking and mentorship in their workshops. Also providing tips on how to become more comfortable "schmoozing" or socializing with professionals.
- Begin mentorship phase earlier and outline the benefits of mentorship for youth very clearly.
- Encourage mentorship as a way to improve Fashionista's Den submission.
- Provide participants with success stories about last year's mentor-mentee pairs.

Feedback on YEP



One day in late October 2009, a young woman contacted me to ask about the Passion for Fashion program. I gave her my usual rehearsed blurb about the program while admittedly, focusing my attention on the myriad of tasks in front of me. However, the young woman commanded my attention with her response. "Wow! That sounds amazing" she said. "I can't believe this is all for free!" I took a moment to digest her comment and responded: "you're right. It really is an amazing opportunity."

My feedback for the MEDT about the Youth Entrepreneurship Program is based on these types of causal moments that I have been privy to as a project coordinator. Surely the Ministry will learn what works and what doesn't through reports, project outcomes, success stories or, for that matter, program shortcomings. However, as project officers you are not entirely privileged to the little things that signal whether a program

is really effective. The feedback I provide here is strongly anecdotal and contains my own opinion and the opinion of those involved in making A Passion for Fashion a reality.

YEP'S POSITIVE IMPACT:



Great price!

First and foremost, the most effective element of this program is that it is offered for FREE. Information about starting your own business is not easy to come by and even then, it can be quite pricey for a young person. Providing these programs for youth for free allows young people to explore entrepreneurship without having to worry about the risk and cost associated with trying it out on their own.

Providing information often neglected by education institutions

Unless they are enrolled in a specific business start up course or program, youth are often not exposed to step by step instructions in how to get their business off the ground.

Particularly with fashion, even those who had graduated from fashion programs still lacked the necessary information on how to start their own business. YEP is a phenomenal opportunity in this regard.

Program flexibility

It was wonderful that the Ministry funded such a variety of programs to fit the different needs of youth. Some young people were more interested in committing to a full time program, while others were really happy that programs like A Passion for Fashion fit perfectly in their work or school schedule.

Not just business... it's personal!

Business skills are great for anyone to acquire, regardless of the career path they choose. However, for many young people, starting their own business is absolutely critical to their overall vocational success. At YES we see youth struggle everyday to fit the 9 to 5 mould while stating what they really wish to do is pursue their passion full time. Entrepreneurship, presents a great option for these youth – youth willing to do whatever it takes to do what they love (in this case fashion design) and all they need is a little guidance!

YEP'S AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT:

Increase the Ministry's outreach promotional efforts

Charitable organizations or agencies, especially smaller ones, face major challenges when it comes to promotion and advertisements. Funders and board members (not to mention auditors) generally frown upon the dollars allocated to publicity, and charities rarely have the capital for a good designer (which, as I've mentioned, is very important).

The reality is YEP is such an incredible opportunity but it is simply not reaching enough youth. I can speak to this both as the program coordinator but also as an ambitious youth myself

with young friends. Prior to writing the proposal for Passion for Fashion, neither me nor anyone in my social circles (and I did ask!) had ever heard of the programs funded by YEP or like programs. One of them had heard of Summer Company and that is only because they were a past client at YES.

I understand the onus for promoting these programs lands on the organizations who receive the funding. However, I truly believe the YEP program could reach new heights if the Ministry itself advertised these programs. My suggestion would be a youth friendly website or “hub” where young people could learn about ALL entrepreneurship programs offered by the Ministry. This website could then be advertised at agencies, colleges and universities.

Another idea would be a launch event for youth where all the funding recipients would be present and pass out information about their program.

Proposal Assistance & Suggestions

Whereas the Ministry provided great feedback and best practices for reports, it would have been great to hear the Ministry’s feedback on the design of the program itself. Perhaps even flagging areas of caution.

Further Reading

- Blog Coverage – finalfashion:
<http://finalfashion.ca/event-passion-for-fashion-award>
- Blog Coverage – dressedfordinner:
<http://dressedfordinner.wordpress.com/2010/03/19/fashionden/>

