

SUH KOUNIM

(MICHÈLE MONTAGNE)

social issues are major concerns for customers and businesses alike. In this uncertain scenario, PR professionals play a key role in the adaptation of brands in these new climates. Suh Kounim, PR professional with a long trajectory in the business, has been at the forefront of an evolving industry and has witnessed the evolution of the PR job in recent years. Hard to define, the role of fashion PR includes, but is not limited to, ensuring that the proper brand image is depicted in the media as well as creating bonds between the journalists, VIP's and brands. A lot of organization, strategy and analysis, and not that many parties and champagne, are the everyday of this profession, which has increased its interest among the younger generations. In a conversation with ODDA Magazine, Suh talks about the highs, lows, challenges and behind the scenes of a public relations professional.

In conversation with
CAROLINA BENJUMEA

Photographer
JEANNE LUCAS

Fashion Editor
TOMMASO PALAMIN

CAROLINA BENJUMEA. It is really interesting to see how wide your professional experience is, having worked for big brands like Rick Owens and Samsung Group, as well as in different fashion agencies like Karla Otto and Michèle Montagne. You have also worked as a correspondent for W Korea, Elle Korea, Esquire Korea, Dazed Korea, and since 2015, you have been in Michèle Montagne, where you are now Senior International PR Manager. What made you choose Fashion PR as a career in the first place and how have all these experiences shaped you as a professional?

SUH KOUNIM. I've always been connected to fashion since I was a mass communications student in Boston, and somehow all my past experience led me here to Paris. In 2007, I started as an intern at Rick Owens and then at Michèle Montagne. Eventually I transitioned over to a junior PR position with Michèle Montagne. In 2012 I moved to Karla Otto Paris and I worked there for 2 years before I returned back to Michèle Montagne in 2016, where I've been working ever since.

C.B. You are a very international person as you were born in Seoul, South Korea, you did your college education in Boston, Massachusetts, you have lived in New York City, in Milan, Italy and now you are based in Paris. What do you think is the main difference when it comes to fashion and style between these cities? Which one fits your style best?

S.K. It has always been my dream to work with the best professionals in the fashion industry. As a student, I imagined my life as a fashion professional living and working in Paris. It still amazes me how my dreams have come true. It really depends on what you dream about and what you speak to the universe because anything can come true if you believe in yourself and don't give up on achieving your goals. I love living and working in Paris,



Vest TAKAHIROMIYASHITATheSoloist
Shirt and skirt KOLOR

where I feel most comfortable and where originality, personality and elegance are easy to find.

C.B. The agency is based in Paris, the capital of fashion for many. What's Fashion in Paris? What means Fashion in Paris and how different is it from other main Fashion capitals such as Milan or London?

S.K. In my opinion, Paris is without a doubt the capital of fashion and always will be. Milan is more production-orientated and London is more of a birthplace for young, talented designers. Paris is the first pioneer of fashion and has had some of the most prestigious, historical fashion houses to date.

C.B. The PR industry is very wide and you can basically specialize in any subject. You can work in politics, for banks, for NGOs, and any other industry. However, there is something really attractive about fashion PR. Is there any difference between being a PR in the fashion industry and in any other industry?

S.K. PR is a dynamic multi-tasking job, so we must be able to respond to the demands of the audience in a timely manner. To become a fashion publicist, you must have the right sense of esthetics, have sensitivity to fashion and be able to read our time through cultures, art and fashion. Our job is to use communication tools, shows, campaigns etc. Also, to create fantasies and dreams around the brand and the products and to innovate and move the brand forward.

C.B. In pop culture and thanks to characters like Samantha Jones from "Sex and the City" and Emily Cooper from "Emily in Paris", PRs are seen as cool people that have fancy dinners and have access to the best parties and fashion shows yet the reality is very different. What is the day-to-day of a PR professional and what are its main missions?

S.K. It is true that we have access to the best parties and shows, since we are also the ones who organize them. But of course, we do not drink champagne every day! It is a professional job which requires 100% concentration on the daily missions. As PRs often say, "it never stops," because we have so many daily tasks to complete!

The PR company's goal is to maintain the brand's reputation at the highest level and to ensure that the public have an accurate picture of the brand. We increase brand awareness, create visual identity and fantasies in order to make people dream about the brand. A visual branding through visual communication, campaigns and editorial content are necessary to achieve maximum visibility in each market. Daily activities include coordinating showroom shopping with the press and stylists and to create seasonal editorial content. The key to success is maintaining a close relationship with the fashion media, stylists, celebrities and influencers.

C.B. Covid changed the way we used to work, the way we interacted with other people and the way we dressed. Today we even talk about the "new normality". As a professional PR, you have to be in contact with a lot of editors, stylists, and creatives all the time. You have to travel and organize events and that is something difficult to do during a lockdown. What was it like being a PR during the pandemic and how did Covid challenge the PR job?

S.K. During the pandemic, we worked mainly online; we did not have physical shows and the designers could not travel to Paris. So all the shows were converted into a digital presentation and we communicated through digital platforms. Now there are physical shows again but the digital platform has become the most important since the pandemic.

C.B. Good level of writing and oral expression, strong interpersonal skills and time management are among the most researched skills by recruiters. With all your experience in the industry, what do you think are the main skills a PR professional needs to have to succeed in this job?

S.K. PR is a dynamic, multi-tasking job. Fashion PR communication requires excellent personal skills which include communication and interpersonal skills, a detail-oriented, dedicated and dynamic personality which is capable of strengthening relationships between the brand and its audience. Also, a strong motivation and mentality to weather unexpected situations. Passion and love for fashion lead to strong motivation which in turn, leads to great efforts that will be followed by success.

C.B. I imagine you have interns or recently graduated PRs within your team. Do you think schools are preparing students well for a PR career, or do you think there is something missing? What would you change?

S.K. I think what is missing in school education is that it focuses on theory and textbooks rather than actual, everyday experiences. I think more appropriate courses should be introduced and applied to teach students about fashion PR, etc. For example, more focus on what PR actually is and what is involved in their duties and daily activities. Or a course on creating a show-from press and VIP invitations to actual show production.

C.B. With the industry constantly changing, the digital world taking over the print and the boom of influencers, what does it take to have a successful PR campaign today?

S.K. You have to be able to read and understand the present and the future and you have to have a clear understanding of our current cultural, historical and political environment to express the brand identity you want to present to the audience.

It is an excellent time to create a successful PR campaign because we face so many challenges today, such as evolving technologies, social issues and innovations. We can take advantage of these 21st century challenges and shape the future. We must continue to learn and understand what is happening today.

C.B. It is interesting to see how much fashion has changed from the 90s and the 2010s until today. Consumers' needs and interests have changed, therefore brands need to offer different things. Have you noticed a change in the requests of your clients over the years?

S.K. Social media didn't exist until about 2003 or 2004. Now, in 2023, monitoring social media has become one of our main activities. Consumer needs and interests have changed. From 2007 to about 2010, we received a lot of calls for our print magazines but now we don't get those physical calls at all.

C.B. Influencers are becoming the new brand ambassadors. How has the job of a PR professional changed with the shift from working with celebrities and supermodels to collaborating with influencers? How different is the relationship with them?

S.K. We have many more fittings today than we did 10 years ago. The number of fittings for Vips has increased incredibly, especially during fashion week. Maintaining a close relationship with the Vips and dealing with online and social media, will play a very important role in the fashion industry in 2023 PR.

C.B. In recent years fashion has been named one of the most polluting industries in the world and there are many NGOs and social media accounts calling out the bad practices of fashion companies. With the state of the world today and people asking companies to contribute and take care of the environment, how are PR professionals dealing with the sustainability demands of society? Has it changed the job of a PR?

S.K. Certainly many magazines are now creating content for sustainable collection stories. We need to be more aware of the environmental issues associated with the industry. For example, today we are featuring Paula Canovas Del Vas' eco-friendly collection and another client of ours, Uma Wang, whose brand has a philosophy of zero fabric waste. This was not the case 10/20 years ago.

C.B. Part of the missions of PR are also product placement, sending samples for shootings and celebrity events. Usually, the samples sent tend to be really small sizes made for catwalk models. Do you demand or advise your clients to have bigger size samples to cover all kinds of bodies or have you noticed some brands already sending bigger sizes? How important is inclusivity for you?

S.K. If we had different sizes of samples, I would love to suggest it to all kinds of shoots for all kinds of bodies!

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C.B. In recent years, social movements have increased their visibility and people are more outspoken than ever. How can PR as an industry contribute to social justice movements like LGBTQIA+ rights defense, Black Lives Matter, feminism, sustainability, and body positivity?

S.K. I've always been surrounded by LG-BTQIA+. I live and work with them; it's been my whole life. It's an exciting time and I'm so happy to see these changes!

C.B. Today we talk a lot about cancel culture and fashion brands have also been targets through social media: Dior and Saint Laurent received backlash over their shows in the desert, Jacquemus was criticized for flying hundreds of people to its show in Hawaii, and most recently, Balenciaga's controversial campaign. Do you think it is a dangerous time to work as a PR during the cancel culture? How do you help your clients go through or avoid these situations that could happen to them?

S.K. Luckily, we have never had such a controversial issue to deal with—thank god!

C.B. In all these years of career and experience, which is the most challenging, memorable, or special client or project you have worked with?

S.K. Michèle Montagne—all of her clients were my dream designers when I dreamed of working in fashion, starting with Helmut Lang, Ann Demeulemeester, Haider Ackermann, Undercover, Kolor, Uma Wang, etc. Their strong creative force has taught me to change the im-

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Top, dress and shorts UMA WANG
Boots ANN DEMEULEMEESTER

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age with creative eyes and soul. Ann Demeulemeester was my absolute dream designer to work with. I remember stating her as my favourite fashion designer in my final exam during my master's studies in Milan. Working closely with her was a dream come true.

Kolor, TAKAHIROMIYASHITATheSoloist, Uma Wang and now with our new client, Paula Canovas Del Vas, are also very special brands that I love to work with.

C.B. Have you ever thought of working as a PR for another industry, maybe in the music industry or the art industry since those are also big passions of yours?

S.K. Yes and who knows, one day I might become a musician/artist. I just started playing as a DJ, so watch out for me on TikTok @electricbitch!

C.B. Working with big brands must be really interesting and I am sure that you have a lot of stories to tell. What is the best souvenir/ moment of your career?

S.K. I've had so many best moments of my career. One of the best moments was to hear Ann Demeulemeester telling me she

loves me and she will always be there for me... it made me cry... to hear love and support from the person you respect the most!

C.B. Between social media, influencers, social movements getting stronger, and fashion and luxury becoming a worldwide phenomenon, what do you think is in store for PRs in the fashion industry, for Michèle Montagne and of course for you?

S.K. To continue communicating with the masses in many different media channels, using not only fashion, but combining all areas of fashion, culture, music and art, and not forgetting to continue creating fantasies and dreams.



Bra, top, skirt and shoes PAULA CANOVAS DEL VAS
Belt: UMA WANG

Grooming JULIE COONE
using BYREDO

Photographer Assistant
HUGO MARONGIU

Conversation edited by
MARIE MADDOCKS



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