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## Why it's tough out there for new Canadian designers

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As his design partner, Helder Aguiar, watches, Diego Fuchs adjusts a sheer white top with draped back and grey skinny cargo pants on an unmoving model.

“Shoot, I’m supposed to be tweeting,”

Fuchs says, his low voice going up an octave.

Both he and Aguiar step out of the shot so Sarah Burtscher, a photographer, can capture the ensemble.

The young Toronto designers are near the end of a day of shooting the look book and campaign for their nascent line, [blak]i, in Burtscher’s small apartment.

The clothing being documented comprises their second collection. Their first, for fall/winter 2011, wasn’t picked up by a single store. This time, though, their prospects have improved somewhat: They have a business plan, a series of previews set up with stylists and a clearer sense of what it takes to become a viable Canadian label.

Even so, neither of them has slept in weeks, both claim. The neophyte designers met at the International Academy of Design in Toronto in 2005 and got their first jobs together at NADA, an independent label that went out of business earlier this year. That experience prepared them for the less than stellar outcome of their own first season, which “was disappointing,”

Fuchs admits. “But having worked with a new label, it wasn’t a total surprise,” he adds.

Geared toward both men and women, [blak]i is best described as high-concept streetwear. For women, that might mean grey leather shorts with fuchsia detailing partnered with a multihued sheerback bias-cut shirt. Fuchs designs the women’s wear collection, while Aguiar focuses on men’s wear.

At the moment, they both have full-time jobs and no additional funding, using their savings and day-to-day earnings to produce the line. They are not, in other words, the Proenza Schouler boys, the well-connected New York fashion darlings whose rise to fame was meteoric.

For most young designers, this is typically the reality. If Fuchs and Aguiar are lucky, their look book will garner the attention of a supportive retailer and then maybe a fashion editor. If they’re especially lucky, they’ll also attract an investor willing to help them take their line to the next level, even if such support can be hard to come by in Canada.

“Everything comes down to money and we’re just too short of it in this country for this industry,” Susan Langdon, executive director of the Toronto Fashion Incubator, says, citing cautious lenders and a small marketplace.

According to Canadian fashion guru Joseph Mimran, a business plan is key to success, more important a tool, in fact, than a sewing machine. “There are successful fashion businesses with poor design, but I never see successful designers with a poor business model,” says the Joe Fresh chief, who adds that he can dissect a balance sheet just as well as a garment.

At [blak]i, Aguiar and Fuchs don’t yet have a formal financial plan – mainly because there isn’t any money – but they do have a plan that covers market, client and product goals. Aguiar also holds a bachelor’s degree in commerce, while Fuchs has experience in costing fabric.

At this stage in their business development, supplies like textiles tend to cost more because they purchase those goods in smaller quantities. But such investments must be made. According to Barbara Atkin, vice president of fashion direction at Holt Renfrew, quality of materials and craftsmanship are what her buyers watch for most in new lines.

“We’re going to look at a garment from the inside out,” she says, adding that she and her team may work with a young designer over multiple seasons before making a purchase.

The competition from established brands, both Canadian and international, makes a breakthrough even tougher.

“Our ultimate goal is to go international,” says Aguiar, who feels that long-term success means entering foreign markets.

To that end, the aspiring couturiers will present their small preview collection and go store-to-store selling their line.

“Coming up with funding to push sales” is what it’s all about, Aguiar says.

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