

f a s h i o n

an interview by mary kay price



H I G H F A S H I O N a l p h a g a m

As the Couture/European Designer Sportswear Buyer for Nordstrom Department Stores, Margaret Hinojosa, Epsilon Phi–Texas Woman’s University, has daily encounters with names that could make most women swoon—Versace. Chanel. Dolce & Gabbana. Valentino. She travels to New York, Paris and Milan. She attends fashion shows that resemble rock concerts in their star power and intensity. She has private meetings to preview clothing from some of the worlds’ most desired designers.

But it isn’t all fun and games. Margaret spoke candidly with the Quarterly about living the life of a high fashion buyer and offered some tips on how Alpha Gams can stay stylish.

quarterly: What is your title with Nordstrom?

margaret: Couture / European Designer Sportswear Buyer

q: What does that involve?

m: I buy American and European Couture Collections (Oscar de la Renta, Vera Wang, Badgley Mischka, Chanel, Valentino, YSL) and European Designer Sportswear (Alexander McQueen, Dolce & Gabbana, Chloe, Missoni, Versace). This means I travel to New York, Milan and Paris to buy these collections for Nordstrom.

q: What is a typical day like for you?

m: The first thing I do is check my sales from the previous day. I will call department managers to congratulate them on good business or discuss challenges with department managers to help them with strategies to improve their results. After that I usually check e-mail and address urgent issues, and then talk on the phone with vendors to discuss collection performance and shipping. I may have a meeting scheduled with my financial team to discuss

buying budgets for an upcoming market trip, inventory flow, markdowns or there may be a meeting to discuss new store openings, marketing, advertising, etc.

I will spend the rest of the day either analyzing a collection business, working on future strategies or drafting proposals for an upcoming designer personal appearance.

Once a week I have a meeting with my team (two assistant buyers and one office assistant) to review what is coming up in the week and month: trunk shows, major events, sales, new strategies, problems or challenges. I liken these weekly meetings to an Alpha Gam Chapter meeting: Old business, new business, calendar check (to make sure each member of my team knows what is on the radar).

q: What is your favorite part of your job?

m: There are so many, I don't even know where to begin! I love being in a market appointment and seeing a model walk into the showroom with an outfit so beautiful it takes your breath away. I love taking a challenging aspect of my business, coming up with a strategy to improve it, executing it and

seeing successful results. But above all, my favorite part is when I have privilege to meet the designer of the collections I buy.

q: What is the most grueling aspect?

m: This would be considered the "non-glamorous" part of the job. Traveling for more than two weeks at a time can be taxing. There comes a point when you want to sleep in your own bed and have a home cooked meal. When you are in market, it's not just about being in a great city and looking at gorgeous clothes—I really work! A typical day in market involves being in appointments from 9 a.m.

Fashion vs. Style

What's the difference? Margaret says, "I see 'fashion' as keeping up with the latest trends, wearing the latest and hottest pieces of the season. 'Style' is something beyond fashion. It's wearing clothes that flatter your figure, colors that flatter your complexion. It is about having components in your closet that transcend time."

Style Essentials

Sleeveless black dress
Skirt suit with a feminine cut jacket
Great pair of pants
Crisp white shirt
Cashmere turtleneck
Beautiful silk scarf
Classic handbag
Pair of well-fitting jeans

until 7 p.m. During the appointment time I review hundreds of samples and pick the ones I believe will sell. In the case of Marni, an Italian collection, I have to review nearly a thousand samples. This requires a great deal of concentration and a steady flow of Diet Coke. Once I get back to the hotel, I have to write the order. Writing means that I have to determine the styles I will buy and what sizes I will buy for each store while keeping everything it within a predetermined budget. Vendors need the orders right away so they can begin ordering fabrics and begin production. It is not unusual to have a full day of appointments and then go back to the hotel, order room service, write orders till 3 a.m. and then wake up at 7 a.m. to repeat the same thing all over again.

q: What has been your single best experience in your career?

m: The single best experience was when I met Karl Lagerfeld. Karl Lagerfeld is the single most powerful man in the world of high fashion. He is probably in his seventies but his ideas are endless and are always new and innovative. In 1982, he was hired as the designer at Chanel

and has evolved it into the most important fashion house in the world. The man is beyond brilliant. I used to think that the day I met Karl Lagerfeld, I could retire because I had done it all.

It was March 2003 and I was at his Left Bank showroom in Paris called Le Libraire. It is actually a photography studio/bookstore. He sells copies of all his favorite books in the bookstore and has a photography studio in the back room where he shows his collection, Lagerfeld Gallery. I was in the studio reviewing a rack of jeans when a large party walked in. Many times, major retailers will attend a market appointment with an entourage that includes the buyer, assistant buyer, merchandiser, corporate merchandiser, fashion director, etc. In this case, I thought this was the entourage of another major retailer. When I looked over, I immediately recognized a white haired ponytail and wraparound sunglasses. I froze. My heart stopped beating. I stopped breathing. Suddenly, a little voice in my head said, “Don’t make a fool of yourself!” I turned my head in the opposite direction of his entourage, started breathing again and realized my heart was pounding. By the time I turned around full circle, he was an arm’s length away. I



immediately introduced myself and said hello. We made some small talk. It just so happened that I had a camera in my hand. There are always models in the showroom modeling the clothes and having your camera in the event a model walks up wearing something you like helps so that you don’t have to scramble for it. Before I knew it, the venduese (salesperson), took the camera out of my hand and said in her French accent, “Here. I make a picture!” Well, I wasn’t going to argue. I simply smiled big and prayed the photo would come out well!

Margaret's Fall Fashion Must-Haves:

Three-Quarter Coat—

These coats have become an extension of jackets. They can be belted, trench style at the knee or below the knee in tweed, jacquard or leather. Wear over a basic sheath dress or over trousers.

Full Skirt—

This is a strong silhouette. Wear it in taffeta, patterned brocade or tweed for fall.

Velvet—

Velvet hasn't been an important fabric in a long time. Add a touch of it in a skirt, on trim on a jacket or on a great cocktail dress.

Flats/Platform Shoes—

The flat carries on the ballerina flat silhouette from summer. For fall, it can be very flat or have a sliver of a heel. The other key silhouette is the platform. It can be found with a tassel, as a sling back in suede or metallic leather.

Great Handbag—

If you can't do all of the above, splurge on a great handbag, like the Chloe pagoda bag, which is a slouchy camera style handbag, or find a bag in tweed. This is an easy way to give your wardrobe a lift.

q: When did you first become interested in fashion?

m: When I was in high school, I worked in a fabric store. I wanted to take advantage of my employee discount so I learned to sew. I soon found that I could make a new outfit every week at a minimal cost. I received more compliments on the outfits I created rather than outfits that I bought. I got serious about fashion my freshman year of college. I was nursing major and realized my heart was not in it. Fortunately, the school I attended had a Department of Fashion and Textiles. I changed my major and received a Bachelor of Science in Clothing and Costume Design from Texan Woman's University in Denton, Texas.

q: Do you still design clothes or stick mainly to buying/merchandising?

m: My job does not require designing and I haven't done any design work in more than 12 years. Having a design background has been a valuable asset though and helps me everyday in buying. For example, knowing how a garment should fit is critical. Poor fit can be why a garment will not sell. Being able to identify the quality of construc-

tion is also essential. The price points of the collections I buy are expensive. If the quality is poor, the customer will not justify the expense. If the sample fit is off, I can ask that the sample be adjusted for production. If the placement of a pocket is not flattering, I can bring that to the attention of the vendor with the recommendation that it is moved or removed all together. I have passed on collections or styles just because the construction, fit and quality has not been up to par.

q: Where did you work prior to Nordstrom?

m: Before Nordstrom, I worked as an Assistant Buyer for a specialty store in Dallas called Stanley Korshak for two and a half years. Prior to that, I was a sales associate in the Couture Salon at Neiman Marcus's flagship store in Dallas for two years. I ended up in retail by chance.

After I graduated from college, I had romantic visions of going to Paris. I had wanted a one way ticket to Paris for graduation and a job at the House of Chanel clipping thread off garments. I envisioned that I would be "discovered" by Karl Lagerfeld

as a design talent and he would make me his protégé. Alas, my parents couldn't afford to send me to Paris and I needed to get to work. I did various freelance work at local design houses: Howard Wolf, Jan Barboglio and Page Boy Maternity. That was in 1991, right when the Gulf War broke out. Finding a permanent job was tough. My mother had given me a second hand copy of Stanley Marcus's "Minding the Store," which covered the history of Neiman Marcus, and I decided retail couldn't be all that bad and went to work for them.

When I got there, I found myself exposed to all of the best in fashion: Chanel, Karl Lagerfeld, Chloe, Oscar de la Renta, Bill Blass and Geoffrey Beane. It was also at point in time where I saw the end of an era in American fashion—the end of the careers of some American legends: James Gallanos, who was Greek born and considered the premier American couturier; Adolfo, who designed a great deal of the clothing Nancy Regan wore during the Regan administration and Pauline Trigere, who designed Patricia Neal's costumes in "Breakfast at Tiffany's." I was privileged to meet them all at a young age.

q: Describe a fashion show in Paris/Milan.

m: The collections (fashion shows) in Paris and Milan are quite a frenzy. There are thousands of buyers, journalists, photographers and paparazzi, pushing and shoving to get in. The only way to get in is to have a ticket. You literally have to push your way through the crowds of people with your ticket clutched tight in your hand to get the front, where a security guard, like bouncer at a club, lets you in. There are always extra people who try to get into shows.

Once the buyers, journalists are seated, there is sometimes standing room availability to see the show. I remember attending my first Alexander McQueen show and having people come up to me asking if I had an extra ticket. Once you are in, you find your way to your seat. Getting to the show on time is important. If you get there late and the show is about to start, your seat will be given away. Last March I saw the Alexander McQueen show sitting crossed leg at the end of the catwalk, because my flight was late flying in from Milan to Paris. I arrived as they lights were going dim. My seat had been given up. I can't complain though because I got a really great, undisturbed close up view of the clothes—I

was literally 12 inches from the models.

q: Who is your favorite designer right now?

m: Right now, it has to be Alber Elbaz who designs for Lanvin. He is a true innovator. In fashion, there are designers who shake things up. People might not like what he is doing at the moment, but then you start seeing the elements of his influence a year later. That is innovation. You have to appreciate the fact that he is bold enough to be a catalyst of change. Some designers play it safe. He doesn't.

q: What is your favorite addition to your wardrobe?

m: Currently, it is a black Chanel cashmere twin set (cardigan with a sleeveless top to wear underneath it) with Lesage black and beige 'fisherman knotted' trim. It is so versatile. I can wear the full set with a pleated black skirt, pearls and be perfect for a business meeting or luncheon, or wear a scoop neck cotton t-shirt under the cardigan and a full khaki skirt and ballerina flats for dressed down at the office and even throw on a pair of khaki cropped pants, and still

look casually appropriate. It was a pricey twin-set, however its versatility and the confidence I feel knowing it is a truly fantastic piece have made it priceless.

q: With your busy schedule, how do you still manage to stay involved with Alpha Gamma Delta?

m: I have learned to know my limits. I am not always perfect. That means I have to say “no” on occasion. And that’s not a bad thing. I would rather stay involved in a small way, rather than over commit myself and then have to back out. Proper planning is essential. I have served as IRD Chairman the past five years and the key has been planning far enough in advance and breaking the tasks down so that I am completing responsibilities over a period of time. Of course, delegation is key. Interestingly, these are all things I learned being an officer as an Alpha Gamma Delta undergraduate.

Clothing Care 101

“Please respect your purchases. Take care of them. Hang jackets on arched wooden or plastic hangers to retain the shape of the garment and fold knitted pieces so they do not stretch on hangers. Launder appropriately and not too often. Believe it or not, dry cleaning can damage the fabrics of clothing. A suit should be cleaned once a season. After wearing, hang the suit on a proper hanger and let it to air out before hanging in your closet. Wrinkles in a suit made of good fabric, such as wool, should just fall out by hanging it up before storing in your closet.”