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# A guide for start-up fashion businesses in the UK



# How to access buyers

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**Before you try to contact any buyer, you need to do your homework. Really understand your product, who your competitors are and what types of store your competitors sell to.**

## **IDENTIFYING THE BUYERS**

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Looking at your competitors' websites is a useful way of identifying stores you could be contacting. Don't forget the importance of the internet for searching for contact names of Buyers; search for conferences, events related to fashion as they often confirm these details. Also check through trade journals and magazines such as Drapers, which often give names of buyers in their news items.

It is important to secure UK stockists first, particularly in London, because the other buyers will be regularly doing their own market research and will hopefully come across your product when they are doing their competitor analysis.

Think on-line stockists as well as bricks and mortar stores.

Also think 'outside of the box'. Are there stores that don't carry your particular type of product line, that may be interested in diversifying a little? Stores are always looking for something new.

Contact some of the organisations listed in our 'Getting Advice' factsheet. Many of them will have Meet The Buyer Events, which can be great for networking.

Because of the data protection act, there are few store databases around that can be shared. So start your own. List all your wish-list stores you would like to sell to in the UK, then further internationally. Then start calling them to get buyers' names and contact details. It's a thankless task, but you have to persevere.

## IDENTIFYING THE BUYERS

Switchboards at the larger stores will not give out names, so you will need to address any correspondence to the 'Womenswear Contemporary Buyer' or whichever department is relevant to you. Smaller stores may be more helpful. But remember, everyone is busy. If they give you details of an Assistant Buyer, rather than the Head Buyer, try to be persistent to get the Head Buyer's details. But don't make a nuisance of yourself; people have long memories.

You also need to know how the buying world functions. Buyers often spend a large proportion of their season's budget before they even get to the tradefairs. So this is key to your timing. Try to see buyers about a month before the key tradefairs. If you leave it much later, your call will just be wasted. For example, there's no point in trying to contact buyers during London and Paris Fashion Weeks. The buyers will all be busy trying to see the shows and visiting the 20-30 showrooms on their hectic schedule.

It's unlikely that you can afford to exhibit at any of the international tradefairs in your first year, but do try to attend so that you can be networking. Check on entry criteria. Not all tradefairs allow non buyers or press in.

## APPROACHING BUYERS

We are all busy, and bombarded daily with 100s of unwanted emails. So you may have a limited opportunity to attract the attention of a buyer once you have identified him/her.

It is vital that you research the market to make sure your product is special, at whatever level, and that it is different enough from the hundreds of collections that are already out there. You will need to point out these reasons to any buyer you are lucky enough to meet. You need to find a way of make them want to see what you are doing, and what is special. You need to make them hungry to want your product and to be in at the beginning. So your first email or phone-call is important – make sure it is strong.

You can try emailing – but there will need to be something catchy in the email title for them to bother opening it.

You can try hand-delivering or posting something to the buyer. But make sure it is not just a letter. Make an impact. The packaging needs to make them curious enough to open the envelope/package; and when they open it, you want them to respond with 'This is interesting. I'll look out for them'. You might have included a postcard or lookbook promoting your collection, or maybe a beautiful small sample of textile – followed up a couple of weeks later with a postcard or lookbook.

**IT IS VITAL THAT YOU RESEARCH THE MARKET TO MAKE SURE YOUR PRODUCT IS SPECIAL, AT WHATEVER LEVEL, AND THAT IT IS DIFFERENT ENOUGH FROM THE HUNDREDS OF COLLECTIONS THAT ARE ALREADY OUT THERE.**

## GETTING PREPARED FOR THE MEETING

If you are lucky enough to get an appointment, make sure you are on time, completely prepared and as professional as possible. You might only get 15 minutes of their time and may not get a second chance.

Depending on what product type you design, take along the following:

- 3-4 key pieces from your collection
- Your portfolio
- A press release
- Any press cuttings  
(can also include on-line coverage)

Be clear about your product: what sort of volumes can you produce?; what wholesale price are you aiming to sell for?; and importantly – will it sell in their store once their 270% markup is added? (note that this figure varies from store to store, but it is a useful indicator).

Also be ready to negotiate and think on your feet. It's unlikely that a buyer will buy from you in the first season they meet you. They'll probably agree to watch you over the next season and may be interested in meeting up again next season. Hopefully though, your product is very different and they'll be desperate to have you in their store.

Lack of orders can be really soul destroying. How much do you want to be in their store? How much do you need to secure your first IMPORTANT stockist?

We don't encourage designers to offer goods on a Sale-Or-Return basis but if the store is really important, you might need to think about offering SOR terms in the first season – for a limited number of pieces. You will need to have your own funding in place to make sure you can afford to take this risk, but it could make the difference between having ONE stockist that you can list and promote, than no stockist at all.

## MAJOR FASHION TRADEFAIRS

This list on the next page covers many of the key tradefairs in the UK and further afield, but does not cover every tradefair worldwide, as it is unlikely that you would have the resources to be travelling to many international tradefairs in your first year or two or setting up your business.

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**TRADEFAIR LIST**  
**- BY PRODUCT**

Menswear	Womenswear	Accessories	Swimwear	Footwear	Sportswear	Streetwear
A Fair	A Fair	Chic	Harrogate Lingerie & Swimwear Exhibition	A Fair	Bodylook	Blue
Berlin Fashion Week	Berlin Fashion Week	Première Classe	Swimshow	Expo Riva Schuh	Running Order	Bread & Butter
Blue	CPD	Premium		MICAM		Londonedge and Londoncentral
Paris Men's Fashion Week	Premium	Prêt à Porter Paris		Premium		Margin
Pitti Uomo	Prêt à Porter Paris	Pure London		Pure London		Red Flag
Premium	Pure London	Surf Shop		Running Order		
Rendez-Vous Homme	The Exhibition at London Fashion Week	The Exhibition at London Fashion Week		Surf Shop		
The Collective	Who's Next	Pulse				
Tranoï Homme						
White Homme						
Who's Next						
Young Fashion	Kidswear	Lingerie	Hosiery	Jewellery	Leather	
Pure London	Bubble London	Bodylook	Bodylook	International Jewellery London (IJL)	MIPEL	
Surf Shop	Bubble New York	Harrogate Lingerie & Swimwear Exhibition	Harrogate Lingerie & Swimwear Exhibition	Pulse		
	Pitti Bimbo					

(UK tradefairs are highlighted in orange)

**TRADEFAIR LIST**  
**- COUNTRY AND**  
**CONTACT DETAILS**

Exhibition Name	City/Country	Products	Website
A Fair	Antwerp, Belgium	Womenswear, Menswear and footwear	<a href="http://www.afair.be">www.afair.be</a>
Berlin Fashion Week	Berlin, Germany	Womenswear and menswear	<a href="http://www.mbfashionweek.com">www.mbfashionweek.com</a>
Blue	New York, USA	Menswear and streetwear	<a href="http://www.enkshows.com/blue">www.enkshows.com/blue</a>
Bodylook	Düsseldorf, Germany	Lingerie, underwear, hosiery and active wear	<a href="http://www.igedo.com">www.igedo.com</a>
Bread & Butter	Berlin, Germany	Streetwear	<a href="http://www.breadandbutter.com">www.breadandbutter.com</a>
Bubble London	London, England	Kidswear	<a href="http://www.bubbletradeshows.com">www.bubbletradeshows.com</a>
Bubble New York	New York, USA	Kidswear	<a href="http://www.bubblenewyork.com">www.bubblenewyork.com</a>
Chic	Coventry, England	Accessories	<a href="http://www.chicuk.ciom">www.chicuk.ciom</a>
CPD	Düsseldorf, Germany	Womenswear	<a href="http://www.igedo.com">www.igedo.com</a>
Expo Riva Schuh	Riva del Garda, Italy	Footwear	<a href="http://www.exporivaschuh.it">www.exporivaschuh.it</a>
Harrogate Lingerie & Swimwear Exhibition	Harrogate, England	Lingerie, swimwear and hosiery	<a href="http://www.lingerie-show.com">www.lingerie-show.com</a>
International Jewellery London (IJL)	London, England	Jewellery	<a href="http://www.jewellerylondon.com">www.jewellerylondon.com</a>
Londonedge and Londoncentral	London, England	Streetwear and alternative fashion	<a href="http://www.londonedge.com">www.londonedge.com</a>
Margin	London, England	Streetwear	<a href="http://www.margin.tv">www.margin.tv</a>
MICAM	Milan, Italy	Footwear	<a href="http://www.micamonline.com">www.micamonline.com</a>
MIPEL	Milan, Italy	Leather Goods	<a href="http://www.mipel.com">www.mipel.com</a>
Paris Men's Fashion Week	Paris, France	Menswear	<a href="http://www.modeaparis.com">www.modeaparis.com</a>
Pitti Bimbo	Florence, Italy	Kidswear	<a href="http://www.pittimagine.com">www.pittimagine.com</a>
Pitti Uomo	Florence, Italy	Menswear	<a href="http://www.pittimagine.com">www.pittimagine.com</a>
Première Classe	Paris, France	Accessories	<a href="http://www.premiere-classe.com">www.premiere-classe.com</a>
Premium	Berlin, Germany	Womenswear, menswear and some footwear and accessories	<a href="http://www.premiumexhibitions.com">www.premiumexhibitions.com</a>
Prêt à Porter Paris	Paris, France	Womenswear and accessories	<a href="http://www.pretparis.com">www.pretparis.com</a>
Project New York	New York, USA	Menswear, Womenswear and footwear	<a href="http://www.projectshow.com">www.projectshow.com</a>

(UK tradefairs are highlighted in orange)

**TRADEFAIR LIST**  
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**CONTACT DETAILS**

Exhibition Name	City/Country	Products	Website
Pulse	London, England	Jewellery and accessories	<a href="http://www.pulse-london.com">www.pulse-london.com</a>
Pure London	London, England	Womenswear, young fashion, footwear and accessories	<a href="http://www.purewomenswear.co.uk">www.purewomenswear.co.uk</a>
Red Flag	Munich, Germany	Streetwear	<a href="http://www.theredflag.de">www.theredflag.de</a>
Rendez-Vous Homme	Paris, France	Menswear	<a href="http://www.rendez-vous-paris.com">www.rendez-vous-paris.com</a>
Running Order	Munich, Germany	Sports-inspired clothing and footwear	<a href="http://www.running-order.de">www.running-order.de</a>
Surf Shop	Devon, England	Young fashion, footwear and accessories	<a href="http://www.surfshopexpo.com">www.surfshopexpo.com</a>
Swimshow	Miami, USA	Swimwear	<a href="http://www.swimshow.com">www.swimshow.com</a>
The Collective	New York, USA	Menswear	<a href="http://www.enkshows.com/collective">www.enkshows.com/collective</a>
The Exhibition at London Fashion Week	London, England	Womenswear and accessories	<a href="http://www.londonfashionweek.co.uk">www.londonfashionweek.co.uk</a>
Tranoï Homme	Paris, France	Menswear	<a href="http://www.tranoi.com">www.tranoi.com</a>
White Homme	Milan, Italy	Menswear	<a href="http://www.whiteshow.it">www.whiteshow.it</a>
Who's Next	Paris, France	Womenswear and menswear	<a href="http://www.whosnext.com">www.whosnext.com</a>

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## Working with manufacturers

**The fashion industry relies heavily on informal information networks, so make use of these to find out which manufacturers are best at the products that you want to make.**

### LOCATING A MANUFACTURER

Ask around amongst other designers that you know in the area: not only will they be able to make recommendations, they will also be able to flag up any manufacturers that they've had problems with, so you'll know to avoid them.

A good place to start is through the organisations listed in our fact-sheet on 'Getting Advice'. Some of them will have knowledge of the manufacturers based in their region. There is an 'Online Manufacturers Showcase' which features on the [www.fashion-enter.com](http://www.fashion-enter.com) site. However, bear in mind that listings such as these come with no guarantee of production quality because they are self-selected.

Some manufacturers will have their own websites, but don't rule others out on the basis of not being very web-savvy. Many good, well-established businesses rely entirely on word-of-mouth for publicity.

Once you have located a factory, you still need to ask a lot of questions before placing your order. Young designers are often so grateful to have found anyone who will make their order, they overlook some important factors in the production process.

These are some questions you might want to ask:

- What rates are they quoting you? Some manufacturers will try to charge sample rates for small production runs. Don't be afraid to negotiate on price if you feel that it is not reasonable.
- Investigate payment terms. Do they expect full payment on delivery, within 30 days, up front etc.? Remember that you will need to keep to your part of the arrangement, so don't agree to payments that you know you will not be able to meet on time.
- What kind of garments do they usually make? Are they for labels that you have seen before and are they of a production quality that you would be happy with?
- Is the manufacturer used to working with small businesses and happy to produce small orders? Small design companies will find it hard to compete for production space if the manufacturer usually only takes large orders for the mass market or large high street retailers.
- Are they able to work with the fabrics that you use? This is very important as some manufacturers struggle to work with 'difficult' fabrics such as silk, jersey and other stretch fabrics.
- Are they going to be able to deliver on time? If you don't give a manufacturer plenty of notice, you risk rushed production, compromised quality and late delivery of your order. Similarly, if you are trying to get your order made at a very busy time in the fashion calendar, you will need to plan the timing carefully. Leave yourself plenty of time to explore your options for production.
- If you can, get quotes from more than one manufacturer before you make a decision – it will give you more leverage for negotiation and give you a good picture of the production options in your area. However, manufacturers usually won't quote a price until they have made a garment, and they will treat this as a sample, and charge you a sampling price for this.



## BEFORE PRODUCTION BEGINS

If at all possible, go and visit the factory. It's not the most glamorous part of the job, but you'll get a sense straightaway of how professional the manufacturer is.

- How is the factory organised?
- Do they seem to take care of the products they are working with?
- Do they have the equipment to make your products? This may sound like a strange question, but not all factories keep up to speed with relevant technology. If you need a specific finish or detail on your designs, are they going to be able to do it?
- If your design requires handwork, do the staff have sufficient skills to do this?
- How does the manager deal with any questions and concerns that you have?

If you are happy with the factory, do try to get the manager to sign a contract before work begins. Contracts help maintain a professional attitude on all sides and could prove useful if there are any disputes. If the manufacturer that you are working with doesn't usually make use of contracts, draw one up yourself, outlining the order size, timing, cost and terms of payment that have been agreed. Again, ask around other designers to see what kinds of contracts they use.

Don't forget your part in the pre-production process – make sure you have a production-ready sample. One of the biggest problems that manufacturers have with inexperienced designers is that they present samples that aren't production ready. As well as a correct sample and patterns, you need to be able to provide very clear instructions with sketches, etc. where appropriate. Don't assume that the manufacturer will just be able to 'work it out', particularly if the design is complex or unconventional.

Manufacturers and machinists aren't necessarily very fashion-aware, so be prepared to explain the aesthetic that you are trying to achieve if you sense that they don't quite get the look you are after. If this is the first time you've worked with a particular manufacturer, make sure you visit them and explain your aesthetic. Take your look-books, and show examples of the type of finishing and details you are after.

It is also essential that your fabrics and trims are delivered on time. Too often, designers place their order with the factory without having checked that everything will be there on time. This can become a real problem if all components are not there on time – you may lose the production slot that was allocated, which could result in late delivery. Also bear in mind that factory managers will often not even start manufacturing an order until all the components are ready. For example, don't have fabrics delivered to the production unit and then have to wait 2 weeks for zips. They will not appreciate being treated as a storage facility.

What are the arrangements for collection / delivery of the finished garments? Some manufacturers provide delivery services but others may expect you to organize this yourself.

Some designers shy away from the production aspect of their work, but if the production quality isn't up to scratch, you'll end up getting left with returns. If you're not confident that you understand how good production works, try to get some advice from a production manager, or even another designer with good production knowledge.

## **ONCE PRODUCTION HAS STARTED**

Don't assume that the whole process will be free of glitches. Experienced production managers always recommend that you keep a close eye on production throughout the process. If your studio is located close to the factory use this to your advantage – go and check on production as often as possible. This can be useful for picking up on any problems early on in the process, when they will be easier to rectify.

Try to establish a good relationship with the manufacturer so that you can learn from them. For instance, they might be able to suggest a solution if some aspect of the design is proving difficult to produce.

Stay professional. Manufacturers sometimes avoid working with young designers because they worry about their ability to pay on time – don't reinforce this belief by failing to meet your contractual obligations. If you are unfortunate enough to have a dispute with the manufacturer, try to resolve it calmly.

Don't be intimidated by manufacturers: without your orders, they can't stay in business. They may have more experience, but if you establish an equal relationship from the outset, you're much more likely to get the quality of production that you want.

## **AFTER THE ORDER HAS BEEN COMPLETED**

You'll probably just be relieved that you got your order completed on time, but it is useful to reflect on how the production went overall.

- Were you satisfied with the quality of production? If not, you need to raise this with the manufacturer. There is no reason for you to accept garments that you are not happy with.
- Did you get your timings right? Had you left enough time for the delivery of fabrics and trims? How could you improve on this?
- Would you use the manufacturer again? Would you recommend them to another designer?
- Were there any problems with meeting the payments on time?

If you were happy with the work they did, let the manufacturer know. It could be the start of a mutually beneficial relationship.

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## Getting advice

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**During your first year in business, you are going to need as much advice as you can get.**

Whichever sector you are entering, you will come across a unique network of NEED TO KNOW people : buyers, press, manufacturers, photographers, and many more.

NETWORK like crazy. Make an impression and get everyone's business card. You never know who could be useful to you in the future. But be careful, these contacts are precious, so don't take advantage and make a nuisance of yourself.

### GETTING ADVICE

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Your college may be a good source of advice. Many regions have specific start-up advice workshops on offer through the colleges, universities or business support projects. Many are heavily subsidised, courtesy of regional public funding. The workshops and advisory sessions on offer should cover some of the essentials of operating as a freelancer, or running your business. Topics may include ethical sourcing, marketing advice, CAD/CAM training etc.

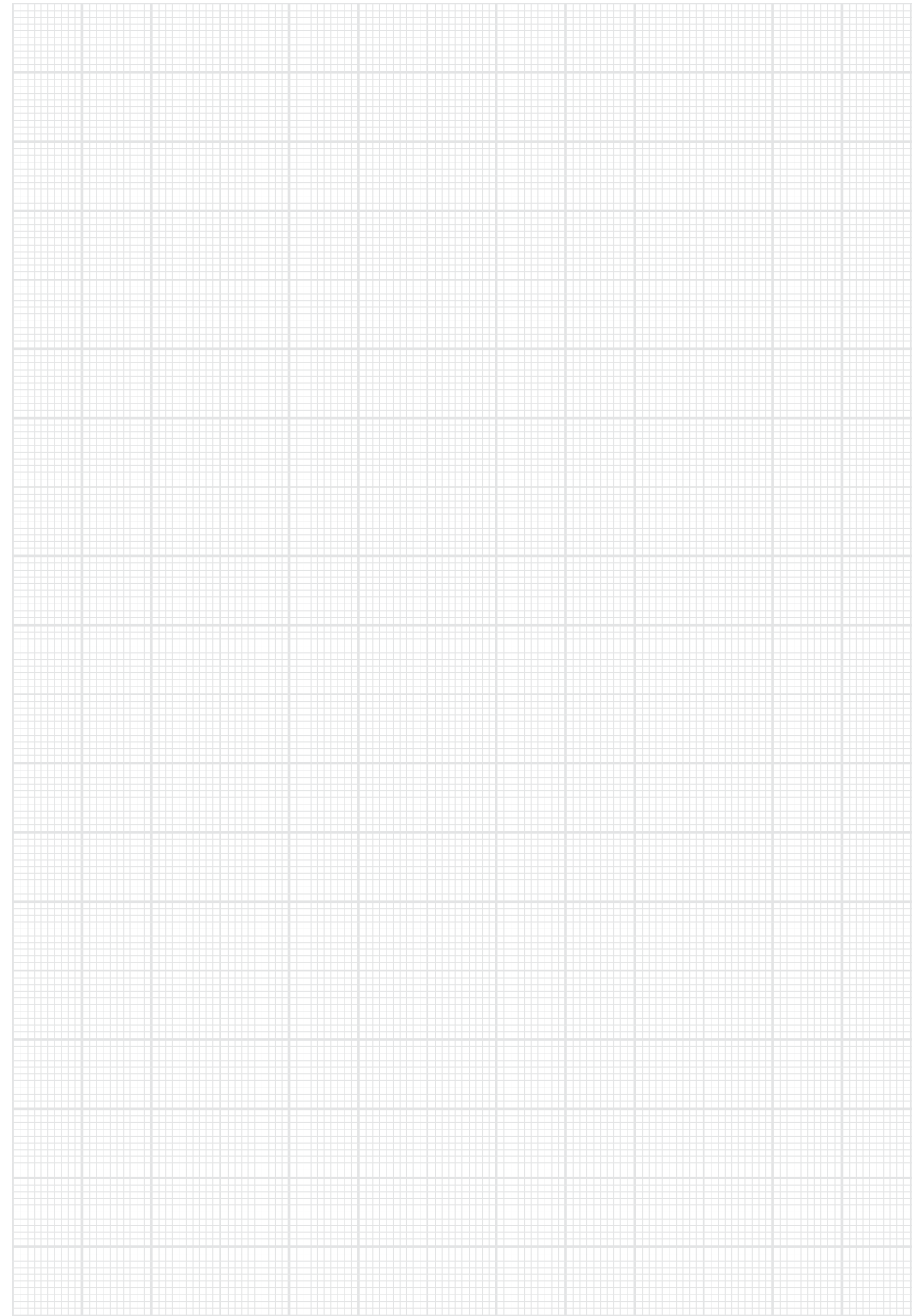
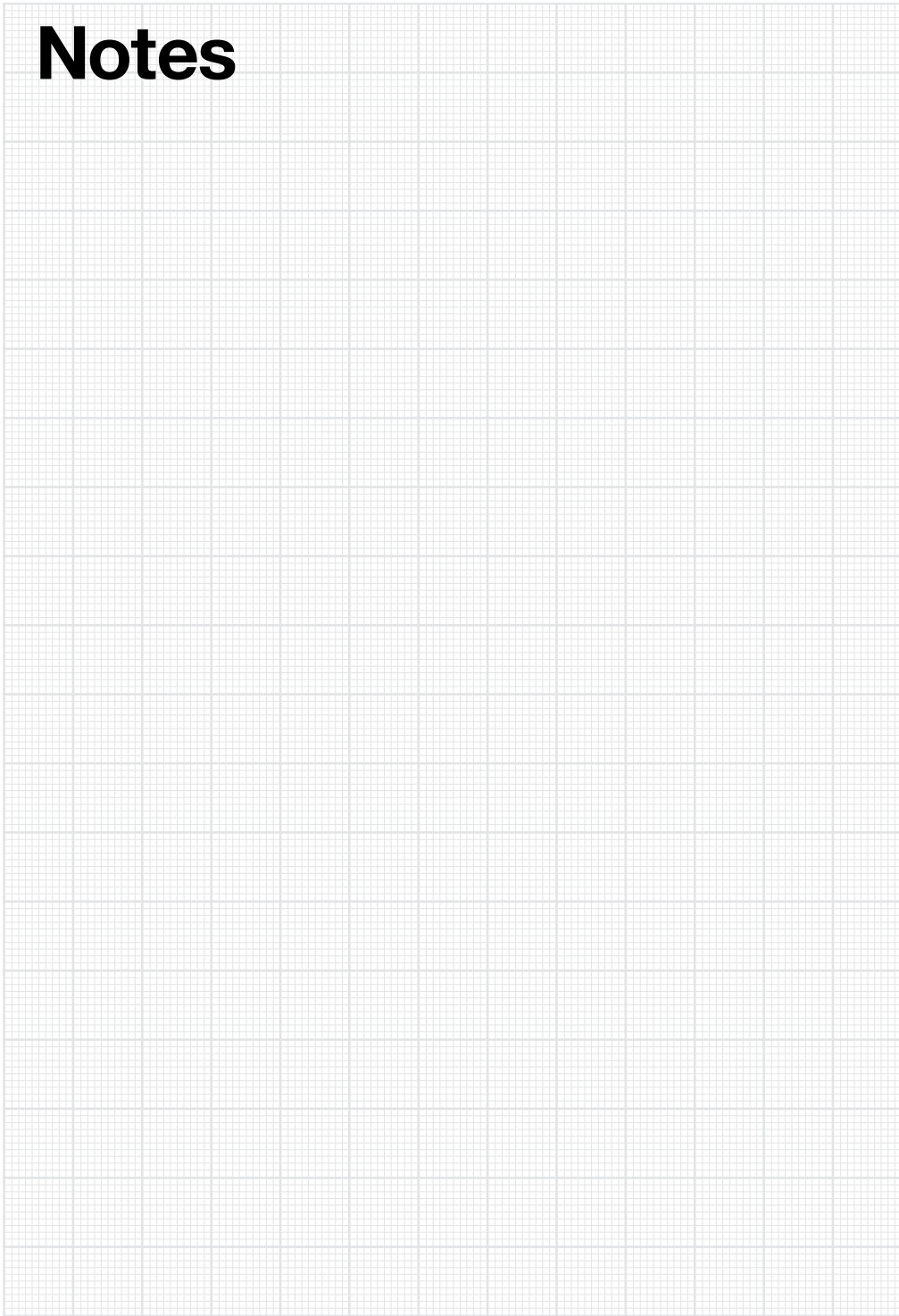
On the following pages we have listed a range of organisations which will be a useful starting point for you. Even if some of them are not based in your area, check out their websites as they may have on-line resources that could be useful to you.

**MAKE AN IMPRESSION AND GET EVERYONE'S BUSINESS CARD. YOU NEVER KNOW WHO COULD BE USEFUL TO YOU IN THE FUTURE.**

Organization	Website	Useful for:
A.C.I.D. (Anti Copyright in Design)	<a href="http://www.acid.eu.com">www.acid.eu.com</a>	Organisation with excellent advice on protecting against the theft of intellectual property (IP) theft
British Fashion Council	<a href="http://www.britishfashioncouncil.com">www.britishfashioncouncil.com</a> <a href="http://www.londonfashionweek.co.uk">www.londonfashionweek.co.uk</a>	Showcases leading British high-end fashion designers; and supports new designers through its New Generation scheme
Business Link	<a href="http://www.businesslink.gov.uk">www.businesslink.gov.uk</a>	Provides extensive advice through its self-help portal. Doesn't have a fashion focus, but still a valuable place to get general business advice
Centre for Fashion Enterprise	<a href="http://www.fashion-enterprise.com">www.fashion-enterprise.com</a>	London's pioneering business development and growth business support provider for emerging high-end designer talent
Centre for Sustainable Fashion	<a href="http://www.fashion.arts.ac.uk/csf.htm">www.fashion.arts.ac.uk/csf.htm</a> <a href="http://www.sustainable-fashion.com">www.sustainable-fashion.com</a>	Supports, inspires and creates innovative and sustainable approaches to fashion through supporting businesses
Chartered Society of Designers	<a href="http://www.csd.org.uk">www.csd.org.uk</a>	A membership based organization which may be valuable to you at a later stage in your business – offers professional services
Cockpit Arts	<a href="http://www.cockpitarts.com">www.cockpitarts.com</a>	Provide studio space and support to new creative businesses
Craft Central (formerly Clerkenwell Green Association)	<a href="http://www.craftcentral.org.uk">www.craftcentral.org.uk</a>	Encourages and supports designer/maker businesses through business training, tailored mentoring, networking opportunities and studio space
Creative Industries Development	<a href="http://www.cida.org">www.cida.org</a>	Provides workshops, advice and useful factsheets for businesses across the creative industries
Design Association	<a href="http://www.design-association.org">www.design-association.org</a>	A membership based organization which may be valuable to you at a later stage in your business – offers professional services
Design Factory	<a href="http://www.designfactory.org.uk">www.designfactory.org.uk</a>	Support emerging talent and long-term creative and business development
ECCA (Enterprise Centre for the Creative Arts)	<a href="http://www.ecca-london.org">www.ecca-london.org</a>	Offers free advice and services to students and any creative business in London, eg Funding Opportunities, IP, Promotional/Marketing Advice, - Courses/Professional Development
East London Small Business Centre	<a href="http://www.goeast.org">www.goeast.org</a>	Offers support for designers beginning or running a business in East London
East Midlands Textile Association	<a href="http://www.emtex.org.uk">www.emtex.org.uk</a>	Assists companies to introduce new technologies and working practices, and aid Clothing & Textile manufacturers to develop trade within the global marketplace

Organization	Website	Useful for:
Ethical Fashion Forum	<a href="http://www.ethicalfashionforum.com">www.ethicalfashionforum.com</a>	Supports and promote sustainable practices, facilitate collaboration, raise awareness and provide the tools and resources needed to reduce poverty, environmental damage and raise standards in the fashion industry
Fashion Awareness Direct	<a href="http://www.fad.org.uk">www.fad.org.uk</a>	Run workshops and competitions where fashion industry professionals inspire young people to develop skills for their future
Fashion Business Resource Studio	<a href="http://www.fashion.arts.ac.uk/28277.htm">www.fashion.arts.ac.uk/28277.htm</a>	Shares the creative, business and technical expertise of London College of Fashion with the fashion and clothing industry. An invaluable link to industry for Industry linked projects and internships
Fashion East	<a href="http://www.fashioneast.co.uk">www.fashioneast.co.uk</a>	Showcases innovative new fashion designers during London Fashion Week
Fashion Fringe	<a href="http://www.fashionfringe.co.uk">www.fashionfringe.co.uk</a>	A talent competition – great to spring board your design label
Fashion Capital	<a href="http://www.fashioncapital.co.uk">www.fashioncapital.co.uk</a>	Offers a wide variety of services to fashion designers
Hidden Art	<a href="http://www.hiddenart.com">www.hiddenart.com</a>	Supports and promotes UK designers and designer-makers through offering a platform to sell and exhibit work and improve access to information
Manchester Fashion Network	<a href="http://www.manchesterfashion.com">www.manchesterfashion.com</a>	A business networking service that creates and develops business opportunities to the fashion, apparel and creative industries across the UK
On/Off	<a href="http://www.thedoll.org/onoff">www.thedoll.org/onoff</a>	Showcases innovative new fashion designers during London Fashion Week
Own It	<a href="http://www.own-it.org">www.own-it.org</a>	Provides legal advice concerning Intellectual Property (IP) through FAQs, fact sheets and articles
Portobello Business Centre	<a href="http://www.pbc.co.uk">www.pbc.co.uk</a>	Has a team of business advisors to help start-ups in the west London area (check website for specific geographical details)
Princes Trust	<a href="http://www.princes-trust.org.uk">www.princes-trust.org.uk</a>	Offers practical and financial support to 14 to 30-year-olds to give them the confidence to enter the workplace
UK Fashion and Textiles Association (UKFT)	<a href="http://www.5portlandplace.org.uk">www.5portlandplace.org.uk</a>	The new trade body for the fashion and apparel sector. The website has lots of useful guidance
Scottish Enterprise	<a href="http://www.scottish-enterprise.com">www.scottish-enterprise.com</a>	Help ambitious businesses in Scotland to grow and become more successful
UK Fashion Exports	<a href="http://www.5portlandplace.org.uk">www.5portlandplace.org.uk</a>	Offers export advice and strategic market guidance. Can also provide funding towards the cost of exhibiting at recognized overseas tradefairs (subject to funding being available)
UKTI (UK Trade Invest & Investment)	<a href="http://www.uktradeinvest.gov.uk">www.uktradeinvest.gov.uk</a>	Provide business opportunities, expert trade advice and support to UK-based companies wishing to grow their business overseas
Vauxhall Fashion Scout	<a href="http://www.vauxhallfashionscout.co.uk">www.vauxhallfashionscout.co.uk</a>	Showcases innovative new fashion designers during London Fashion Week

# Notes



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