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As Seen In

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Garment-Industry Veteran Ilse Metchek Provides Her Take on COVID-19

For **California Fashion Association** President Ilse Metchek, the business of apparel is more than an industry that produces clothing. With a career that has spanned decades, Metchek has served as a resource for many in the field.

California Apparel News spoke with Metchek to discuss the impact COVID-19 will continue to have on the industry.

Over the course of your time working in the fashion industry, have you ever experienced any situation comparable to the COVID-19 pandemic?

That has affected the entire industry like this? No. [In the past], certain segments have been affected. I remember after 9/11, everyone thought it was the beginning of World War III. Everything stopped, and I remember the panic when there were no shipments, no flights, nothing was going on and nobody knew whether anybody would need another T-shirt again in their lives. The question of whether fashion is relevant I've seen before but certainly not to the extent that it affects the entire supply chain from buttons to zippers to thread—to everything. September 11 only really affected the United States. This is a global issue.

How do you think the effects of this pandemic will impact the apparel supply chain?

Through 2021, everyone will be circumspect about what they buy. They'll be very cautious because you will not have that much fluff in the economy. We don't know when this is going to end. I doubt very much that 30 percent returns are going on because people are buying necessities. You're not taking too many chances online. If you need a new T-shirt, you're buying a new T-shirt, but you're not buying a little fluffy print dress to wear at a lawn party in the summer.

When do you think that mindset will end?

If we are all healthy, it's going to be a great Christmas. Everybody's business is a nine-month year this year, never to be made up. You don't make up the loss. If the dust settles around September, Christmas is going to be a great season. It will be a cause for rejoicing because we got through it. A year after the dust settles, after the first day that people breathe freely, there will be a buying spree. I recently had a conversation with an upscale furniture company, and they are getting orders because people are home and they have nothing to do. They are looking at their shabby couch or shabby chair or something that needs replacing and they are going on **Wayfair** to get replacements. People—particularly in the United States—have an itch to spend money.

So, you look around and you're in pajamas, or a T-shirt and jeans, you're walking around in slippers. You will not be able to look at these pieces anymore. That is replacement buying. You will have a full year of replacement buying.

Between the California Work Sharing Program, the United States Small Business Association Economic Injury Disaster Loans and anticipated relief from the CARES ACT stimulus bill, do you feel these aid options will greatly help the fashion industry?

I will have 10 gray hairs before everyone sees a dime. It's all trickling down from the feds to the

states. The states will decide who gets what, and that scares me.

Every situation is different, but how would you advise businesses regarding methods to safeguard what they have built and how to work through this situation?

I can't if I don't see their bank statements. I do not know if they have a cushion. I do not know if they have furloughed their employees or fired them. I do not know what they expect to do in the future. You may have to reassess what the product you make stands for.

That is not to say that they will not come through it, but if they're trying to sell ice in the winter—or bathing suits in May at full price—it's not going to happen. If you're going to try and sell winter clothes in August, that is also not going to happen. More so than ever, it is going to be buy now, wear now.

What is the most important piece of information our readers should keep in mind as they weather the storm created by COVID-19?

Evaluate your business for future emergencies. Evaluate your inventory. Evaluate your product. What are you doing—for whom and why? I think this gives everybody pause.

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California Fashion Association

444 South Flower Street, Los Angeles, California 90071 | Tel: 213 688 6288 | Fax: 213 688 6290
email: info@calfashion.org | Website: www.californiafashionassociation.org

