

GOING ON

INSTINCT



“I’m very much a fatalist,”

says *Fashion* magazine editor-in-chief Bernadette Morra. After working at The Toronto Star as a fashion journalist for 20 years, it might seem like she was fated to helm one of Canada’s top beauty and fashion magazines—but landing where she is today wasn’t all happenstance. Morra shares her advice for arriving at the right destination for you.

BY KATE DALEY

LET YOUR GUT LEAD

When Morra began her writing career, she wanted to be a music critic. After graduating with a social sciences degree from the University of Toronto, she pursued a media writing diploma at Sheridan College to hone her journalism skills; music, a subject which she was passionate about, was a natural fit.

Showing gumption even from the start, she began pitching story ideas and wrote sample music reviews for an editor at the Canadian Press to prove that she could, indeed, write. But when she finally met with the editor in person to discuss her reviews, he had a different subject in mind for her. “He looked at me and said ‘you should be writing about fashion,’” she says. “I clearly had a natural interest in it which was evident by what I was wearing,” says Morra.

So why hadn’t she considered fashion writing earlier? It simply wasn’t the pervasive category it is today. Morra had loved fashion for as long as she could remember—she’d been buying *Vogue* ever since she had an own allowance. “It was like a light bulb went on over my head. A chill went through my body and I realized he was absolutely right.”

She began writing fashion stories for the newswire, some of which ended up in the *The Toronto Star*. Her reputation for being a fast, reliable writer earned her more work as a freelance writer for *The Star* and *Flare* magazine, who eventually hired her as a staff writer in 1993. But then she hit another crossroads.

She had been at the magazine for less than two months when she was offered a position at *The Toronto Star* as a fashion writer. While she loved magazines, Morra knew that she wanted to focus on newspapers at that point in her life—she liked the fast pace, shorter stories and hustle of the news world. “I felt the newspaper was a better fit. That was intuition and also just paying attention to that feeling of what I enjoyed most,” she says. And it appears she was right—Morra worked at *The Star* for 20 years as a fashion writer and then editor.

CHOOSE SUBSTANCE OVER STYLE

On a daily basis, Morra is hounded by young writers and bloggers who want to know how to land a position at *Fashion* magazine. What does she tell them? “There’s so much focus put on networking and cultivating one’s own brand that actually producing a superior quality product or service often becomes a lower priority.”

Morra suggests focusing on doing the hard work to back up your ambition before promoting yourself on social platforms like Twitter. Talent will always be in demand, she says, so follow the example of talented people, surround yourself with them and let them mentor you. In the end, if you work hard, they’ll want to work with you.

START SMALL

Before Morra’s freelance fashion writing took off, she edited closed-caption subtitles for television. She recommends that everyone start out doing something where they’ll learn the ins and outs of their business from the bottom. “Don’t be afraid of starting small,” she says. “If you can afford to, intern. It’s a fantastic way to strike things off your list. It really helps you narrow your focus,” she says. And get involved in as many aspects of your work as possible.

Through her post at *The Star*, Morra had the opportunity to work closely on assignments with photographers, the art department, and

the production staff so when she finally became an editor at *Fashion*, she understood how to work with a diverse team to create the best product. This applies to any workplace—understanding the entire process allows you to be a successful leader.

FOCUS ON YOUR SKILL SET

“One day, the Canadian poet Irving Layton came and spoke to us at Sheridan College. He said if you want to be a writer, you need an obsession, and that has stuck in my mind all of these years,” says Morra. What he meant was this: “Have something that you are better at than everybody else—a niche,” she says.

DON’T ACT OUT OF EMOTION

In the magazine industry, complications crop up daily. “Situations often arise with photo shoots, like cancelled flights [which can hamper the model’s or photographer’s arrival on set] but you need to stop and take the time to assess what’s really going on,” she says. “Acting on your instincts doesn’t mean being overly emotional or flying off the handle,” she says.

Her preferred method of problem solving is to discuss it with colleagues, analyze the issues and debate a solution before acting on the way she feels. “I hear stories about women slamming doors and throwing tantrums—it’s not necessary,” she says.

LET YOUR DREAMS EVOLVE

“*The Star* was my dream job,” says Morra. “I was having a fantastic career there, interviewing everyone from Karl Lagerfeld to Marc Jacobs to Gianni Versace. But after 20 years I hit a wall and it was a real primal feeling that I needed a change. I instinctually felt if I was going to stay relevant, I had to leave.”

Morra asked for a leave of absence to pursue personal projects and take a breather. But her industry was at the beginning of a sea shift—cuts were common and deep—and she was offered a buy-out package instead. She used that time to get out of publishing, but stay close to fashion by starting her own web site for jewelry lovers. Morra manned the site and freelanced for a year before the publisher of *Fashion* approached her about a maternity leave contract in 2009. “I had never aspired to edit a fashion magazine,” she says. “But I thought ‘well, nobody is ever going to offer me the position of editing Canada’s number one fashion magazine again.’ It was too good to pass up—and Morra’s experience in the fast-paced newspaper world served her well in the transition.

EXPECT IT ALL

Morra, now in her early 50s, has teenage twin boys, Christopher and Matthew. Before they were born in 1998, Morra travelled regularly to London, Milan, Paris and New York covering the runway shows for *The Star*. But after having kids, she scaled back on the travelling. “Cutting back didn’t hurt my career one bit,” she says. “Valued people will not be any less valued if they have children as long as they deliver the same quality of work.”

Now that her boys are 15, she’s ramped up the work commitments again. “You can have it all,” Morra says, “but maybe not all at once.”

INSIDE SCOOP

“There really isn’t any magic formula to success,” says Morra. Focus on being the best at what you do. Whether you’re a chef, an accountant or a television director, concentrate on producing the best work, she says. “That’s what it all comes down to.”