

# Pivot Perfect

*A Thought Leadership Q&A Series by The Brownstone Group*

## **Fern Mallis: The Industry Trailblazer – A Legacy of Connection and Leadership**

Fern Mallis, often referred to as an arbiter of fashion, has been a transformative force in the industry for decades. Best known as the creator of New York Fashion Week, Fern redefined how the world engages with fashion, turning it into a global spectacle and an essential platform for emerging talent. Her career spans pivotal roles at the Council of Fashion Designers of America (CFDA), IMG Fashion, and as an advisor and conceptual consultant to numerous influential brands and organizations. Fern is one of the founding members of Design Industries Foundation Fighting AIDS (DIFFA) and has continued to partner with numerous organizations in the realm of philanthropy and mentorship, including the American Heart Association and the Fashion Institute of Technology. Her current chapter is in consultancy, leveraging her unparalleled expertise to guide businesses and creative ventures toward even greater success.



The Brownstone Group had the honor of meeting with Fern to explore her extraordinary career, her thoughts on leadership in the creative industries, and her profound influence on the evolution of fashion. Her visionary approach and unwavering commitment to fostering innovation continue to inspire generations of designers, executives, and creatives worldwide.

**Timothy Boerkoel (TBB): You've worked for notable brands, interviewed multiple high-profile fashion industry figures in your conversation series at the 92nd Street Y "Fashion Icons with Fern Mallis", and consulted in many capacities throughout your career. How would you describe the Fern Mallis brand, and what does it represent today?**

**Fern Mallis (FM):** My brand represents many different things – it's ME. I am a connector ... a sometimes wise sage that people come to for advice, knowing I've been around the block in the

industry, having worked in fashion longer than most people I know. A very meaningful part of my brand (although I'm not crazy about calling myself a 'brand'), and my life, is encouraging young talent and supporting their journey. I'm a person, so my brand is not a collection of products, but a showcase of creativity, in the forms of direction, ideas, connections, and unique wisdom. I've been passionate about the industry for 40+ years and have strived to be on the right side of everything – including organizing for the right causes and charities; always trying to make the industry work

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smarter and grander for people. Fashion Week is the most notable example of what Fern Mallis has done; however, there are many smaller initiatives that have made a meaningful impact on the clients I've partnered with.

What is different about me is that people have always come to me and I, in turn, react and respond to their needs. I've never tooted my own horn; my preference is that others make moves, and the promotion of Fern Mallis follows organically. However, we are in an evolving industry with people creating their own brands frequently, even buying followers on social media platforms. I, too, am in the process of evolving and creating value from my decades of deeply rooted relationships and experiences. I am connected to so many at this stage in my career; we share a deep and mutual respect, and I'm tapping into that. I continue to be a cheerleader, boosting people up, and creatively conveying their stories and broadcasting their work.

I've also been leading my own consulting firm, Fern Mallis LLC., where I'm officially collaborating with business leaders and creatives to ideate new projects that are tailored to their needs. It's clear that throughout my career, this process of connecting and promoting others has enhanced my own profile.

**TBB: From a very young age, we are all influenced by what is around us, and we take in so much information without even knowing it, almost like osmosis – it finds its way in and becomes a part of our DNA. You came from a family of influencers – with your dad, mom, and uncles all creatives in some capacity. I'm sure family gatherings were a master class in the industry without any conscious awareness of what was being absorbed. What do you remember about that time, and what were the soft skills you witnessed that you now see as**

**helping create the launch pad for your award-winning career?**

**FM:** I was very lucky that my family was creative and my parents encouraged creativity. My mom was a huge supporter of Broadway. They went to the theatre all the time, and when they saw something they liked, they'd buy tickets for my sisters and me. My mom was "a Martha Stewart" before there was a Martha Stewart! She could fix anything; she would find a broken bicycle or toy on the street, bring it home, and wire it into a lamp. She was an amazing cook as well, although she couldn't follow a recipe to save her life. And my dad was smooth and charming. He was a successful salesman, along with his brothers in the fashion industry. I loved going to work with him as a child and experiencing all aspects of his workday; from hanging out in the showroom as he worked with all the buyers and fashion directors to joining him and my uncles for lunch. I picked up a lot of little things along the journey ... like what to order in a nice restaurant as a young kid when I accompanied my dad and his buyers. They would order a Bloody Mary and I would have a Virgin Mary and feel like a big shot.

Walking through the streets was quite an experience as well. At that time, the garment center was a bustling community, with trucks driving up and down the streets and push carts being loaded in and out; it created a vibrant energy of booming manufacturing and retail. It was a wonderful time.

My dad was very nice to everybody; the waitresses at Mary Elizabeth (an industry restaurant around the corner from the showrooms) all knew him and talked with him. I realized then how important it is to be nice to people. Those traits help you through business later in life – so much so that a mantra of mine has been and continues today – be nice.

My dad always brought home from the office a copy of Women's Wear Daily, and I would read all of it; that's how I learned what was going on in the world, along with my dad's great advice (I guess sharing

advice is in my DNA). My parents had good friends whose sons also sought advice from him, and I'd just take it all in (and those sons grew up to become notable retail executives.) A quote of my dad's that has always resonated with me is "no two people should ever have to worry about the same thing." That philosophy freed me up and later proved invaluable when I was running Fashion Week.

Some of the other traits from my parents that have carried through was their sense of encouragement. They were both incredible athletes at a young age. Although that was not something my sisters and I ever embraced, our parents supported whatever paths we wanted to take. My older sister is an architect; she was an interior designer for years and then went back to school to get her MBA in architecture at Harvard. My younger sister, who has passed away, was an artist with a talent for painting Warhol-like commissioned work. She had three daughters who also inherited the creative gene and have all landed in the arts as well.

I'm often asked what my parents did to raise incredibly talented daughters. It's not something I ever gave much thought to; we were all raised in a creative space. I recall whenever my folks would come back from the theatre on Broadway, we'd wake up in the morning and there would be a new assortment of art supplies on the dining table for us – encouragement in a box. We also went to art school at the Brooklyn Museum as kids. It was a great experience to have so much exposure to the arts. Each of us was given a blank canvas.

**TBB: "The conductor of an orchestra doesn't make a sound ... they depend, for their power, on the ability to make other people powerful." This is a quote by Benjamin Zander, an English conductor and music director for the Boston Philharmonic Orchestra. It describes for me what you achieved with the creation of New York Fashion Week by orchestrating a platform for others to best perform and feature their talents.**

### **How does that analogy play out in other roles of yours – past or present?**

**FM:** What a marvelous example to describe my role – I'm the conductor and everyone out there is a part of the orchestra. I try to make sure all the parts work together harmoniously while also overseeing the bigger picture. Fashion Week is very different from how it was in the past, and sometimes I'm asked, "Fern, how did you do it back then?" I used to put those projects together with a "Disney mindset" in my head. Disney considers the consumer in absolutely every facet of the park – wherever you are, even when you're waiting in line, there's always something engaging to do so the experience feels seamless.

For Fashion Week, signage was key and I would share my thoughts as the tents were coming together. "Make sure the signage is higher, like when you walk through an airport, so everyone can see it. Shoulder level is too low and blocks the sign when people are in front of you." Garbage pails were something I noticed as well – we always needed more, and I wanted them wrapped and pretty. I'd labor over the information desk, making deals with florists to provide big arrangements. We'd arrange giveaways depending on the occasion or season: flowers, apples, or even condoms for Valentine's Day. The goal was to create an extraordinary fashion experience.

I somehow remained calm in that chaotic environment. I'd describe it as my stewardess face – you know, when you're on a plane and the flight attendant is serving coffee and the plane jumps or loses altitude. If the attendant continues to serve the coffee, you go back to reading your book. If they drop what they're doing and hurry to buckle up, you know the plane is in trouble. In the fashion show environment, I always felt people were looking to me for that signal. I knew it was my role to portray a sense of calm and order. I had a team to worry about the details, like water dripping down when it was

raining, or snow paralyzing the roofs of the tents. That's where my dad's quote would come to mind – no two people should have to worry about the same thing.

I still try to maintain that sense with the other projects I'm involved with. For my Fashion Icons interview series with the 92nd Street Y, I am very conscious about the guests and their comfort – making sure they arrive smoothly, have what they need, and feel settled. When people want to meet the guest, I try to encourage a picture or introduction. It's always about making it a happy and friendly experience for everyone. Early on during fashion week, I'd create a canopy over the photographers' entrance so they wouldn't have to wait outside in the rain – without them, the world wouldn't even know these fashion shows existed. Sometimes, these are details that can be overlooked. The photographers trudged through the elements, carrying all sorts of equipment, and would work hard to set up before anyone else arrived. They are one critical section of the orchestra that brings the show to life, literally.

Prior to the creation of Fashion Week, there wasn't ONE big fashion experience – just a lot of different people doing their own shows all over the city. Synergy between the shows did not exist, nor did a conduit between times and locations. But once we centralized and organized the event, it became an example of Hillary Clinton's notable line – "it takes a village" ... and it did take a lot of people to make our fashion village work. We got everyone to work together and play together in the same sandbox. That kind of undertaking is never easy, but it worked, and it was worth it.

**TBB: Social media and influencers have accelerated the pace of fashion, shifting the traditional industry formula from heavy reliance on brick-and-mortar to the current trend of reaching audiences through platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and e-commerce sites. What**

**influence do the traditional fashion shows and other fashion events play today and how do you see them transforming to continue to have an impact on the future of fashion and design?**

**FM:** That's a great question and one the entire industry needs to consider. For some designers, I'd advise against doing a fashion show; it's not always the best use of budget dollars; and give some serious consideration to who are you doing it for – what's the end goal? Today there is a different audience at fashion shows – each person is there for a specific purpose; and everyone is judge and jury (although I am not always a believer in their expertise or appreciation of fashion history to make some of the pronouncements made). If you're scrolling through your phone, you're missing the experience of the collection and the privilege to see all the nuances in person. When you're focusing on getting the right shot or being first to post, you miss the whole spirit and reason why fashion shows exist. People used to come prepared, having done their homework, and used the fashion shows to decide which looks would be bought, featured in store windows or ad campaigns. The shows provided a big picture view of the season and solidified buying selections. It's a whole new world now.

I recently attended a big event a designer planned where they invested in bringing in influencers, many young men and some women. On a follow-up call with the company, I asked what the end result was; did the event move the needle at all? The reply was, "it was a draw." In my opinion, that's not good enough. The industry is in such transition now; I'm hard pressed to truly understand it. Social media is a blessing but it can be a nightmare when we live and die by it. A single post can either make someone's career or ruin it – it's a precarious medium to invest so much energy, money, and time in.

As for the influence of fashion events today – designers are unique, and so are their audiences. I am leaning toward more exclusive, smaller, and

targeted approaches – unless you’re a designer like Tommy Hilfiger or Armani and can create a spectacular show, with the benefit of budget and the security of your brand’s prior success.

I’m a believer that young professionals should be mindful of the expenses of a fashion show. At the U.S. Fashion Trust event, winners were awarded \$50,000 to encourage their business – and some spent more than half of it on a fashion show. It could provide more bang for your buck if invested in better staffing, quality product, upgrading materials – something more targeted. Blame me maybe, but the fashion show is still seen as the best way to feature new designs – but fashion shows are not always the answer for everyone. I suggest doing some soul-searching with each client to identify what they’re trying to accomplish.

I do love still life presentations, with the designers available to answer questions and provide quick sound bites. New York Men’s Day, the bi-annual fashion initiative, has been very effective in nurturing emerging talent and showcasing new designers. During this event, an empty studio space is the setting – some people bring in trees and create a jungle; others stack up boxes in a geometric backdrop; and some have live music or a band. It’s another format that allows the designers to create the mood in a way that allows the clothing to speak and their creativity to stand out. Stillness and quiet can sometimes grab your attention and tell a story.

**TBB: You humbly continue to grow your list of philanthropic initiatives with attention to detail and the creation of such PR-worthy and attractive events; you include other influential women who are inspirational and draw a broader audience, all contributing to a greater cause. What do these initiatives mean to you and how do they align with the Fern Mallis brand?**

**FM:** If I could have one wish, to be anyone, I would wish to be a true philanthropist – to have the kind of money where I could really make a difference and

spend my life contributing to different causes. But I try to be the conduit in bringing people together for these meaningful causes. I’ve been very involved from the beginning of my career with the AIDS Movement and was a founding board member of Design Industries Foundation Fighting Aids (DIFFA). I became passionate about these causes because my friends were dying – it was personal. I continued to create some fantastic events for DIFFA at a time when people weren’t talking about it and the government wasn’t involved.

When I was Executive Director of the Council of Fashion Designers of America (CFDA), we continued to support the fight against AIDS with 7th on Sale events. There was also Fashion Targets Breast Cancer, working together with the Ralph Lauren team, and raising millions of dollars for research. Afterwards, we licensed Fashion Targets Breast Cancer to fashion communities all over the world. This all aligns with my interest: making connections and making a difference.

Through the years, I’ve been honored by various charitable organizations for cancer research, such as the Samuel Waxman Cancer Research Foundation in New York City. It’s been rewarding and is another example of the power of the fashion industry when we unite for a cause. I continue to be invited to get involved in new and different ways: for example, there is an American Heart Association folder in front of me right now to review. When it first started, I helped formalize the Red Dress Initiative for Fashion Week, working closely with all the designers to get their red dress designs on display. It became a huge celebrity event, and even included Laura Bush when she was First Lady. It’s important to carve out time to give back, and it’s particularly meaningful when the cause is close to your heart.

One year, General Motors sponsored Fashion Week, and we had created the Concept Cure initiative. I had the most fun with this project! Each designer personalized a car for the GM brands ... imagine



Betsy Johnson's car with rhinestones across the dashboard; Joseph Abboud's with the interior roof as a map of the world; Vivienne Tam's car with its orange dragon head gear shift; and Anna Sui's shiny purple SUV with animal print interiors. The creative power shared between industries was very inspiring. General Motors later partnered with the Rosie O'Donnell Show to auction these cars off. It was an extraordinary project to be a part of: thinking that far outside the box creatively and philanthropically.

**TBB: Fashion influences more than just the clothes we wear – it translates to other industries as well. How does your deep knowledge of fashion, your “rolodex” of developed relationships, and your creative business sense allow you in your current consulting role to use that skillset to help shape other industries? I could envision a “Fern Mallis” college course to set the next generation on their own path.**

**FM:** Fashion is a bellwether for many other industries and world events. Currently, any consulting work I'm either involved with or exploring still remains within the fashion sphere. Luckily, I've maintained my “rolodex” – and there was a time that I was very proud I had a triple rolodex (although no one under 30 has a clue what that is). I've activated my network and am reconnecting with people within the industry that I've worked with in the past, realizing the value in the relationships I've cultivated. It's time for my creativity to branch out in new and different ways for this next phase of my consulting work.

Recently at the WWD Apparel & Retail CEO Summit, I met some new young designers and caught up with some old pals, including Richard Dickson, who I had previously collaborated with on the Barbie Turns 50 Fashion Show in 2009 in the tents during his time at Mattel, and now he's the CEO of Gap, Inc. On the spot, I shared some ideas with him, envisioning an opportunity for collaboration, and our eyes lit up from the discussion. That spark is what I love! That

moment of making a meaningful connection. How do you summarize that in a CV (curriculum vitae or resume)? It's about activating creativity, with the goal of impacting a brand's revenue.

I'm also on the board of the FIT (Fashion Institute of Technology) Foundation, which nurtures the next generation in fashion and supports their initiatives. As Chair of the Nominating Governance Committee, it's a rewarding opportunity to meet interesting people and bring them together to support the mission.

Years ago, I launched Fern's Finds, my clothing and accessories collection with QVC and HSN ... and I would love to bring it back. It all began with my travels to India – I'd return wearing unique items and people wanted to know where they came from. These items inspired the Fern's Finds collection. I believe there is still a need to design product that speaks to my generation, who, at times, can feel overlooked in terms of style and size.

This also coincides with an idea to partner with the right brand, sharing my voice and industry position as a brand ambassador of sorts, someone who represents them, promotes them, and wears their collection in speaking to my segment of the industry; we continue to hold an important place in the market.

There are several Fern Mallis projects in motion right now that I'm happy to share with you. We are about to commence work on my third Fashion Icons book published by Rizzoli. Additionally, there is a Fern Mallis documentary in progress. I've seen the producer's sizzle reel and am very proud of where this is heading. The initial reaction from anyone who has seen it is – I want to see more! We are in the process of raising capital to further that effort to completion.

One additional and exciting adventure is heating up, one might say ... a restaurant called “Fern” is in the development stage. It can be described as a fashion version of Elaine's, with an Upper East Side location

envisioned. This is a fun and meaningful partnership with a good friend of mine who built Magnolia Bakery into a global business. He's the business side and I'm the creative side. Another dear friend of mine, Scott Bromley (who designed Studio 54) would be the designer for "Fern." It's all perfectly packaged in my head right now. At this stage of my career, I'm thrilled to develop this concept with an homage to the fashion industry – just imagine textiles and patterns, prints, pillows, designer

aprons and staff apparel, and menus that are works of art. My goal is to feature the fashion industry in many ways and create a stunning space where all are welcome, comfortable, and enjoy a wonderful time and a great meal.

With these exciting adventures ahead, I'm more inspired than ever to keep bringing new ideas to life and sharing them with the world.

### About The Brownstone Group

*The Brownstone Group was launched in 2015 with a mission to offer the most effective executive search, strategic consulting, and leadership advisory services. We introduce exceptional talent to brands and their leaders, transforming businesses and careers. Founder Tim Boerkoel possesses more than 25 years of retail, consumer, hospitality, and luxury experience, advising and recruiting for startups and global corporations alike in their searches for CEOs, Presidents, Board Members and C-Suite talent. Brownstone, along with its global network of affiliate partners, operates as a true partner to clients ensuring swift yet long-lasting results.*

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