

# The New York Times

## What Lies Beneath That Oscars Outfit?

By CAROLINE TELL



Kerry O'Brien, a former financial publicist who lives in Shelburne, Vt., founded Commando in 2003

When Hollywood walks the red carpet Sunday night for the Oscars, one label will be worn surreptitiously by many of the A-list stars. But it's not a secret couture line or, heaven forbid, something from the local mall.

It's Commando, a line of undergarments that bills itself as "invisible underwear" by using a stretch fabric in place of an elastic band to create a smooth silhouette.

"With all of the lights and cameras, you have to choose something that is very seamless," said Leslie Fremar, a New York-based stylist who often uses Commando items when dressing celebrities like Julianne Moore and Reese Witherspoon, both of whom she will dress for Sunday's ceremony.

"It is the basis for all of the looks we create," said Karla Welch, a Los Angeles stylist who dresses Felicity Jones, Olivia Wilde and Amy Poehler. "It's simple, smart and it's this little secret that's available to everyone. It's rocket science for underwear."

Commando is also a regular at New York Fashion Week, where designers including Rebecca Minkoff, Prabal Gurung and Michelle Smith of Milly appreciate how the undergarments are barely visible from the front row, even when the models are wearing low-cut dresses and leg-baring skirts.

"The pieces allow the models to move freely and showcase my looks," said Ms. Smith, whose models wore nude Commando thongs for her runway show last Monday.

The line's inconspicuous nature was put to the test at the Council of Fashion Designers of America 2014 awards, when Rihanna wore a see-through dress by Adam Selman that left little to the imagination. Judging by how little attention the underwear received (and how much buzz the dress generated), the piece served its function.

"When it comes to nude thongs, I always choose Commando," said Mel Ottenberg, Rihanna's longtime stylist. "They don't show, even when the dress is totally sheer and you're going to see everything."

Given the embrace by fashion insiders, one might expect Commando to be the brainchild of a Hollywood stylist or New York designer. But it was created by Kerry O'Brien, a 43-year-old former financial publicist who lives in Shelburne, Vt., and spends her free time skiing in Stowe and paddleboarding on Lake Champlain.

Ms. O'Brien founded Commando in 2003, after working as a senior vice president at the public relations firm Weber Shandwick, where she specialized in financial media. In 2001, she quit her job the day after the Sept. 11 attacks. "I knew I would have to watch 9/11 coverage over and over as part of my job, and I couldn't do it," Ms. O'Brien said. "Looking back, I was probably burnt out anyway."

As she was trying to figure out her next move, she would field questions from friends seeking advice on what to wear. Instead of offering tips on clothing and makeup, she would invariably ask them about their underwear. And more often than not, she found the undergarments unflattering.

"Elastic is the enemy of underwear," she said. "No one looks good or feels good with elastic wrapped around them."

So Ms. O'Brien set out to create a line of her own, the difference being that she wanted the underwear to be elastic-free and without trim. She found a manufacturer in New York that could make a pair of panties stay up by using a stretchy nylon fabric that is interlaced with Lycra. The material and shape keep the underwear from falling down without an elastic band.

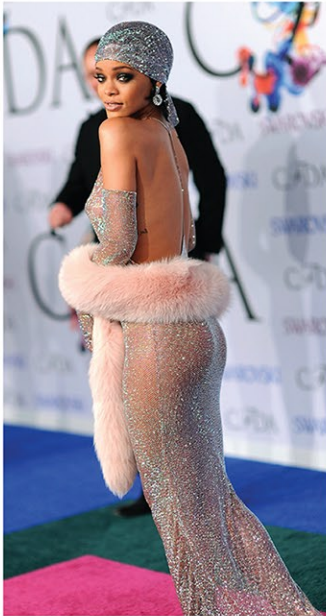
She called it Commando, in a reference to the slang term for not wearing any underwear. Ms. O'Brien created two prototypes and brought them to Bergdorf Goodman and Neiman Marcus. The stores placed orders immediately, she said.

"I've spent a lot of time in the dressing room with customers in various form of undress," said Ken Downing, senior vice president and fashion director at Neiman Marcus. "They are always surprised by what the right underpinning can do. Commando smoothes out everything."

Using money she had saved and the sales skills she honed in public relations, she went door-to-door to sell her line to retailers around the country. Within a year, more than 500 stores were carrying Commando, she said.

While Commando may have been one of the first elastic-free brands to reach the market, it is an increasingly crowded space, with Cosabella, Maidenform and Spanx now offering similar products. Commando has added colors, prints and styles as well as slips, tops and swimwear.

As for the Oscars, Ms. O'Brien will be watching in her home, like everyone else, and won't know for sure who will be wearing Commando. Which is the point. "A great undergarment can make a dress fall completely differently," she said.



Rihanna put Commando to the test with a see-through dress in 2014.