

BUSINESS / MARKETING

How a third-generation knitwear manufacturer aims to disrupt fashion



Mia Fratino's knitwear products are ethically made in a factory in Sri Lanka. Supplied

Mia Fratino co-founder and creative director Ar

By [Heather McIlvaine](#) | October 18, 2023

Australian knitwear brand Mia Fratino is on a mission to disrupt the fashion industry and change for the better the way stores – and consumers – buy clothes. We speak with co-founder and creative director Amy Jones about the brand's no-sale policy, and rethinking the seasonal calendar.

***Inside Retail:* Tell me about your brand, Mia Fratino, and how it started.**

Amy Jones: I'm third-generation in the knitwear manufacturing industry – my grandparents and my parents ran a manufacturing business for 45-plus years. I grew up on the factory floor and got to learn how it all worked. They sold the business in 2014, and I was approached by Tim Fitzpatrick, who was actually a competitor – his family had an operation in Sydney – and we joined forces.

My family's company manufactured onshore, and we had what's called whole-garment manufacturing. It's zero-waste, so it knits out a jumper with all the seams and everything. Dad was all about that – it's a Japanese weaving technology, it's very sophisticated, very advanced, and most of the big knitters in Italy use them. It's non-labour intensive, so you can manufacture in Australia, whereas the finishing process, which is how Tim's business operated, requires a lot more staff, which is expensive. He moved his premises offshore about 12 years ago.

I joined forces with Tim in 2015, and in 2016, Mia Fratino was born. I came into the relationship as a designer and a marketer and he's very much the manufacturing and logistics part of it. But we share this passion for sustainability and ethically made garments. He and his father-in-law and brother-in-law built a factory in Sri Lanka – it's entirely ethical and run like a European or Australian factory. They've got about 600 employees there and that's where we do all our manufacturing. It's a very big operation.

The first three years of Mia Fratino were done on the kitchen table. After three years, we took a space in Balaclava [in Melbourne]. We've got a showroom downstairs and do design and marketing upstairs. In August 2020, I took on my first employee, and we've now got five or six staff.

IR: One of the interesting things about Mia Fratino is that you have a no-sale policy. Can you tell me more about that?

AJ: Part of our model from the very beginning was to put the best quality Mongolian cashmere out there for an affordable price, so when our customers – whether they're stores or consumers online – ask for a discount, our policy is really quite straightforward. No, because there's not a margin in there for it. We're being true and honest in saying, 'This is our best price.'

Yes, we have a margin because we have a business and things to pay, but we stand really firm on our pricing structure. It gives us a stable foundation, and we're very proud of it because it's totally sincere. Customers know that they're going to come in and buy a product, and they're not going to see it in the bargain bin for 50 per cent off. It means they've got trust in what they're buying.

IR: Earlier this year, you called on the fashion industry to realign the

sales calendar with the seasons. Is that something you have always felt strongly about, or did your thinking on it evolve over time?

AJ: It's something that's always irked me, and over the years, I've tried to have a voice on it, but as a start-up, you're just struggling to survive, and it's hard to be heard when you're still trying to get out there. It's always been a frustration of mine, and I honestly feel that it's always been a frustration of the stores, because ultimately, it cuts into their margins as well.

***IR:* The discrepancy between the fashion calendar and the seasonal calendar has been the status quo for many years. What about it irks you?**

AJ: It's the waste and the devaluation of the product. You're putting something in stores, and then you're saying immediately, 'I'm happy to slash that [price] in half.' In Australia, we do some things really well when it comes to sustainability – putting things in the right bins, not using plastic shopping bags, we're the leaders in solar. But when it comes to fashion, we've got a fair way to go. I think it is about consumer education.

***IR:* Can you explain what drives that devaluation? Does it stem from the fact that winter clothes land in-store before winter begins, and as soon as winter hits, summer clothes arrive, so retailers need to discount their stock to make room for the next season?**

AJ: In the southern hemisphere, 1 February is when your winter product launches. Some brands even launch in January, when you're still having 30-degree [Celsius] days. 1 June is when the sale frenzy starts to happen. It's fabricated to push volume – not at any particular margin. If you see something and it's 50 per cent off, you think, 'That's great', and you'll buy two or three of them. But you don't need them. It's encouraging waste.

It comes back to education – people don't really understand the massive

volume of waste and huge piles of landfill that are being created. And I think it's getting worse. In countries like Norway and Germany, there's a higher level of education on these topics.

IR: It seems to me that you need a critical mass of brands and stores and industry leaders to all jump together and change their approach to the fashion calendar. If you have only a few people trying to change things, it won't really affect the industry.

AJ: I guess that's what we're experimenting with at the moment – that's why we're doing different initiatives like our no-sale stance and 12-month sales timeline.

When we were operating in Australia and New Zealand, I used to design two collections a year. Now we're in Europe, so I design a separate collection for them, so all of a sudden, I'm designing four to six collections a year. It's a huge volume of work, whereas if we moved to a more efficient structure, which would be everybody selling the same collection, we could sell to stores in Europe six months out, and then stores in Australia would have a 12-month lead time to buy. It would empower the retailers.

We haven't done it yet, but I've pitched it to all my agents and a lot of my stores as something that I'm potentially going to roll out in 2025. We need to consider ways that we can do stuff differently. It's a really interesting concept, and I don't know many Australian brands doing it, except for Zipporah. They started doing it about 10 years ago, and if you go

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g to see what the European stores have in stock, because their international market is stronger than their Australian market.

IR: Are you having conversations with your retail partners about these issues?

AJ: Yes, we're constantly talking to our stores. We sell indent, and then we

normally drop three times in the season, and our stores can buy stock from us as well. We know that they continue to buy stock throughout the season but it's definitely something that I am discussing with them. I get a different message from everyone, but they're certainly open to it. A lot of our stores share the same values as us.

There's so much unknown with this, but that's part of being a leader in this industry – you have to take those leaps. You learn if it doesn't work, and if it does work, hopefully that has an effect on people who follow suit, and that's really what you want.

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