

Who's Next Paris

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Report by Paul Alger and Martial Ramage at UKFT

Let's start with a little history...

Who's Next Paris has been on UKFT's international tradeshow listing since the event was created. Originally created by Xavier Clergerie and Bertrand Foäche, in direct competition to the established Prêt à Porter Paris and SEHM exhibitions, these *enfants terribles* of the fashion industry set out to disrupt the established menswear and womenswear calendar in the 1990s. And disrupt it they did!

SEHM, Europe's largest international menswear, show collapsed barely four seasons after Who's Next was created and Prêt à Porter Paris was brought into Who's Next a few seasons later. However, with the merger and some of the partnerships which came with it, the show became more mainstream and predominantly about mid-market womenswear collections. The first preview edition of Première Classe, the groundbreaking accessories show which was added to Who's Next, continues to be its jewel in the crown but it too has lost some its identity as more commercial brands and products have been allowed in, creating a mishmash of quality and cheaper collections which do not always sit well together.

Cities such as Berlin and Copenhagen have reinvented their fashion trade shows with Berlin, in particular, becoming major competitors to Who's Next and the famous (or infamous) Bread and Butter concept which took Berlin and Barcelona by storm was itself inspired by the early pioneering spirit of Who's Next but severely altered the Paris show's trajectory. Finally, as the wholesale market itself has shrunk and been changed beyond all recognition and brands look to smaller and more niche events which are free to enter instead of big shows which charge an entrance fee, the larger shows in Paris find themselves struggling to carve themselves out a new niche. New competitors have set themselves up in competition, luring away buyers and exhibitors to pre-collection events and showrooms or shows in other cities. Who's Next's second edition Première Classe Tuileries also does this, leading buyers and brands having to choose between two events in Paris barely three weeks apart.

And so the disruptors have become victims of disruption.

The present day

Nowadays, more than 20 years after its creation, Who's Next still welcomes an estimated 45,000 buyers at the Porte de Versailles exhibition centre with approx. 1,200 French and international collections. The majority of the visitors are from France and the surrounding countries but 35% of them are key international buyers, representing independent boutiques and department stores from all over France, the EU, Japan, China and the rest of

the world. For many of these buyers, this is still their main buying and research event and many of them are thought not to visit other fashion weeks or events.

The show remains primarily commercial, attracting mid-market retailers and the national and international press but there are still some better quality collections in the show, particularly in the premium parts of *Première Classe* and *Fame* (upscale ready to wear) but often exhibitors complain that their Indian and Chinese suppliers are also showing in other areas of the show, thereby cannibalising their business.

The show is generally well laid out and presented, although there were some (justified) complaints from some of the accessory collections who were allocated strange stand layouts and locations. One or two stands had no walls, leaving signboards and fittings precariously balanced. Overall, this was a smaller British group than we have typically seen in the past as companies concentrate their limited budgets on other events, possibly the pre-collections showrooms in Paris, or cut back on tradeshow expenditure due to concerns over Brexit.

Visitor traffic

Saturday was quieter than usual. This was generally attributed to the *Gilets Jaunes* in Paris and the regions, leaving independent retailers unwilling to leave their stores and some Asian stores deciding to postpone their trips to Paris. Sunday was the busiest day and, as usual, Monday saw the show visited by most of the Parisian-based buying houses representing US and Asian store groups.

Most of the British exhibitors were fairly pleased with the show although some of the new exhibitors expressed concern that they had not seen enough buyers at the show to cover their costs. It has always been the case that buyers expect to see brands show for at least a couple of seasons before they will engage with them but, as buyers become more risk averse, it is tougher than ever before for new collections to reach the buyers. Whilst the French are statistically the largest buyer group at the show, as always, most of the British exhibitors had seen mainly non-French accounts although some had placed orders with French businesses. The vast majority of British businesses said they had been questioned energetically by EU and, interestingly, non-EU buyers about the potential disruption to business caused by Brexit.

Charlotte Drew from ByEloise said: “Who’s Next is truly an International trade show with buyers from all over Europe and the rest of the world, helping us to access markets that are new to us and highly relevant. We opened several large new accounts and will definitely be coming back for the next show”.

Paul Alger, director of International business at UKFT said: “Who’s Next offers buyers a vast array of products in one place – which is increasingly rare nowadays. Although the feedback from exhibitors has been generally positive, we have a smaller group this season and Who’s Next needs to address the fundamental shift in the wholesale market and how this impacts

on the timing and relevance of entire the Parisian trade show scene. It feels like it's time for some more disruption".

The next edition of Who's Next will run from 6-9th September 2019.

To apply for a TAP reimbursement grant to help with your costs for Who's Next, please email Paul Alger for the grant application forms paul.alger@ukft.org.