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# think big Hot Biz

by  
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## CHIC TO CHIC

Of course, there are the horror stories. Like the times swimwear designer Malia Mills and her business partner, Julia Stern, spent long nights mixing kettles of fabric dye in Mills' studio apartment because they couldn't afford colored cloth. Or the time a factory breakdown forced them to construct 100 bathing suits by hand in two days.

Let's not forget the rejection. At the start of her career, Mills, now 32, offered to work for a top designer for free but was turned down.

And did we mention the money problems? Mills worked as a waitress while trying to get her New York City business, Malia Mills Inc., off the ground, but wound up with \$100,000 in personal debt anyway. She's still paying that off.

If tales like these don't scare you away—and you have a truly unique idea—you might be ready to start your own fashion-design company. But don't expect it to be all martinis and feather boas, honey.

The fashion industry demands penance from its novices. Count on long, stress-filled days; a battalion of competitors; and, at least in the beginning, very little payback in every entrepreneur's favorite shade: green. In fact, starting a fashion-design company from scratch, with limited capital, is a lot like boot camp for your soul. Still, despite the myriad challenges—and sometimes because of them—a growing number of young entrepreneurs, equipped with little more than a sewing machine and a dream, are launching their own fashion lines.



**STITCHFEST:** Fashion is cutthroat, but if you're as determined as bikini designer Malia Mills, you, too, can make waves.

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is gaining attention with his Latino-inspired men's clothing, particularly his *guayaberas*, or traditional Mexican wedding shirts, which he has adapted to American tastes.

"I've stumbled onto an interesting niche," says Melendez, owner of Maji by Melendez in Dana Point, California. "Latinos make up a significant portion of the population, especially in Southern California, but this segment has been largely overlooked by designers and retailers. I hope to emerge as a leader in the design, production and distribution of clothing geared toward this demographic

as well as consumers who are looking for more unique attire with a little attitude."

Many of Bundy's students have gotten a toehold via costume design for the entertainment industry. Others have found their niche custom-designing one-of-a-kind fashions for individuals—a growing market, she says, because people are tired of off-the-rack outfits that look alike.

Bundy strongly recommends young designers work for an established company before plunging in on their own. Mills followed that advice. After graduating from both Cornell University, with a degree in apparel design, and a Paris design school, she took a job as design assistant at a San Francisco-based

### FIND YOUR FIT

Barbara Bundy, vice president of education at the Fashion Institute of Design and Merchandising in Los Angeles, confirms that many students like the idea of running their own companies, free from the chains imposed by established fashion houses. Being your own boss promises the possibility of complete creative freedom and control.

Those most likely to succeed in the fashion industry start with an idea that will appeal to a specialized or niche market. Mills' sassy bikinis, in flirty prints like cheetah, are designed to fit like lingerie and come in mix-and-match sizes so women can choose the top and bottom that fit. Twenty-two-year-old Elle Hamm of Irvine, California, designs and sells form-fitting sportswear with an athletic edge that can serve as daywear or eveningwear. And 28-year-old designer Mario "Maji" Melendez

with a degree in apparel design, and a Paris design school, she took a job as design assistant at a San Francisco-based

reporter, was working on the *Sports Illustrated* and remembered that Mills used to work for her. She called her old friend and suggested she move to Hawaii, where she practically lived. Mills whipped up six suits, none of which were sold. But feeling that she had to try, she quit her job and moved to New York City.

Alas, the Big Apple wasn't the answer. The rivalry of yet another young swimwear designer was the next eight months working as a design assistant while reaping the benefits. In 1992, she decided to start her own line.

