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CENTRAL ASIA FASHION

**36** INTERNATIONAL FASHION EXHIBITION  
МЕЖДУНАРОДНАЯ ВЫСТАВКА МОДЫ  
**AUTUMN-2025**

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## FASHION SCENES: HOW STORE DESIGN SHAPES BRAND IMAGE IN KAZAKHSTAN

In the modern world, an offline retail outlet is not just a place of sale; it is also an important point of contact between a brand and its customers. At the business conference of the 36th International Fashion Exhibition Central Asia Fashion Autumn-2025, experts touched upon topics such as store design for building a strong brand, the specifics of the Kazakhstan market, trends in fashion scenography, and the influence of design on sales and customer loyalty.

Marina Polkovnikova, moderator of the business session, expert in the development and implementation of design concepts and merchandising, founder of VMC Retail and international consultant at EBRR, has been working in Kazakhstan since 2018. During this time, she has familiarised herself with the specifics of the market, which differ greatly from those of the Russian retail sector. Nevertheless, the Kazakh market is no less interesting and unique in its own right. *«One topic that arises at the briefing stage with the client is whether Kazakhstani brands and designers should incorporate ethnic elements into the physical store space. I will give examples of cases that have already been implemented. The multi-brand store Lenazh, for example, showcases the work of the best Kazakhstani designers who participated in Kazakhstan Fashion Week. The brief was to create a space that would appeal to the target audience of stylists and their clients. We focused on achieving a high level of «Instagrammability»: every corner of the store was designed to encourage customers to take photos there. This was especially evident in the fitting room area, where graphics and details created a recognisable background for photos and videos, instantly identifying the brand. The result is a modern, stylish space with no ethnic references. The second example is a premium shoe store in Dostyk*



Expert in the development and implementation of design concepts and merchandising,  
founder of VMC Retail Marina Polkovnikova

Plaza. Although only European brands were presented here, we understood our client and focused on elements that appealed to the Kazakhstani consumer. Gold was an essential part of the interior design — not flashy or intrusive, but delicately integrated into the retail equipment to create an atmosphere of cosiness and luxury. After all, for the Kazakhstani audience, gold is an important and familiar symbol in interiors, and its presence enhanced the emotional perception of the brand».

Entrepreneur, founder of the ethnic brand Moonshuaq, popularizer of Kazakh culture through modern fashion Alisher Bakyt told how he created the brand from scratch, investing only 100 dollars: «Before that, I had a studio where they sewed stage costumes, such as those depicting Kazakh batyrs and traditional dresses for girls. These costumes were rented out for films, music videos and other projects. Gradually, my wife and I began to experiment, with her making accessories and headdresses. One day, when we went out to the mall with them, we were surprised when people came up and asked: 'Where can we buy these?' Then we realised that there was a demand for them. For the first year and a half, we worked exclusively online, with 90% of orders coming via the internet and the remaining 10% through concept stores where we rented racks to display clothes. Today, the situation has changed, with around 70% of sales now being made offline. People want to see our collections in person, touch them and try them on. These are not basic T-shirts, the size of which is easy to predict online. These are designer clothes, each item of which features hand embroidery, ancient patterns and unique technologies. Our brand is worn by people who are not afraid of attention and want to express their identity and culture. Moreover, an increasing proportion of our clients are foreigners, accounting for around 20-25% of our customer base. As a result, our turnover has grown eightfold in a year and a half. A year ago, our turnover was 5 million; now it is 40 million, and it is growing steadily. At the same time, our team is small, with only five people. I have assembled a team of highly skilled professionals, and we outsource tasks that are time-consuming and do not require constant presence. This compact yet robust structure has enabled us to grow so quickly. To date, we have served over 10,000 clients. The main secret is that our clothes sell themselves. We don't invest in large-scale advertising campaigns, but we actively use various channels, such as streams, collaborations and offline points in tourist areas. The rail arena system still works well, too. Why do people choose us? Because we offer quality, limited availability and authenticity. We create capsule collections in small batches of 50 items, with no repetition. This creates special value. People look for past collections, but they are no longer available. Then they wait for new ones. It is fundamental to us that our customers feel special and that our products are unique and not mass-produced. Simple sales mechanics also work: We need 100 dialogues a day and a 15% conversion rate to fulfil the plan».



Entrepreneur, founder of the ethnic brand Moonshuaq Alisher Bakyt

The brand actively went offline because Alisher noticed that the same clients come back again and again throughout the year. It immediately became clear that there was a need not only for purchases, but also for live communication: «That's why we opened a 130-square-meter showroom in the center of Arbat together



*with our partners. There is a coffee shop there, and every evening we try to organize small events, create a space for the community. As for the payback: traditionally, 3 years are allocated for such projects, but we plan to reach it in 3 months. Perhaps this sounds too ambitious, but we have a proven approach. I am an impatient person: if I understand that the collection will not «go well», I simply take samples off the display cases, even if they are completely ready and photographed. There have been many such cases. But it is this principle that allowed us to work almost without leftovers - no more than 5%. The cycle from creation to sale takes an average of 2 months, and thanks to accurate analytics, we understand how quickly we can return the investment», - the businessman explained.*

*Marina Polkovnikova noted that this is a very strong indicator: «Usually it is good if you manage to keep the balance within 20%, everyone strives for at least 10%. Considering that the business is only 3 years old, you are already implementing global retail trends. The first is a coffee shop in a store. This has long been practiced in Asia, in Germany for a quarter of a century, and in Russia this format is only gaining momentum. The second trend is the creation of an offline community. Today, this is the key to retaining a loyal audience. Offline events, activities, a special club atmosphere are formed, where you want to come again and again. This is a good option for many brands that otherwise cannot compete with large monopolists».*

*Alisher Bakyt added that one regular customer is more valuable to the company than a hundred new ones: «That's why we introduced a lifetime warranty on our clothes. For example, if a lock or button breaks, a person can contact us at any time without receipts or deadlines. We create the entire product from scratch ourselves and can take on such responsibility. Our specialty is also interior scenography, urbanism, complemented by national carpets. These carpets are starting to disappear, they lie in warehouses, forgotten. I wanted to bring them back to life, to remind people of their roots. Old photographs often created the feeling that ethnic culture was dull, black and white, but this is not the case. I wanted to bring back the brightness, to show the richness. Even the brand name «Moonshuaq» is associated with this. Many people think that it is «the ray of the month», but in the Kazakh language it is closer to «the ray of the sun». That's why we use bright accents to show that ethnic can be modern, cheerful and bright».*

*Indira Adil, co-founder and CFO of the Adili brand, recalled that the brand was created in 2010, and from the very beginning its mission has been closely linked to certain values: reviving the spirit of the native land, preserving and rethinking family traditions, combining ethnicity with modern design. «We have always striven to bring our style into all areas of everyday life, whether that be meetings with friends, business negotiations or simply enjoying the comfort of home. Kazakhstani culture is incredibly rich in symbols and meanings, and our designs are both authentic and modern. Our brand started life as a small 20-square-metre boutique in Astana, which we created with our own hands. We soon opened a store in Almaty, focusing on shopping centres. This was a bold step, as we had no experience or base, but it gave us the opportunity to*



Co-founder and CFO of the Adili brand Indira Adil

*develop alongside large international brands. In 2017, we launched our own production of home textiles, created unique prints and received the «Product of the Year of Kazakhstan» award. We then took another step forward by entering the clothing category. Working out patterns, thinking through collections, setting up production and building market analytics was not easy, but in two years we learned to work with fabrics and technologies, collected expertise and developed our skills. Now, clothing makes up 50% of our range», - Indira said.*

*Today, the brand is represented in Almaty, Astana and other regions of Kazakhstan, including Shymkent and Taraz. The stores have become more spacious, brighter, with comfortable fitting rooms, thoughtful ergonomics and atmosphere. The assortment includes clothes, home textiles and accessories, but it is silk scarves and accessories that remain Adili's calling card, flagship product and main source of inspiration. «We continue to open new stores and expand our collections. Economic realities suggest that we should be in a higher segment, closer to the premium class, as we emphasise the quality, naturalness and tactile comfort of our fabrics. We create limited editions and pay attention to every detail, wanting each client who chooses our products to feel a special connection to the rich Kazakh culture», - the entrepreneur believes.*

*Indira Adil and her team only began actively developing online sales in 2025, when they assembled a team of specialists responsible for organising photo shoots, creating content and keeping it constantly updated. Currently, online sales account for around 7% of total sales, but the aim is to increase this figure to at least 30%. «We understand the trends and are moving in that direction. Initially, our brand was built around a basic assortment with a slight ethnic accent, rather than ultra-fashionable things. Our images are not overly shocking; everything is quite restrained, «in Kazakh style», with a minimum number of prints. However, we don't want to be rigidly tied only to Kazakh ethnicity. The fact is that oriental ornaments are internationally recognised. They can be found in Uzbekistan and Arab countries, too. This is the result of a historical mixture of cultures. Therefore, we have a broader approach – we have an oriental identity. At the same time, we try to create timeless collections that remain relevant for more than one season. Regarding the store concept, we renovated the store in Astana. When clothes were added to the product line, it became clear that we needed fitting rooms and more neutral walls. Our assortment is quite bright, so basic, calm walls allow you to focus better on the products. Overall, the indicators are good. In Shymkent, it naturally took time for the audience to adjust to our fresher, more modern approach, as they traditionally prefer «expensive and rich» items. They are now starting to accept it. », - the speaker concluded.*

*The founder of the Kazakhstani clothing brands Mimioriki and Global Nomads, member of the Presidium of the Light Industry Association of Kazakhstan Inna Apenko recalled that the children's brand Mimioriki turned 16 years old: «When we started in 2009, people were very wary of goods made in Kazakhstan, and even more so of clothing. We were the first Kazakhstani brand to enter the fashion retail sector and appear in shopping centres. Back then, doors were closed to us. Developers did not believe that a domestic brand could compete with European ones, and consumers did not believe it could either. I am a marketer by training, and my colleagues have often said: «You have a cool product and a strong concept, but it's better not to mention that it's made in Kazakhstan. The name sounds almost Japanese; let the market think it's from Japan». But I have always disagreed with this approach. It seemed wrong to me that we did not value our own brands and heroes. We were among the first to openly declare: «Made in Kazakhstan». Today, the situation is completely different. New, strong brands are emerging and growing against the backdrop of a large wave of patriotism. Now, it's fashionable to wear Kazakh products. We produced children's clothing for many years, and our clients asked: «Make an adult line. We dress children with you, and we want to wear your clothes ourselves». I want to express special respect to everyone who works with production in Kazakhstan: this is an incredibly difficult business! Every day I asked myself: «Why did we choose such a difficult path? ». If a retailer's work begins the moment the goods arrive in the country, then our process starts much earlier: development, purchasing fabrics and accessories abroad, production, and only then the product arrives in the store. By this point, you are already exhausted, and a new cycle lies ahead. The DNA of global brands always contains the values of the country in which they are created. American brands convey the spirit of the American dream,*

innovation, globality, French brands are associated with aesthetics, beauty, an exquisite lifestyle, German brands - with functionality, precision, quality. And I wondered: what is Kazakhstan as a country about? This is how the dream of Global Nomads appeared. Switching to a second brand turned out to be incredibly difficult, but during the pandemic, when shopping centers were closed and children's clothing was not in demand, we created a family collection for adults and children. It saved us: the share of this capsule was 40% of Mimioriki's annual sales. This is how Global Nomads was born. The semantic basis of the brand is the connection of the past and the future. We are inspired by the nomadic past of the Kazakh people and transfer it to the modern image of digital nomads – «digital nomads». We work a lot with ornament. Kazakh ornament is a language through which you can «read» history. Each symbol has a meaning: longevity, well-being, family comfort. In clothing, these elements are transformed not only into decor, but also into a kind of amulets. Our little symbol, like the crocodile in Lacoste, is the Samruk bird, a symbol of freedom and the absence of borders. There is also Baiterek - the tree of life, a symbol of continuity and connection of generations».



Founder of the Kazakhstani clothing brands Mimioriki and Global Nomads, member of the Presidium of the Light Industry Association of Kazakhstan Inna Apenko

Today, Global Nomads has three of its own stores - in Almaty, Astana and 5 franchise stores in the regions. The company feels a decrease in traffic in shopping centers and a decrease in purchasing power, so it is actively developing the online direction. So far, the share of online sales is only 5%, but 25 countries have already received products. «This is the fulfillment of a dream - to bring Kazakhstani cultural codes to the world. We build promotion on collaborations and info-reasons: these are special drops, client days when I personally work in the store, these are meetings with friends and subscribers. For example, a collaboration with the singer Dimash Kudaibergen opened the brand to a huge audience outside the country. We realized that this is how retail works today: do not wait for traffic from the shopping center, but create reasons ourselves that attract people offline», - Inna Apenko emphasized.

As for the design of the stores, the central element of the store is the shanyrak: «The interior is generally modern, but we consciously added traditional elements because we want to build a global history and broadcast our own codes to the world. There is a lot of wood: for example, in the checkout area or the chest that we use to store things, but at the same time it is made in the form of a traditional chest - a symbol of heritage, part of the interior of the yurt. Like luxury brands, we also have our own recognizable pattern, it is found in printing, in decor and, of course, in clothing. The Samruk bird, which I have already mentioned, is also present in the showcase. And the ornamental symbols that we use are placed around the room with a description of their meaning, so that the client understands what kind of amulet he chooses along with the clothes. This adds depth and meaning to each product».



Marina Polkovnikova noted that Russia is currently seeing a sharp drop in sales across all fashion categories. The footwear segment has suffered particularly, with a 62% decline in the first half of the year alone: *«There are several reasons: in addition to general geopolitical instability, the weather has also affected the situation. In the central part of the country, it was as if summer never happened, which hit the footwear market hard. Women's clothing has fallen by 32%, men's clothing by 28%. However, those players who feel confident offline are noticing a rapid growth in online sales, much more active than in Kazakhstan. But we understand that trends from Russia usually reach us in 3–5 years. Now the proportion of the fashion market there already looks like this: online takes up about 40–45%, offline – 55–60%. Offline is still holding its ground, but the balance is changing. At the same time, the structure of shopping centers is also transforming. If fashion used to account for about 70% of their portfolio, today this share is shrinking. The shopping center is increasingly turning into an entertainment space: large children's zones, leisure areas are appearing, the share of restaurants and cafes is growing. And one of the most curious trends is the appearance of «therms» in shopping centers, complexes with a water park and many saunas, which can only be accessed through the shopping center itself. Large oceanariums are also becoming a magnet for traffic».*



CAF expert Marina Polkovnikova notes that shopping malls are increasingly being transformed into entertainment spaces

Co-founder and CEO of Fashion-Outlet Zatolux.com Alena Shestak said that the sale of clothing, footwear and accessories of premium brands began online; in 12 years, a portfolio of more than 400 brands and 16,000 items has been collected. The first offline store was recently opened in Almaty: *«This business is marginally complex, but very interesting. It has its pros and cons. The sizes are limited, the collections are last year's, the assortment is a crazy mix from Dolce & Gabbana to Ralph Lauren plus mid-range brands. Conceptual goods prevail, and there are fewer basic items. Therefore, our audience is very diverse. But this is precisely our strength: when you come to us, you can find everything. And in this regard, the main task of outlet design is to maintain a premium feel. After all, we offer original items from world brands with big discounts of 65-90%. It is important that the atmosphere still remains status. Not only repairs and interior help with this, but also service. Our consultants quickly understand what the client needs and help navigate the rich assortment. We have built the navigation in the store as clearly as possible: separate zones for men, women and children, separate rails by category and size. The women's zone, of course, has the largest space, an entire floor. Children's assortment is especially popular as a gift: in Kazakhstan, it is impossible to visit a family with children without a gift, and if it turns out to be a Dolce&Gabbana suit, the joy will be twice as great. The space is beautiful, with designer elements, for example, mirrors on the ceiling, which visually expands the hall. We will gradually change the details and bring the interior to the desired level».*



Co-founder and CEO of Fashion-Outlet Zatolux.com Alena Shestak

Alena Shestak said that after the opening of the offline point, the delivery service with fitting was retained: couriers bring things to the home, the client calmly tries them on, pays only for the ones he likes, and returns the rest immediately. Speaking about customer service, the entrepreneur emphasizes that this is a new «currency» in retail. In addition to delivery with fitting, the key feature of the brand is the most personalized interaction. They quickly exchange contacts with clients, communicate live in WhatsApp, and promptly inform about arrivals and sales. *«We are currently introducing a new tool - personalized mailing. The idea is for a person to receive notifications only for his size. For example, if he wears shoe size 39, then in the selection he immediately sees new items in this size without unnecessary information. This saves time and enhances the feeling of an individual approach, which is critically important for the luxury segment»,* - says Alena Shestak.



Head of ProMerch Valentina Irubayeva

Valentina Irubayeva, the head of ProMerch, gave a number of professional tips on store design: *«We are interested in collaborating with both large chains that are well-known throughout Kazakhstan and beginning entrepreneurs who have only a couple of products and a small amount of space. We have worked on projects as small as 17 square metres, but we wanted to return to this small store, which is still operating successfully. One of the main mistakes stores make is blindly copying someone else's brand without understanding why a particular element has been chosen, why the lighting has been set up in a certain way or why a particular*



piece of equipment has been selected. The second problem is targeting the wrong audience. I have more than once gone to a store with a fashionable, youthful design, but the goods are actually designed for women aged 35+. As a result, clients get confused, turn around and leave because they feel that «this is not for me». Another common mistake is the lack of a consistent style across chain stores. In Astana, for example, the design is one way, and in Almaty it is different, so the client is unsure whether they have found the right brand. «Competent retail design can not only decorate the space, but also directly influence sales and customer loyalty».



CAF Business Conference Experts Explain How Store Design Shapes Brand Image

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