



Should newly hired designers ‘soft launch’ their debut collections?

The many designer debuts this season have creative directors choosing between teasing new eras and the power of surprise.

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This past Saturday, select industry folk noticed a green circle around Dior’s Instagram profile picture. They had been added to the label’s Close Friends Instagram Stories list, which revealed a series of photographs teasing Jonathan Anderson’s debut collection scheduled for next Friday in Paris. There were two photos, one of American artist Jean-Michel Basquiat and another of socialite and PR executive Lee Radziwill, each taken by Andy Warhol. The third featured Anderson’s riff on the Dior Book Tote, which was rendered as a book cover itself for Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*. Anderson turned the Book Tote into a book, a classic case of his playful, meta approach to fashion.

The private teaser was not just a first look at his collection, but a subtle kick-off to his Dior era — a ‘soft launch’.

Anderson is not alone here. Since the Great Designer Reshuffle began last year, almost every designer who has been handed a house, has, in one way or another, teased their collection. At last month’s Cannes Film Festival, Julianne Moore and Vicky Krieps debuted Louise Trotter’s first looks for Bottega Veneta. Both moments followed the launch of the designer’s first campaign for the label, which celebrated 50 years of its signature Intrecciato weave. Timothée Chalamet wore Haider Ackermann’s first outfit for Tom Ford at the Golden Globes in January, two months ahead of the designer’s first show in March. The actor also wore Sarah Burton’s first men’s look for Givenchy at the 2025 Academy Awards, part of a two-punch soft launch that also featured Elle Fanning in an archival look reimaged by the former McQueen designer.

The soft launch is strategic in a year crowded with so many debuts. Rather than reveal a first collection only on the runway, designers are extending their online lifespans by teasing in advance through internet-friendly moments. They can break through the noise and make a statement — tee up a new ‘era’ with an auspicious start. But when everyone is doing the same thing, does it cut through the noise, or simply add to it?





The age of the ‘soft launch’

Ackermann dressing Chalamet ahead of his first Tom Ford show was an unorthodox, and therefore delightful and effective, preview. The crux of it all is that it made sense: Chalamet’s first-ever runway show was one of Ackermann’s for Berluti (he called the designer “the closest thing to what an auteur is in fashion”), and they have since developed a symbiotic designer-muse relationship. Chalamet has worn Ackermann consistently over the years, even during the time the designer retired his eponymous house.

It’s a similar story for Burton: Chalamet had worn Burton’s Alexander McQueen repeatedly, as had Fanning. And the strategy worked. Givenchy was ranked the seventh top earning label of this year’s awards season by media impact value (MIV), according to Launchmetrics, at \$22.7 million. (The report was inclusive of five broadcasts: the Emmy Awards in September 2024, the Golden Globes in January 2025, the Grammys in February 2025, the Screen Actors Guild Awards also in February, and the Academy Awards in March 2025.) Chalamet was the top ranked man of the season, generating an MIV of \$152.3 million, way ahead of his top five counterparts: Kendrick Lamar (\$105.7 million), Adrien Brody (\$94 million), Kieran Culkin (\$56.7 million) and Colman Domingo (\$36.4 million). (MIV is the monetary value of posts, article mentions and social media interactions.)

But what does a soft launch actually reveal? In the case of Chalamet, neither looks provided much indication to what we would eventually see on the runway. His Tom Ford look was full of Haider-isms, namely the way the designer often wears a silk scarf in lieu of a tie (which he utilised on the runway in a style unrelated to Chalamet’s look). As for his Givenchy look, Burton has yet to show a men’s collection — her only other menswear moment came by way of a classic suit for Joaquin Phoenix at the 2025 Cannes Film Festival, for which the brand also dressed actor Rooney Mara, Phoenix’s partner.

With Fanning’s, however, there was a mini version of her Oscars dress on the runway, which referenced Hubert de Givenchy’s first couture collection in 1953. The soft launches, then, seem to point more to a wider tone-setting strategy than merely working as a collection preview. They are more about a label’s new era with a new designer, than the specific collections themselves — even if they can in some cases, like Anderson’s Dior, serve both purposes.

For Bottega Veneta, seeing Trotter lean on the soft launch with Moore and Kriepps has been fascinating, given that the label remains absent from social media, something this strategy so heavily depends on. Yet how else does one build up hype for a brand whose slogan is ‘When your own initials are enough’?

This also comes to show that brands are increasingly aware of how the internet will do the heavy-lifting for them if they play their cards right. One does not even need to follow the labels on social media to see these fashion credits, just the right fashion person, or a properly informed, opinionated observer.

The verdict on the soft launch seems straightforward enough: why not? With all of these designers having to unveil their visions within the same 10-or-so-day period during fashion weeks, the possibility of delivering clues, or an amuse-bouche, seems obvious. Think of it almost like a pop star teasing a new album — some good promo never hurt anyone.

The element of surprise

There’s still power in a hard launch, though. Remember when Beyoncé dropped her self-titled album with no prior announcement on a Friday in 2013? Or when Alessandro Michele decided to drop a surprise debut collection for Valentino last June? The resort 2025 lookbook included 171 ready-to-wear looks, plus 93 images of footwear and accessories. Like Beyoncé’s, it was somewhat of a master move, surprising the industry with a clear statement of what Valentino as imagined by Michele would look like. It both set and sharpened the expectations for his debut show in September.

