



From Runway Giant to Runaway Success

# tyra

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Transformation. According to Tyra Banks, that's the difference between a good model and a great model. A good model will look pretty in clothes. A great model will transform herself into a totally different character. She uses her face, eyes, body and, of course, the clothes to convey whatever the moment calls for. "Great models," Banks says, "are silent actresses." And she should know. For more than half her life, Tyra has transformed herself in front of the camera, becoming a history-making fashion icon in the process. From Paris to New York, from Dolce & Gabbana to Yves Saint Laurent, Tyra has walked the runways and posed for all the industry greats.



The model-of-the-moment flavor of haute couture didn't offer Tyra the longevity she craved though. So she transformed her image, proactively cultivating a more commercial, mainstream appeal. Lucrative work with giants like Cover Girl, Pepsi and Tommy Hilfiger quickly followed. She became the first black woman to be featured on the covers of *GQ* and the coveted *Sports Illustrated Swimsuit Issue*. Next, she landed the Victoria's Secret contract that made her a household name. In 1997, Tyra won the prestigious Michael Award for Supermodel of the Year, which in the fashion world is the equivalent of taking home an Oscar.

Barely in her thirties, the Inglewood, CA native has transformed herself again over the last three years—this time into a business savvy media mogul. Having successfully survived the modeling industry, where careers often peak before a model turns twenty-five, Tyra's latest role (that of executive producer, host and head judge of the hit TV show *America's Next Top Model* and host of *The Tyra Banks Show*) may prove to be her most challenging to date.

**At the height of your career, you made what many would call a risky decision. You left modeling to pursue your dream of producing and hosting television shows. Why?**

When I was a model, I modeled because someone told me that I could. I wasn't the girl who used to look at magazines all the time and wish that I was in them. It became a dream later, but it wasn't something I aspired to. But even before the whole modeling thing happened, I'd always wanted to write, produce and work in the film and television business. That's where my heart and soul has always been. It's something I've dreamt of since I was nine years old. The modeling was just something that I did because I was 5'10".

**Basically you've taken this business of style and transitioned it into a personality-based industry. What do you think it is about you that allowed you to do that successfully?**

I would answer that by bringing it back to *Top Model* a little bit. When I decided to do the *Top Model*, I told a couple of people about the idea and they said that it will never work because models are unsympathetic characters. Even my agent said it wouldn't work. (I ended up firing him and selling it without him.) Basically, people don't really look at models as human beings. They're paper dolls in a magazine that stare back at you and have no heartbeat. So when I created *America's Next Top Model*, people got to see that models are insecure. They cry; they fight; they aren't perfect. It made them human. And as much as it humanized my girls, I think it humanized me. It took away the one dimensional character and showed that there was a human being there.





**You took control of your career. Is that why the theme of self-empowerment continues to come up so often in your work?**

I think it's so important because as women, especially women of color, I feel we're put into a box that says, "This is what you're good for. This is as far as you're going to get and you need to just accept that." So every day on my talk show I try to get out the message that even though we're put into these boxes, it's up to us to break free and to prove people wrong. People are going to constantly tell us that we're not good enough, that we cannot do something. It is a fight. It is a battle. And we cannot let them win.

**Can you tell me a little bit about how your talk show came into being?**

About seven years ago, I was appearing on the *Oprah Winfrey Show* consistently, and I got a lot of offers to do my own talk show. But I didn't feel I was ready. I felt I was too young and I was still very judgmental, like, "Why you doing that? Why you still with him? He's treating you so bad, you need to leave!" So I needed to live and experience being in a bad relationship and having negative things happen in order to be empathetic enough to be a good talk show host. So, one day I was at lunch with my manager Benny Medina and he said, "Tyra, what do you want to be? If you were to walk into this restaurant and everyone were to turn and look at you, what do you want them to think?" I said, "Benny, I'm interested in longevity. I'm interested in being relevant. In being a leader. In having the power to make change."

**That's huge. So often you see public people who couldn't care less about that kind of thing. They seem to be in it for the money and the fame and the hot women or hot men or whatever it is. They aren't really looking to see "what is the impact that I'm making on society right now?"** That's extremely important to me. Even when I was modeling. As superficial as modeling is, I was always happy that I was thirty pounds heavier than those girls. I felt like that was a silent message saying that you don't have to be stick-skinny to be considered attractive.

**Even though you've retired from modeling, how much of a role do you think style still plays in your career?**

Style plays a big part of it. The first season of my talk show, I tried to go against that. I tried to wear things that weren't really stylish, that maybe didn't look so great. But then I had people come up to me on the street like, "Tyra, what the heck did you have on today?" So I had to realize that people still want me to be stylish. This season we have a new stylist, Yaniece Piper Thomas, and she's like, "Girl, you need to come with it and be the hotness!" So, now we strive to make sure that we're more "style iconic," as opposed to making me look like a fool! [Laughter]

**Who do you think is your biggest influence in developing your business savvy?**

My mom is a really big influence for me. She was a single mom raising my brother and me. She always kept her eye on the prize. When my parents divorced, we moved into a one bedroom apartment. But my mom was always trying to take extra jobs and save her money so we could get another bedroom. My mom would save up and she'd go, "Ok, now we're moving to two bedrooms!" A couple of years later we got three bedrooms. That was her mission—to always improve our lives. That whole bedroom thing for me has continued. And it's not just a monetary thing. It's constantly improving, being self-empowered and not depending on anyone but myself in order to succeed.

**What is happening with your love life?**

I'm single right now, but I'm dating. And it's weird to go out on dates because I have to get set up by my friends. So I'm like, "Who you know? Who you got? Who you gonna hook me up with?" I have to do it that way because it's kind of hard to just meet somebody on the street. So I've been going out on some dates. A couple of them haven't called me back after the first date. I'm like *dang!* But it's cool. Everybody gets rejected. People would never believe it but, yeah, I wait by the phone too.

**What do you feel is your current sense of style?**

On the talk show it's... oh, damn. I can't remember what my stylist calls it. It's business chic with a little fly-ness mixed in. On *Top Model*, we call the style "cinched and snatched." I always have some type of corset on this season and we're doing kind of short, Marilyn Monroe type hair.

**Last question. Ten years from now, what's going to be going on?**

Ten years from now hopefully I have a family and that family is the priority—raising my children and trying to keep them as healthy as possible in a world of entertainment that's not so healthy. I would want to give them the most normal life possible. For them and my future husband too.