

MOBILE

Apple is a total marriage of design and tech: Diane von Furstenberg

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Apple's Apple Watch Edition

By SARAH JONES

MIAMI – To make fashionable wearables, design has to be part of the process from the beginning, rather than an afterthought, according to panelists at The New York Times International Luxury Conference Dec. 2.

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Tech companies are experts at making utilitarian devices, but they are typically not known for their aesthetic choices. Working with fashion brands allows a new perspective to wearable design, as both parties bring their vision to the table.

“I am very happy that I am old enough to have been at Studio 54 and young enough to be part of the digital revolution,” said Diane von Furstenberg,

Fashion meets tech

Ms. von Furstenberg became tied to Google Glass when she was the first person to show the smart eyewear in public during her spring/summer 2013 fashion show, putting them on models as an accessory. These devices then captured the model’s perspective of a runway show.



Model wearing Google Glass at DVF runway show

This collaboration happened by chance. The designer has friends in tech, one of whom is Sergey Brin, the co-founder of Google Glass.

After spying her friend wearing the creation, they had a discussion, in which he said he had never been to a fashion show. Two weeks after he attended her next show, she got a call from him to arrange having the glasses on the runway.

The brand got publicity, including being featured in a video with more than 2 million views. Ms. von Furstenberg later designed frames for the tech device.

This type of designer collaboration is happening more frequently, as tech companies are realizing their limits in crafting visually appealing items that consumers will want to wear.



Panel, from left: Diane von Furstenberg, John Maeda, Stefano Rosso and Babak Parviz

For decades, the deciding factor for a tech purchase was its utility, whether something was faster or better. Now that these devices have to simultaneously act as an accessory, design needs to be an integral part of the process.

Often, designers are brought onto a project late to fix it, after the tech aspects of a device are already decided. The panel agreed that having the designers involved in the conversation from the start delivers the best product, since there is more opportunity for their vision to come through.

"The designers really need to know what the limitations of technology are," said Babak Parviz, Ph.D., vice president of [Amazon](#) and Google Glass creator/designer. "They can design around it sometimes, design with it and sometimes push the technology people to do better

"So a lot of times, when you get an answer that it's impossible to implement X or Y in technology, that's not really true, it just hasn't been done before," he said. "So if the designer pushes back, and the people who are executives make a decision that yes, we're going to support our designers, amazing things can happen."



Opening Ceremony and Intel smart watches for Barneys

Referencing an earlier Skype interview with musician will.i.am, in which he said that fashion brands should be wary of partnering with large technology companies, since they will be swallowed, moderator Vanessa Friedman asked if that was the case.

Ms. von Furstenberg responded that she disagrees, saying that fashion is an enticing partner in its own right.

"Everybody wants to use fashion," Ms. von Furstenberg said. "If you sell meat, you want to use fashion."

"I think that anything that happens, at some point people go to fashion because fashion is the conduit for everyone to see it."

Design focus

Ms. von Furstenberg argued that Apple is a luxury brand, since it has developed a luxury community and has kept design at the forefront since the beginning.

L2's founder also predicted that technology giant Apple will be venturing into luxury categories in the near future to capitalize on enormous profit margins and its pristine brand image at the L2 Forum 2013.

During the "7: The Forces Shaping Prestige in 2014" session, L2 Think Tank boss Scott Galloway pointed out that Apple's acquisition of CEOs from Burberry and Saint Laurent indicates that the brand is forcefully moving toward the luxury sector. The founder also warned that luxury brands will begin to face increasing disruption from outsiders ([see story](#)).

Dedicated horologists agree that the introduction of Apple's smartwatch will not pose a dire threat to traditional Swiss watchmaking, but is there potential for growth through collaborations?

Like many high-end brands, Apple has become notorious for the amount of control it has over every detail of its products, from design aesthetics to advertising. Recently, the brand has worked to reestablish itself not just as a tech giant, but as a true luxury goods maker with its latest Apple Watch at the forefront of this shift ([see story](#)).

Responding to an audience question about whether tech can be justified as luxury, due to its lack of timelessness, Ms. von Furstenberg said, "If you give a beautiful leather briefcase to a 13-year-old today, I'm not sure they'd really like it that much. But by the same token, I think Apple is a luxury company."

"Everything goes so fast in technology, and it's so amazing," she said.

Final Take

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