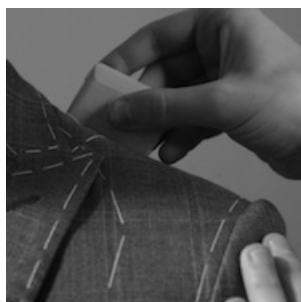


COMMERCE

Career concept key to culling, retaining skilled artisan workforce

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Video still from Brioni's "Su Misura"

By JEN KING

VERSAILLES, France Luxury goods are reliant on skilled craftsmanship, but talent cultivation has proved difficult in today's culture as consumers readily move away from traditional artisan work.

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In the "Underwriting the Future" panel session at the International New York Times Luxury Conference April 6, senior executives from three brands discussed how their business models have cultivated talent in ways that maintain tradition and quality and, importantly, supports the surrounding community. The roots of these talent measures start with training and education to teach employees a useful skill set not just as a form of employment, but for a viable career.

"Tradition is sustainable; it becomes something that doesn't die with one person," said Gianluca Flore, CEO of **Brioni**.

"With the [tailoring] school teaching them, making sure goods are produced, generation after generation, this is how we keep alive tradition and heritage inside the brand," he said.

Learning luxury

For a brand such as accessories maker Nancy Gonzalez, the lack of historical perspective in its home community of Cali, Colombia limits the interest in the tannery craftsmanship needed to create high-end handbags. Unlike Italy, for example, which has a storied heritage of leather working dating back centuries, Cali was only founded in 1536.

Without a "luxury heritage," the brand's employees did not grow up surrounded by a rich history. Instead of basing its structure on heritage, Nancy Gonzalez engineered a brand culture focused on social responsibility that aims to help its employees thrive.

The namesake founder of Nancy Gonzalez responded to Colombia's often chauvinistic culture by hiring a workforce dominated by women. The brand boasts a workforce that is 90 percent women, many of whom have children.

Instead of shunning working mothers, Nancy Gonzalez operates a full-time day care center for approximately 250 children. Ms. Gonzalez firmly believes in hiring mothers and fostering the growth of their children, feeling it is a win-win. The brand's products are skillfully made and its employees and their families are well cared for.

"[Ms. Gonzalez] believes that children are the future," said Santiago Barberi Gonzalez, president and executive creative director at [Nancy Gonzalez and Santiago Gonzalez Accessories](#).

"Colombia is a very chauvinistic society, so if she was going to invest so much of her money and time in training people, she would rather train mothers, heads of the home," he said.

"Because she was most certain that the money would go toward those children, who would be raised better."

Mr. Barberi Gonzalez, Ms. Gonzalez's son, stressed that its empowerment of women model is not charity, but rather a way to provide the women of Colombia with a future and a career, as opposed to a job.



Nancy Gonzalez's Gotham clutches in alligator leather

Detroit-based watchmaker Shinola has a similar employment strategy at its core. The brand was originally meant to create 100 factory jobs, with the watches created being sold to other brands to sell. But instead, its philanthropic intentions meant to assist Detroit's demolished workforce turned Shinola into a full-force brand of its own.

When its factory opened in May 2012, Shinola began training its employees, and in nine month's time its workers were fully trained. Within its first year, laid off autoworkers, former nail technicians and security guards turned watchmakers built and sold more than 55,000 watches.

Tom Kartosis, founder of [Shinola](#), shared an anecdote with attendees about a woman named Crystal who works for the brand as a line leader. Prior to becoming a line leader, a managerial position with nearly 30 watchmakers under her, Crystal had been a janitor at the company, but she scored so well on the training tests that she quickly moved up the ranks.

When former United States president Bill Clinton caught wind of the brand and wanted to learn more, Shinola selected Crystal as the ambassador of its work, giving her the opportunity to present President Clinton with the brand's watch.



Shinola's latest timepiece, The Canfield

The creation of viable employment is also valued by Italian menswear brand Brioni. Established in Rome in 1945, just over a decade later in 1959 Brioni established a production plant in Penne, Abruzzo, and the village of the brand's founding tailor Nazareno Fonticoli.

In a town of just more than 12,000, nearly one member of every family works for the Brioni production plant. These thousand or so employees, many of whom are skilled tailors, went through a rigorous training process to be a Brioni suit maker.

Dedication and passion for the brand are the foremost qualities of these tailors who underwent nine years of training in total to work for Brioni. Training begins with a three-year course at a tailoring school recognized by the Italian government. After three years of schooling, the tailors-to-be spend another six years as apprentices.

Throughout its history, Brioni has been innovative, being the first brand to have a men's runway presentation, a trunk show and ready-to-wear haute couture. These industry innovations show that heritage brands can still find ways to modernize without jeopardizing their histories.

Mr. Flore recognizes that its tailoring school gives Brioni a new angle and point of view from students coming up through its system. The school is not just seen as a coaching tool for tomorrow's tailors, but also as a way for Brioni to learn from the next generation.



Brioni spring/summer 2016

Educating future generations

The main objective of educational programs backed by luxury brands is to transmit savoir-faire to future generations. By doing so, heritage houses can further protect the craft behind its products.

Nearly every sector vertical in the luxury universe offers some sort of formal training, but as with other channels, the industry still has room to grow and learn from its peers.

For instance, German automaker BMW is looking for youth interested in a career in the automotive sector as it expands its apprenticeship program.

The search will hire more than 30 young people, who will join the current 224 apprentices across three different manufacturing sites. Although the luxury industry as a whole is having trouble finding and retaining talent, the prevalence of apprenticeships among automakers helps to insulate the sector from the problem.

Although apprenticeships may not have a direct analogue in the retail world, finding a way to cull from a group of driven young people could result in better talent retention in the long run. Young applicants will likely be passionate about the industry, open to ongoing learning and coaching and determined to move up the ranks ([see story](#)).

"Be true to the brand, stick with the brand and growing into that is giving elegance to the next generation," Brioni's Mr. Flore said.

"How we can teach them, coach and show them what we do?" he said. "The next generation wants to know more of what we do."

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