

STRATEGY

Craftsmanship, talent and education in luxury Luxury Memo special report

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Luxury heads back to school to prepare the next generation of talent. Image credit: Melijoe

By JEN KING

Luxury is currently facing an onslaught of challenges, but one factor that may prove most damaging to the business' future is dwindling interest in artisanal skills as professional career paths.

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While talks of emerging markets, changing consumer behavior and retail's shifting formats tend to dominate luxury marketers' conversations, the decline in dedicated and skilled talent could prove disastrous for brands that rely heavily on handmade goods. Educational initiatives have become essential to introduce students to a range of craftsmanship and to portray the luxury goods and service world as a viable career option on both the creative and professional sides of the business.

"In the luxury world, the most precious asset is talent, at all levels," said Kitty Maisonrouge, president of the [Luxury Education Foundation](#) and adjunct professor at [Columbia Business School](#), New York.

"Talent does not just mean in the creative side, but in the business side," she said. "Luxury is not really theoretical, it is really practical.

"The reality is that the difference between a brand that sells soap and a brand that is luxury is very personal, emotional and it is not something you can read to understand. You really need to live it."

Talent drought

The concern of not having access to the best talent is a well-founded worry for many in luxury as it could be detrimental to the manufacturing of high-end goods.

In 2014, the Boston Consulting Group and the *Business of Fashion* co-published "The Race for Talent: Fashion and Luxury's Greatest Challenge for the Next Decade," a report that interviewed 60 companies over a two-year period.

The survey found that 50 percent of fashion and luxury brands do not feel they have access to the best talent. Also, respondents confessed that their businesses struggle to find and recruit top-talent positions.



A Berluti shoemaker at work. Image credit: Berluti

The role of creative director was identified as the the most difficult role to fill, with 67 percent saying finding talent to assume the duties was a struggle. This was followed by brand director, designer and pattern-maker.

Having the right employees can have a measured effect on a brand's profits and economic growth, especially in executive and leading creative roles. Because of this, luxury brands may need to rethink their existing recruiting strategy to locate the personnel necessary ([see story](#)).

"Luxury brands need people who understand both the retail environment and the challenges a business faces in the industry," said [Thoma Serdari](#), founder of [PIQLuxury](#), co-editor of [Luxury: History Culture Consumption](#) and adjunct professor of luxury marketing at [New York University](#), New York.

"The former can partially be taught on the job: operations and customer interactions must be experienced firsthand for the employee to master her responsibilities," she said. "The latter, however, is an area that requires more abstract thinking, comparable case studies and theoretical applications to enhance problem solving. This is something that a retailer cannot provide the employee, but an educational institution with the appropriate course of study can."

Professions such as tailors, leather workers and cobblers, for example, were once family-held roles, with skills being passed down through the generations. But, as the world has modernized, these careers have been more or less abandoned by younger generations looking for lucrative professions elsewhere.

The workforce of today often foregoes traditional artisanal skills for office work, especially as digital continues to permeate all facets of life.

A young professional who may have once followed in the footsteps of her dressmaker mother with schooling and an apprenticeship is now looking toward the corporate sector to advance her career goals and life aspirations.



Inside Dior's atelier before its spring/summer 2017 show. Image credit: Christian Dior

For a luxury house that prides itself on hand-constructed leather goods or dresses with intricate lacework, for instance, the fear that in a generation or two there may no longer be qualified tanners, leatherworkers or lacemakers is a reality.

To alleviate the issue, and to safeguard the industry's pillars, many luxury brands stress the importance of a business model that cultivates talent in ways that maintain tradition and quality, as well as supporting the surrounding community. The latter emphasis is especially important for creative hubs that have a particular skill-set embedded deep in their local cultures.

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 as a viable career.

Italian menswear label Brioni, for example, was established in 1945 in Rome and soon opened a production plant in Penne, Abruzzo, the village of the brand's founding tailor Nazareno Fonticoli, in 1959.

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 become a Brioni suitmaker.

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.

The Brioni Tailoring Method

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.

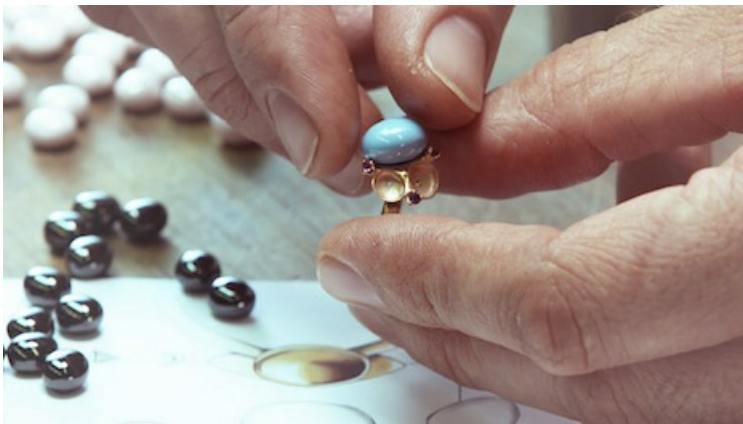
The school is not just seen as a coaching tool for tomorrow's tailors, but also as a way for Brioni to learn from the incoming generation via new ideologies and innovation ([see story](#)).

Sharpen your pencils and scissors

As with Brioni, the luxury business as a whole has been proactive in using education, both through school partnerships and branded initiatives, to recruit talent. These efforts aim to represent creative skills as career opportunities rather than artistry that is on the decline.

"Luxury brands can use educational initiatives to protect and preserve handcrafts by engaging with, and educating, younger generations to appreciate the craftsmanship that differentiates luxury brands from other market sectors," said Kristie McGowan, director for global luxury and management at [North Carolina State University](#), Raleigh, NC.

"In such a technologically and digitally driven world, luxury products, services and experiences maintain an exceptional attention to detail that can be lost in the flurry of products available in the market," she said. "Handcrafts are the foundation upon which the luxury industry was built, so it is crucial to protect and preserve them. One way to do so is through educational initiatives and partnerships."



A Pomellato artisan works on a ring. Image credit: Pomellato

A common method leveraged by luxury houses is hosting design contests that attract students in art and fashion schools. This concept allows brands to nurture talent prior to graduation and establish a supportive bond with up-and-coming designers.

For example, Italian fashion label Giorgio Armani is lending its support to emerging design talent with the creation of a collegiate competition.

In collaboration with the British Fashion Council, the New Bond project will see students vie for a prize that includes the chance to have their creations produced for Emporio Armani. Armani's competition is open to those studying at any school within the BFC Colleges Council network, which includes Central Saint Martins, London College of Fashion and the Royal College of Art ([see story](#)).

Also, a number of branded vocational programs have been introduced to bring talent in-house and demonstrate a brand or conglomerate as an advantageous employer.

In 2014, for example, French conglomerate LVMH launched its professional training program L'Institut des Mtiers D'Excellence (IME).

The IME program allows LVMH to voice its need for artisans while supporting young talent as they develop their crafts to ensure that the skills of the trade remain strong for future generations. Upon completion of the program, IME trainees receive an accredited degree through paired apprenticeships with LVMH houses ([see story](#)).

Institut des Mtiers d'Excellence LVMH - Parcours de formation 2016

At launch, IME included courses in jewelry and dressmaking, with apprentices being placed at Chaumet and Givenchy, respectively.

Currently, more than 200 young people are enrolled in IME-backed training programs for leather goods in France and Italy ([see story](#)), vineyards and winemaking, culinary arts, watches ([see story](#)), retail and design.

Individual brands have also put together programs to ensure that future talent is available.

Both LVMH-owned Fendi and Kering's Saint Laurent have organized programs to hone the skills of next-generation couturiers through educational efforts.

Fendi, for example, has worked closely with Sartoria Massoli, an Italian couture workshop, since 1982. The Massoli Academy, based out of the Sartoria Massoli, is endorsed by Fendi via a course designed to teach the savoir-faire of dressmaking to a new generation ([see story](#)).



Fendi students at The Massoli Academy. Image credit: Fendi

Similarly, Saint Laurent offers prospective designers a program that combines an internship at the brand with related courses offered at France's Institut Franais de la Mode (IFM) and the cole de la Chambre Syndicale de la Couture Parisienne (ECS) to nurture innovation and sustainability ([see story](#)).

"[From a school perspective,] partners keep us relevant," said [Kim Corfman](#), professor of marketing and academic director of the Fashion & Luxury one-year MBA at [NYU Stern School of Business](#), New York. "They ensure that we are educating students to solve problems that matter and that the solutions they create are of value. At a more practical level, partners provide us with live cases and projects to which students can apply what they have learned.

"[As for a] company perspective, academic partnerships provide companies with more intimate access to thought leadership and best practices in business," she said. "Partners also have the best access to the talent we are developing. They have the opportunity to get to know our students over time and benefit from their abilities through projects and consulting assignments."

Teaching technology

Talent recruitment and retention is not only a concern held by luxury brands searching for creative individuals to carry out design and material manufacturing tasks.

According to BCG and the *Business of Fashion's* 2014 report, technology roles are also difficult to find good hires for, with 33 percent of brand respondents identifying ecommerce manager as difficult or impossible to fill ([see story](#)).

"Luxury brands, more than other brands, are a promise of future value," PIQLuxury and NYU's Ms. Serdari said.

"To be able to deliver on that future value they need to invest today in work that ensures their handcrafts can be adapted to different technological environments and that sustainability is part of regular operations," she said.

In response, ecommerce player Yoox Net-A-Porter Group, for instance, inked partnerships with Italy's Bologna Business School and SDA Bocconi University ([see story](#)) to prepare graduates for the increasingly digital fashion industry.

The partnerships seek to pool participating institutions' collective expertise to help train managerial candidates for digital business positions such as Web analyst, Web marketing specialist, specialist in Big Data, ecommerce manager or site manager ([see story](#)).

Recognized for their highly successful apprenticeship programs, luxury automakers have also embraced technological education to ensure the sector's future.

Italian automaker Lamborghini, for one, works with the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) on research initiatives, with the end goal of establishing a super sports car that is ready for the rest of the 21st century.



Lamborghini's team at MIT in Cambridge, MA. Image credit: Lamborghini

More than 100 students and faculty members work alongside Lamborghini engineers to exchange ideas, workshop and collaborate on projects. These will then lead to research initiatives, primarily focusing on technologically advanced materials ([see story](#)).

Also, automakers leverage education to ensure its sector is an inclusive workplace.

British automaker Jaguar, for example, opened the door for female students interested in engineering through educational programming.

Jaguar's "Young Women in the Know" gives female students ages 15 to 18 insight into engineering and manufacturing. The four-day program acts as precursor to the automaker's apprenticeships with more than 90 young girls participating ([see story](#)).



Jaguar's next class of Women in the Know students. Image credit: Jaguar

The luxury hospitality industry is not immune from the perceived talent drought either, with fewer individuals opting for managerial or service positions, as they are no longer viewed as long-term career options.

But, as the luxury tourism sector booms, students with an interest in hospitality are now able to learn firsthand through an educational partnership with Rome's LUISS Business School and Italian hotelier The Lungarno Collection, owned by the Salvatore Ferragamo Group.

During the course, Lungarno Collection will dispense knowledge of Italian luxury and high-end hospitality to enhance the classroom experience. Students enrolled in the 12-month LUISS Masters in Tourism Management program will build analytical and managerial skills to ready them for a career in tourism ([see story](#)).

Sustaining talent

Similar to how digital and ecommerce's rise has led to educational ventures to ensure that the appropriate talent is available to turn ideas into practice, luxury's gravitation toward sustainability and transparency has facilitated programs that deal with eco-friendly coursework.

Leading the way is French luxury conglomerate Kering Group, which has partnered with New York's Parsons School of Design on a course to measure the environmental impact of designs.

The course leverages the Kering x Parsons: Environmental Profit & Loss program and uses the My EP&L mobile application as a measurement tool for students to better understand the environmental impact of their designs.



WHAT MATERIALS IS IT MADE OF ?



Main Fabric : ?



Cashmere wool



Wool

Inner Lining : ?



Buttons : ?



Kering's My EP&L app is used as a measurement tool by Parsons students. Image credit: Kering

During the class, students also glean insights from Kering's EP&L methodology, which measures and monetizes the conglomerate's environmental impact across its entire supply chain.

Taking the concept a step further, students also have an opportunity to learn how to integrate sustainability from the start of the design process, from sourcing to manufacturing. To do so, Parsons students use the My EP&L app ([see story](#)).

Similar efforts have been launched by LVMH and Burberry as luxury looks to explore alternative manufacturing methods that will leave less of an effect on the environment.

LVMH currently works with London's Central Saint Martins to create sustainable solutions for the luxury world via the "Sustainability & Innovation in Luxury: Fostering Creativity" program. This objective sees collaborative projects between the school's students, graduates and LVMH employees ([see story](#)).

In June, Burberry announced it had gifted \$3.8 million to the Royal College Art in London to spur materials science innovation. Through its Royal College of Art grant, the Burberry Material Futures Research Group will be the first science, technology, engineering, art and mathematics (STEAM) research center at an art and design university.



A Burberry artisan constructing a trench coat. Image credit: Burberry

Students at the STEAM research center will apply radical thinking to invent sustainable materials, transform consumer experience and advance manufacturing. Burberry's goal is to use innovative thinking to benefit the luxury business and community at large ([see story](#)).

"Technology is responsible for the greatest disruptions luxury brands are facing," NYU Stern's Ms. Corfman said. "Students need knowledge of how to manage, finance, source, design, market, et cetera, that can be applied to a rapidly changing landscape, and they must be prepared to adapt.

"A supply chain that is sustainable and ethical is not only the right thing to do, it is practical," she said. "It is in the long-term best interests of companies and increasingly important to consumers."

Organizing opportunities

Outside of brand- and conglomerate-led efforts, there are numerous organizations that present luxury as an optimal career choice through educational awareness tactics such as university coursework and mentorships.

One such example is the Luxury Education Foundation (LEF), a nonprofit organization established in 2004, with a focus on educational programs for undergraduate and graduate students in design and business.

The LEF pairs teams of students with senior executives in leading luxury firms to gain an understanding and appreciation of the luxury business.

"We created [the LEF] with just one program to come up with creative solutions for questions brands have, but also to learn how to work together and to be very practical at all levels," LEF's Ms. Maisonrouge said.

"It has been so successful that now we have 15 programs," she said. "We have programs that are very small, very tailored, really one-on-one mentoring from the CEO, and now, also alumni, who graduated from the program 12 years ago, with young students because the most important thing is identifying talent, training talent and retaining talent.

"That's why all these programs are so helpful for the brands to secure talent."

What is LEF?

A master class organized by LEF, "Design & Marketing Luxury Products," for example, brings together MBA students from Columbia Business School and design students from Parsons The New School of Design with an end goal of understanding the role that each business field plays in the creation and marketing of luxury goods ([see story](#)).

"We've been able to engage our brands and our CEOs because they see the value of trying to groom the future leaders of tomorrow," Ms. Maisonrouge said of the LEF. "Again, the benefits of the time, money and energy spent is to get these young talents to fall in love what they do, to be interested in their brand, to discover their brand and this, while the students are pondering the option, they become totally taken by luxury."

France's Comit Colbert, an association of 78 luxury brands and 14 cultural institutions, starts planting luxury seeds even earlier by hosting career days to spark interest in the minds of young adults.

Together with French Ministry of Education, Comit Colbert hosts hands-on experiences days at the Muse des Arts dcoratifs in Paris. The 2015 edition saw 700 middle schoolers invited to experience what the luxury business has to offer to ensure that the crafts behind many goods remain for future generations ([see story](#)).



French middle schoolers attending Comit Colbert's Career Day 2014. Image credit: Comit Colbert

But educational ventures do not need to be exclusive to centers of learning and young students.

Keeping in mind that learning never ceases, British luxury trade group Walpole champions the role of craftsmen in the industry with a program that gives business guidance to artisan entrepreneurs.

The Walpole Crafted program gives up to 12 individuals or businesses access to mentors and educational workshops designed to help scale their business. While the luxury industry prides itself on the handwork that goes into its products, technology is displacing traditional production in many mainstream companies, making this type of program a necessary platform to preserve the craft and profitability of independent makers ([see story](#)).

"Brands engaging with students in luxury education programs is the best way to get the younger generation interested in the luxury sector as a profession," North Carolina State University's Ms. McGowan said.

"Academic programs, students and brands all benefit from engaging with one another," she said. "Experiential activities are opportunities for students to put classroom learning into practice, to get students excited about luxury and for students to understand their future potential career path."

"Brands benefit by having an opportunity to see how students think, react and solve problems before committing to hiring them."

Best-practice tips for attracting individuals to a career in luxury:

- Ketty Maisonrouge, LEF and Columbia Business School
 - "To attract them is to create great vocational training programs and to create internships to allow the students to not just see one aspect of the business, but to see multiple aspects, to see how multifaceted [luxury] is. Cross-department training, internship and vocational training – something that explains the reason why things are done in a certain way. It opens the students' eyes."
 - "Once [brands] have the young people, later on when they are hired, [they should] have an in-house

mentor with whom they can check in, to share what they are learning and seeing, what could be done differently and voice frustrations. Have someone they can talk to and confide in to help and mentor them."

- Thoma Serdari, PIQLuxury and New York University
 - "Invite students to where the product is. Most students' experience with luxury brands is limited to brands' communications, in print or digital. Using all senses to experience the product changes everything."
 - "Invite students to the place of manufacturing and share more information about operations. In other words, education cannot be limited to experiences in the classroom or mere simulations. A greater investment is needed."
- Kim Corfman, New York University's Stern School of Business
 - "Signal that their talents and education are valued and will be rewarded."
 - "Strategy and marketing students are more likely already to be considering careers in luxury. Seek out students who are focused on other functions, such as operations, information systems and finance. Show them what an exciting sector luxury is and how much potential there is to create value."

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