

MARKETING

Women still face obstacles in path to high-level luxury leadership roles

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Women's experiences are not uniform, but overall representation of women in top luxury roles is low. Image credit: Ponant

By DANNY PARISI

NEW YORK The world of luxury executives is still overwhelmingly made up of men, but some of the top women in luxury believe that there are paths forward for women and much notable progress has been made.

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Speaking at the Women in Luxury conference on May 9, a panel of top women executives in luxury spoke about the challenges they have faced, how they overcame them and how the pathways to the C-suite have changed for women over the years. The panel was moderated by Chris Olshan, CEO of the Luxury Marketing Council, who guided the conversation through topics ranging from the glass ceiling to mentoring.

"It's sad that this even still comes up, but sadly it does," said Edie Rodriguez, brand chairman of **Ponant Americas** and corporate special advisor to Ponant. "At Ponant, they really are gender neutral.

"It's the best person for the job no matter what," she said. "We really try to do a good job in that regard."

Women in Luxury 2018 was produced by Luxury Daily, with venue sponsor UBS

Obstacle course

The statistics on the demographics of executives do not paint the most ideal picture.

In the Fortune 500, there are more CEOs named John than there are women CEOs. Meanwhile, women represent around 50 percent of the United States while only 3 percent of the population is named John.

But things are changing and women are increasingly taking up leadership roles in their respective companies.

Additionally, women's experiences are not uniform. Some of the panelists spoke openly about facing open prejudice from more senior men, while others experienced it so infrequently that it was shocking when incidents did occur.

"I'm a lemonade stand girl at heart," said Laurie Erickson, CEO of **The Finest Accessories**. "I've always worked for myself.

"I don't think of myself as a woman CEO," she said. "I'm often surprised when I'm dealing with a contractor or someone and I suddenly realize, 'Oh my god, he's treating me disrespectfully because I'm a woman.'"



Edie Rodriguez

▫The pressure placed on women in the workplace often makes them feel as though they are expected to work twice as hard to receive the same recognition as male colleagues.

But one panelist felt that this was a secret strength for women. Because women are so used to working extra hard for results, many have developed a work ethic that puts them at an advantage compared to men who may be used to receiving more credit for less work.

"I mostly find women are the ones who come to me and express the wish to learn a specific skill and get to a higher level," said Sylvie Beljanski, president and CEO of [Natural Source](#). "A lot of men tend to think they know everything already and just show up, so it is the women who end up with more skills."

Changing tides

Executives from across the luxury business are aware of the obstacles in the pathway of women, as well as the necessity of including women at every stage of a business' practices.

For example, personal care group Coty Inc. works with a variety of high-end brands to create fragrances that appeal to the modern world, hoping diversity will be universal in the near future.

At the Cond Nast International Luxury Conference on April 19 the chief marketing officer for the group's luxury division expressed her desire to have complete inclusion in beauty. Themes such as genderless campaigns and products for a wider range of skins tones are just a few of the ways Coty is integrating diversity into its business, hoping it will foster growth in the industry ([see story](#)).



Laurie Erickson

As the tides change for women in luxury and women increasingly find themselves in positions of power, the panelists spoke highly of the ideas of speaking up for one's self, being confident in one's decisions and seeking out valuable mentors.

Things are getting better overall, and some of the panelists compared the experiences they had early on in the business to their experiences now that they are in high-level positions.

"I've lucked out in magazines because there's a long history of women in top roles in magazines," said Stephanie Davis Smith, editorial director of **Modern Luxury**. "I spent some time at a men's magazine. I took a demotion to work there, and after several years I never got back up to my previous level position.

"I told them, and they told me to look at the masthead because it's all men," she said. "That's the first time I encountered something like that, I had never thought that I couldn't be at the top.

"Later, one of them got laid off and asked me for a job, which was pretty interesting."

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