

MARKETING

How humor, hard work can help women build a career in luxury

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Women need to support each other to get ahead in a male industry. Image courtesy of Conde Nast Italia Archive

By DANNY PARISI

NEW YORK - For women in luxury, the world can sometimes be a hostile place, which is why it is important for them to learn to work together and support each other, according to two entrepreneurs who have done so for 20 years.

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At the Women in Luxury 2018 conference, Carrie Ellen Phillips and Vanessa Weiner von Bismarck, two women who have been working together for decades, spoke at length about their experiences as women and entrepreneurs as well as how to build a lasting partnership. One of the things they said elevated them to their current position was their joint work ethic.

"Women tend to say I got lucky," Ms. Weiner von Bismarck said. "Men never say that.

"We didn't get lucky, we worked really hard. We met a young designer named Derek Lam and we did his fashion show, then we were introduced to Stella McCartney we worked with her.

"More and more fashion companies followed because people liked that our approach was a very honest approach."

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

Building a partnership

When Ms. Phillips and Ms. Weiner von Bismarck began working together many years ago, their office life was not exactly the seat of luxury.

The two women describe sharing a single desk, fighting over the single computer and spending long hours cramped up in a small room together. But those early days struggling together formed a strong bond between them.

As the pair began to take on more prestigious clients, their accommodations may have expanded, but they always strove to keep that same sense of sitting in the same room together and working in tandem.



Carrie Ellen Phillips. Image credit: BPCM

"In some partnerships, things grow apart," Ms. Weiner von Bismarck said. "You start working on different things and before you know it the communication thread is ripped apart.

"I think it's very important to stay close and stay connected. Its like a marriage; you see people who are married but they grow apart because they live different lives."

The two women had lots of advice for aspiring entrepreneurs in the luxury industry, particularly women. Part of their recommendations involved finding something that you are incredibly passionate about, not just something that will pay the bills.

For instance, Ms. Phillips and Ms. Weiner von Bismarck are both passionate about sustainability and the environment, something that is difficult to navigate given their choice of industry to work in.

"Fashion is the second most harmful industry to the planet after oil and gas," Ms. Weiner von Bismarck said. "Most of us have spent our careers trying to sell people clothes and it's horrible for the world.

"What we've found about sustainability is that it's really about technology. There are incredible new technologies that will revolutionize the way people do business."

Speaking up

For the two women in charge of BPCM, working together has been the an incredible benefit to their careers.

For many women in luxury, it can be tough to speak up and have their ideas heard in a business that is still mostly dominated by men.

Women looking to advance their careers need to not only take credit for their ideas but also express them.

Stories have been told over time of many women in luxury and business who have a multitude of ideas but often do not speak up. There are also many other times in which they do not claim ownership over these ideas.



Vanessa Weiner von Bismarck. Image credit: BPCM

During another panel at Women in Luxury 2018, Shanker Inc.'s Martin Shanker expressed the idea women need to value their own ideas, making sure to speak up and quickly. His advice was to never start a sentence with "I," and to dive right in ([see story](#)).

For Ms. Phillips and Ms. Weiner von Bismarck, there is another key factor they have cultivated throughout their careers: a sense of humor.

"We laugh a lot," Ms. Phillips said. "Our business partner flew up from LA and the three of us were so laughing hard at the restaurant that the waiter came and asked if we were okay.

"We've dealt with a lot of difficult stuff," she said. "It seems trite to say we laugh a lot but that humor helps a lot getting through the hard things."