

APPAREL AND ACCESSORIES

Calvin Klein looks to remain fresh after 50 years of history

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Raf Simons took over artistically at Calvin Klein to reinvigorate the brand. Image credit: Calvin Klein

By DANNY PARISI

NEW YORK - With 50 years of history behind it, U.S. fashion label Calvin Klein has turned from a young upstart to a heritage house, but how does a brand such as that stay fresh half a century after its birth?

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That was the question explored by Calvin Klein's CEO Steve Shiffman at the French-American Luxury Exchange held in New York on June 7. Mr. Shiffman spoke about how no matter what surface level trends or practices may change, the core values of luxury always remain the same.

"The one thing that is not being disrupted is what we want: to be heard, to feel special," Mr. Shiffman said. "We need to answer this question: Do we make people feel special by practicing inclusion or exclusion?"

"Does it make you feel special because you feel different or because you feel the same?" he said. "Today it's not enough for a brand to create a single definition of luxury."

Black thread

It was a year full of outrage, political unrest and vicious culture wars. No, not 2018. Mr. Shiffman instead began his keynote address speaking of 1968.

The year was one of the most tumultuous for both the United States and France, the two subjects of the French-American Luxury Exchange. Amid the protests and clashes, Calvin Klein was founded that year.

In its early years, Calvin Klein made waves with its edgy and forward-looking designs and marketing.

"I became CEO four years ago and the biggest question I was faced with was this: When a brand turns 50, how do they stay fresh?" Mr. Shiffman said. "We are living in a time when what we know and believe is being disrupted."

"In revolutions, institutions fall," he said. "We are keepers of institutions, so we have to adapt or become irrelevant."



Calvin Klein eyewear. Image credit: Calvin Klein

To answer the question of how to remain relevant, Mr. Shiffman hired Raf Simons, the iconic Belgian designer and former creative director of Dior, to take over artistic direction of Calvin Klein.

The combination of Mr. Simons' French background and Calvin Klein's U.S. background made for a unique combination that reinvigorated the brand.

Mr. Shiffman also spoke about how the brand focused on creating a single overarching vision that they followed.

"We had to change how we engaged with the world," he said. "We needed what we call a single black thread, a cohesive creative vision that would allow us to show up with certainty."

Building a legacy

Legacy is incredibly important for luxury brands.

So many luxury brands have built their brand with the weight of their long histories behind them.

For Calvin Klein, the brand is in an interesting position, being halfway between the young, emerging brands founded in the last 10 years and the heritage brands who may have more than a century of existence under their belt.



Calvin Klein's fall/winter show from last year. Image credit: Calvin Klein

Brands in this transition period need to pay even more attention to their legacy than others. Chasing after the latest trend may be appealing for luxury marketers in an ever-changing world, but doing so can risk the loss of a brand's core identity.

For Diego Della Valle, chairman and CEO of Tod's, luxury brands' strengths lie in their legacy and the heritage they build up over many years. Speaking at the Financial Times Business of Luxury Summit on May 21, Mr. Della Valle warned that brands can dilute that legacy if they reinvent themselves too drastically and too frequently ([see story](#)).

"In the fashion industry, we have an enormous opportunity," Calvin Klein's Mr. Shiffman said. "We can define the issues of today to build a better world tomorrow.

"My views may not be shared by everyone here, but the music in my head says we have to build a society with room for everyone," he said. "That's the definition of luxury that matters to me."

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