

WOMEN WHO LEAD

Women Who Lead: Sarah Gargano on the evolution of luxury PR and her agency

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Sarah Gargano is founder/CEO of Sarah Gargano Communications. Image credit: Pamela Berkovic

By MICKEY ALAM KHAN

In this new feature named Women Who Lead, *Luxury Daily* interviews senior women executives across the luxury spectrum who make decisions that affect their customers or brands with whom they work. Our first interviewee is Sarah Gargano, CEO of her eponymous New York-based agency that counts Lalique, Valmont, McLaren Automotive, Rosanno Ferretti, One Drop, Luxury Education Foundation and the Italian government among her clients.

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A 20-year veteran of PR, Ms. Gargano runs Sarah Gargano Communications out of a loft office in Manhattan's sunny SoHo district. Peripatetic, luxury lover, mom of two daughters and a multitasker, she is on a tear to grow her business as the public relations industry itself undergoes rapid change.

"We see the next generation of public relations and communications as creating and maintaining a sense of community for brands, their clients and followers," Ms. Gargano said.

"With social media and influencer marketing generating a huge audience of global consumers for brands, storytelling has truly become a brand's currency," she said. "And it's important that PR leverages this new currency.

"Consumers really want to connect with brands that reflect their lifestyle and share their values."

In this dialogue, Ms. Gargano outlines her vision for [Sarah Gargano Communications](#) (SGC) and discusses the role of influencer marketing and the state of PR as client and end-consumer expectations evolve in this digital-empowered era. Please read on:

What is the state of public relations and communications in the luxury business? PR has always played a critical supporting role to advertising and marketing in luxury

Public relations is experiencing a well-deserved revolution. Over the years, the field has been growing significantly in importance and influence, making some people think it will overtake marketing in the coming years.

The public relations advisor role has become a broader strategic partner to clients for all things branding, marketing, digital, social media, events and media relations.

PR teams are the best suited to handle advertising initiatives since they have existing relationships with the media and an innate understanding of storytelling.

Beyond driving awareness, PR activities today are measured on the business results they drive, making it indicative of the increasing convergence of PR and marketing.

With the rise of digital media, too, PR teams have the ability to share news directly with the consumer as well as press, making them key communicators with clients.

I remember a keynote conversation event we hosted at Columbia Business School with our client, Luxury Education Foundation (LEF), between Carolina Herrera and Richard David Story, then editor in chief of Departures [magazine]. Richard asked Carolina, 'What's the number one most important factor critical to the success of a business?' Carolina smiled, looked at the audience and said, 'That's easy PR!'

The entire audience erupted with applause and LEF president Ketty Maisonrouge stood up clapping, urging me to stand up in front of the audience. I did and it was such an incredible moment. I looked around and saw Carolina and Richard clapping for me.

To have PR be reinforced by such an iconic figure in the fashion industry was thrilling and empowering.

So many times, people underestimate the enormous power of public relations and downplay its effectiveness due to the difficulty in measuring results.

This experience was one of those moments for me when I was re-energized to prove how formidable and all encompassing this field can be.

Who are some of your biggest clients? What kind of services do you offer them?

Our longest client has been Lalique, whom I have worked with for 20 years, starting as their in-house PR director for North America in 1999. Since then, I've gone on to work with them in the United Kingdom and Italy and then again in North America.

I truly consider them my family and they have been incredibly supportive of my career growth and the formation of the SGC agency. Lalique is a lifestyle brand with six pillars including jewelry, decorative objects, interior design, fragrance, art and hospitality.

We work across all of these divisions to promote and reinforce Lalique as the true lifestyle brand it is, founded by [the] prolific Rene Lalique who significantly contributed to each of these areas throughout his lifetime.

To achieve this messaging, we identify partnerships and events for the brand to further this goal and work closely with the media to help us communicate all initiatives globally.

The future of luxury is not only in luxury goods, but also in luxury experiences, and Lalique is in both of these segments.

The formation of the hospitality division and five-star hotels by Chairman Silvio Denz has underscored this opportunity to synergize Lalique crystal, gastronomy and the vineyard a marriage of savoir-faire and French savoir-vivre.

We create these experiences for customers and press to delight, seduce and eventually buy into the brand.

Another big client for us is Valmont, an amazing Swiss luxury skincare and fragrance brand that is family-owned by Didier and Sophie Guillon.

Valmont is passionate about art that inspires everything they create from their products, retail to spa experiences.

In the U.S., Valmont has dedicated spas at The Hotel Plaza Athenee in New York, the Hotel Bel-Air in Los Angeles, the Aria Hotel in Las Vegas and, recently, select Montage Hotels, so we are busy working on these partnerships in addition to launching some major product introductions to the United States for 2019.

What stands out the most to me is that Valmont has really recognized the importance of social media influencers and for the past two years. We have focused on this strategy to make the brand relevant to next gen.

It's exciting to see the popularity and demand of the brand increase so dramatically in such a short period of time through this one vertical alone.

We also are helping Valmont to become recognized as an art brand through events, exhibitions and press trips.

Didier is an artist, art collector, patron and curator of art exhibitions globally. He has created the Fondation Valmont, a pillar of the Valmont Group dedicated to contemporary art that collects works of arts, [and] discovers and supports new talent.

Didier has just purchased a palazzo in Venice where he will showcase his exhibitions during each Venice Biennale and that will also be home to the Fondation Valmont.

Another huge client for us is the Italian government and the Italian Trade Commission's Beauty Made In Italy program that promotes the awareness, availability and excellence of Italian beauty products and brands to the U.S. market.

Currently, we have 35 participating Italian brands in the program that is co-run out of Rome and Milan.

To support this, we have created an Italian Beauty Council (IBC) that focuses on educational programs for the companies with various platforms to learn the unique aspects required to enter the U.S. beauty market.

IBC has an advisory board comprised of Italian professionals and specialists from the beauty industry including hairstylists, make-up artists, digital media experts, social media influencers, retailers, distributors [and] heritage brands to give an all-encompassing viewpoint of the beauty industry.

These leaders offer valuable advice, knowledge and personal experience to the Italian member companies to provide them with the support needed to successfully enter the U.S. beauty market. They give back and mentor these future Italian business leaders.

Last year, we hosted our inaugural IBC panel discussion event and it was so successful we have three more planned for this year.

Moreover, SGC offers a full range of communications services including public relations and marketing strategy, branding, image management, media and film relations, editorial coverage across all platforms, curated event experiences, partnerships, influencer relations, ambassador programs, panel discussions, webinars, social media and digital technology for measured results.

How have clients' expectations changed with the exponential rise of digital and social media, as well as influencer marketing?

Digital publications and influencers/social media are helping brands expand their reach.

Today, clients expect coverage in both realms. This means that in addition to liaising with newspapers, magazines and broadcast channels, PR teams have to also work with bloggers and influencers to get placements.

PR agencies are typically best suited to handle influencer relations, directly overseeing and managing their partnerships with brands.

Posts from the right influencers can be equally, if not more effective, than traditional editor exposure in publications. This visual storytelling is at the very heart of how luxury brands should be communicating and engaging with their new consumer.

Is the press release still relevant? Or have tweets and Facebook and Instagram posts replaced the workhorse of PR?

The press release is still relevant as the need to communicate brands' messages will always remain, but it has morphed into various forms.

For luxury brands, the formality of the traditional press release still remains, as it is important to manage their image and perception.

But we also like to communicate a press release's message through other forms like Instagram posts and stories, Facebook posts, et cetera, that target other key demographics for the brands, adapting to their digital lifestyle.

You set up business a few years ago. What are some of the biggest changes you have seen since?

Even though PR still largely involves gaining placements for clients in media, today public relations services extend beyond media relations.

PR professionals act as brand stewards and strategists, establishing and maintaining a company's positioning and

managing its reputation.

This management also extends to key individuals at a particular brand, like owners and presidents of luxury brands. For example, SGC gains key profiles of these executives in the media to help further position them as innovators and leaders in their field and with their brand's passions.

The public relations advisor role has become a broader strategic partner to clients for all things branding, marketing, digital, copywriting, social media, events and media relations.

SGC recommends brand partnerships to elevate brands and are seen as key connectors with digital access to target consumers and influencers.

The largest change in the past four years has been the rise of the influencer that sees no signs of fading and only strengthening, with the potential to evolve into an art form.

This has become a key area that all luxury brands must embrace and find ways to speak to as it directly influences their next gen target consumer.

Brands who are testing out collaborations with influencers and other members of their global ecosystem are achieving and maintaining relevance right now.

It is imperative that PR representatives have relationships with their brands' target influencers.

Realizing this, SGC has fostered these key relationships over the past three years and is lucky to work with smart influencers who know how to drive brand messages home while still inspiring their followers in authentic ways.

You have a CV steeped in luxury. What are some of the highlights of your career so far working with luxury clients?

Over my 20-year career in luxury PR, I have been lucky to contribute to some incredible experiences.

Some of these highlights for me were co-hosting a RISD Museum fashion exhibition, "Artist Rebel Dandy: Men of Fashion" with Andre Leon Talley, representing the Hotel Santa Caterina to royal families and celebrities, sharing with them the heritage of the family, exquisite property and historic Amalfi region, the partnership between Lalique and Elton John over a 20-year period including his Oscar parties and private events at his home in the U.K., working with Herms and Puiforcat on an Asian exhibition at the Imperial Palace in Tokyo, Valmont's "Beauty And The Beast" art exhibition in Venice during the Venice Biennale, so many tremendous moments.

But what speaks to me most, when I look back, and what I remember almost every single day is why I love luxury so much. I love the craftsmanship and the devotion of the artisans to their work.

When I first started work at Lalique in 1999, I was also responsible for representing silver brand Puiforcat owned by Herms and porcelain companies Jean-Louis Coquet, Robert Haviland & C. Parlon, Philippe Deshoulières as Lalique did their North American distribution at the time.

As part of my training, I visited all of those factories in Alsace, outside of Paris, and in Limoges, spending time with the craftsmen, observing their dedication, pride, how they passed their knowledge onto their children and grandchildren.

These experiences at the factories were life-changing for me and from those days onward, convinced me to focus my efforts exclusively on the promotion and education of the luxury industry worldwide.

To be so passionate about your job and only be satisfied with the best quality and excellence is something I strive for everyday.

Most traditional media are on the skids, trying to adapt to a digital world dominated by Facebook, Instagram, Google, Twitter, Snap and LinkedIn. Do reporters and editors still retain their influencing power?

Absolutely. Editors still have authority in their respective fields as reporters and researchers in their industry. They have the credibility and experience, whereas influencers who use social media channels to promote themselves may be less knowledgeable and may be compensated for certain posts, potentially decreasing their authenticity.

How are you positioning yourself and your firm?

We see the next generation of public relations and communications as creating and maintaining a sense of community for brands, their clients and followers.

With social media and influencer marketing generating a huge audience of global consumers for brands, storytelling has truly become a brand's currency. And it's important that PR leverages this new currency.

Consumers really want to connect with brands that reflect their lifestyle and share their values.

SGC works with brands to develop stories that create authentic connections. In turn, this connection creates communities of brand loyalists who effectively market the brand in a truly authentic way.

PR for luxury brands should focus on the brand experience. Consumers today want to feel connected to a brand and engage with the brand in new and exciting ways.

We try to create highly personalized experiences that reward customers in unique and creative ways and are effective in establishing long-term loyalty between the consumer and brand. These exclusive experiences offer customers a sense of belonging and community.

Another way we have positioned ourselves is by being on the pulse of luxury sector trends, innovations and how luxury is influencing society's larger cultural conversation.

For 15 years, I have worked with the Luxury Education Foundation (LEF), comprised of luxury brand presidents in North America and LEF president, Ketty Maisonrouge.

LEF is focused on providing students with various platforms to learn the unique skills required to become a leader in their specific sector, by giving them real-life opportunities that allow them to engage with these CEOs of leading luxury firms.

Being privy to this group of luxury leaders, watching them navigate their brands, listening to their evolution as they manage the changing state of the luxury industry has rubbed off more than a little on me.

Also, having lived and worked in France, Italy, England as well as New York, LA, Chicago and Miami, I have a unique, global understanding of different cultures with intimate knowledge of the countries and their rituals.

SGC has daily interactions with the French, Italian and English countries, resulting in our ability to effectively communicate and respect each country's diverse business practices. We know what works in each country.

This understanding can never be underestimated especially as European brands are entrusting their heritage and image to us for management. As a result, we feel SGC is one of the best-positioned and most trusted communications company to manage these luxury clients.

Most of your clients are European. How do your French clients differ from the Italian, for example, in their mandate to you and expectations of PR and marketing communications? And U.S. clients how distinct are their needs?

Most of our clients are European: French, Italian, Swiss and English.

The common bond among them is to always uphold their brand's distinct heritage and reputation for innovation and excellence. I think this message weighs a bit heavier for our European clients than for our U.S. ones.

There isn't much of a difference, really, between our European brands French versus Italian other than cultural. They are global citizens and at the end of the day, the luxury world is small.

European clients look to us for an understanding of the North American market, regional differences between the cities, strategies that resonate in each market, press, influencer and film relationships, customized partnerships and event experiences.

The U.S. clients don't have this responsibility to their heritage as much. They are more concerned with connecting to millennials and are consequently more experimental in PR strategies that can be fun.

U.S. clients tend to specialize more easily in purely digital and influencer-related strategies.

Events seem to be playing a larger role in communications, especially in the luxury world. What are some of the dominant trends there, in the sense, what works in the events business to acquire new customers or retain existing business?

Events are playing a larger role because experiences have taken the top spot as best ways to attract and retain consumers.

Again, it's about creating a sense of community for your brand who you partner with, where you host the event, who

you invite, how you communicate that experience to press, influencers and customers.

Consumers are demanding more than ever before. Most times, they are more educated than salespeople, having done research online before entering a store and they want to actively participate in a retail experience, no longer content to just listen to a salesperson speak about the product.

That is why events are so critical they must satisfy this more sophisticated consumer.

Today, it is imperative to create Instagrammable moments at events how can we grab the imagination and attention of the guests and get them to post on their social media accounts?

We just hosted an art event in Los Angeles for Valmont to celebrate the inaugural launch of LA Frieze Art Fair alongside The Cultivist, a global art membership group.

The entire VIP art crowd was hard-core, steeped in street-cred, seemingly with no interest in posting on social media.

Well, that completely changed when out of the blue, during the event, life-size children's characters a la Disneyland appeared out of nowhere, break-dancing and dancing around the guests. Guests loved it and whipped out their phones. Everyone was capturing content to post.

These posts generated buzz and excitement about the event and, ultimately, about the Valmont brand, thereby associating it to those artists in attendance and linking it with LA Frieze Art Fair and The Cultivist.

You have brought on quite a few clients in the past few months. And you seem ready to expand geographically and talent-wise, right?

Yes. We are so excited to announce new clients including Cosmoprof North America (CPNA), the largest and most awarded beauty trade show in North America with a global network including Bologna, Hong Kong, Mumbai and, soon to come, Mexico.

We also are thrilled to be working with One Drop, an international nonprofit organization created in 2007 by Guy Laliberte, founder of Cirque du Soleil. Their mission is to provide access to safe water while inspiring behavioral change with respect to water, sanitation and proper hygiene practices.

We have also expanded our partnership with McLaren Automotive where we will support their communications team as the lifestyle agency for North America as well as work closely to develop McLaren's merchandising, licensing and partnerships division out of the U.K.

We just completed a project with new luxury faux-fur brand, Maison Atia, founded by the dynamic duo of Chloe Mendel and Gustave Maisonrouge for their first fashion presentation at New York Fashion Week last month and have editor and influencer events lined up in April with Coty to promote several of their beauty brands.

It is such an exciting time for SGC and thanks to my incredibly dedicated team, we are taking it to the next level with expansion plans to double employee size and open new offices over the next year.

What is next for your agency? Your goal for this year and next?

SGC is a luxury global company and as such we need to have representation in our client's high net-worth regions. This presence will strengthen and further SGC as an authoritative PR luxury agency with knowledge of these key markets.

Our first office outside of New York will be London that is slated to open this summer. Next will come Los Angeles. That is a crucial market for our brands who desire footholds in Hollywood, celebrity and red carpet events.

After LA, we will look to open Milan. That is a personal thrill for me, given my deep personal and working roots in Italy for the past 15 years.

We are honored to represent Italian clients such as the Italian government and Italian Trade Commission's Beauty Made In Italy program, iconic hairdresser Rossano Ferretti and luxury five-star Hotel Santa Caterina in Amalfi.

Further, our New York office in SoHo is an all-Italian office shared with two other fantastic Italian companies, so we truly ingratiate ourselves in the culture every day. It all comes full circle.

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