

TRAVEL AND HOSPITALITY

## Women Who Lead: Edie Rodriguez on leadership in the luxury travel business

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*Edie Rodriguez is chairman for the Americas and brand ambassador of Groupe Artemis' Ponant Cruise Line*

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 second interviewee is Edie Rodriguez, chairman for the Americas and brand ambassador of **Ponant Cruise Line**, a Groupe Artemis luxury yacht expedition company whose siblings include Kering, Christie's and Chateau La Tour.

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A veteran of the luxury cruise business, Ms. Rodriguez has served time as president/CEO of Crystal Luxury Corp. and, prior to that, held senior posts at Royal Caribbean Cruise's Azamara Club Cruises and Carnival Corp.'s Cunard Lines, Seabourn Cruise Line and Carnival Cruise Line. A native New Yorker now based in Florida, she is an accomplished speaker, sits on several boards, serves as a role model for leadership in luxury and strategizes on her feet as business quickly evolves.

"Luxury marketers should remain cognizant of the fact that global luxury consumers/guests, regardless of where they are from, are looking not only for the luxury item, but they are also looking for the experience wrapped around the purchasing of the item in the process," Ms. Rodriguez said.

"That experience may simply be the online experience of engagement and how user friendly their Web site is, it may be the in-store experience, it may be a concierge service in their home or hotel suite, or perhaps even more importantly, it may be some sort of a surprise-and-delight adventure like a backstage pass that they won't soon forget and will keep them coming back for more," she said.

In this dialogue, **Ms. Rodriguez** outlines her business and personal philosophy, the direction of the luxury business including travel and cruises, her leadership style, the quest for delivering the much-vaunted "experience," mentoring, issues that women face, evolving consumer behavior and the role of technology. Please read on:

What is it like to head a cruise company? You are one of few women to successfully helm cruise companies, now at Ponant and before that as CEO of Crystal Cruise Lines?

The cruise industry is a great industry, particularly at the luxury end of the sector. It is a global and varied business

that encompasses many divisions within the organization, including everything from ship design, finance, technology, gaming, corporate governance, CSR, marketing strategy, hiring and training for both shoreside and "at sea" team members, spa, gym, hotel operations, sales, food and beverage, boutiques, shore experiences, itinerary planning, port operations, human resources, making guests happy, delivering shareholder returns, etc., to name just a small portion of what is involved.

Leading such a global multi-faceted enterprise is a wonderful experience and really allows you the ability to become really well rounded with portable skills.

As far as being a woman in these roles, I always say that no chairman ever hired me because of my gender, but rather for their view that I was the best person to fill the job specification.

We are in 2019 and the gender issue sadly is still a topic that is raised. I look forward to the day when true gender equality in the business world exists including equal pay for women without it having to be mandated by governments, as some countries have initiated.

Lastly, as a global luxury cruise line, you are delivering experiences that deliver memories of a lifetime for your guests and that is very fulfilling for a company to achieve.

As Americas chairman and brand ambassador for Groupe Artemis-owned Ponant, what is your mandate?

Ponant is actually owned by Groupe Artemis, the same parent company as sister luxury brands Kering, Christie's auction house and Chateau La Tour.

Ponant is turning 31 years old in April of 2019. While they were well known in France, they were not well known in America. As a small brand we don't have mega-millions of budgets to spend on advertising to make us well known rapidly. As a result, it has to be accomplished organically.

When Groupe Artemis acquired Ponant a few years ago, they invested billions to grow the brand and to make it a well-known brand internationally, to be successful in delivering ROI that absolutely requires guest sourcing from America.

My mandate was that we needed to profitably grow the U. S. business by at least double, especially with the launch of new ships. I'm proud to say that we well exceeded that goal from a numbers' perspective.

Additionally, we won *Travel & Leisure World's Best Awards*, which is important at the point of sale to assist our Travel Advisors in closing more Ponant sales.

We also signed a significant national account that had told Ponant "no" to a preferred partnership agreement six times previously. The list goes on of successes that I was happy to guide the team to, but we will still have much further to go in the U. S. as we continue to grow even further.

We will be a 12-ship operation by April of 2021, including the world's first luxury exploration vessel that will go to the North Pole.

The U. S. market will remain a key focus for our company.

How is running a luxury yacht expedition company different from a cruise line?

Size does matter and, in this case, small is better.

The business side of the two have many similarities, as you are doing and needing the same things, but on a much smaller scale. The differences come in when you can create really unique itineraries because the ships are small and thus get in to many more unique ports around the world.

With zodiacs and the expedition aspect and all that this aspect takes there is where it creates other key differences as opposed to more vanilla-type cruising.

What is your leadership style?

I lead by example and am a 24/7/365-type leader.

As a leader, you must lead and I want to be responsive to all, hence my workaholic DNA. That does not mean that I expect 24/7/365 from team members, as I recognize that they need balance in their lives.

I have a participative style of management. I value everyone's input and like to implement what I call "creative collaboration."

Team members should be engaged in the process. I also believe in taking care of your team members and they will then take care of your clients/guests.

As a woman executive, you must have encountered challenges climbing the corporate ladder. What do you think you did right that got you to where you are?

Being passionate about what I was doing was, and still is, always key for me. It guides me in every aspect of my life.

One of the things that I always did right was to listen to my own instincts and to know myself well enough to know that when the passion was gone, it was time to move on to a new role.

This has always been wonderful because it led to growth. I also am blessed with energy like no other and that always propels me to want to work hard and do more.

Volunteering for things when nobody else wanted to do them led to wonderful outcomes as well.

I also never mixed business with pleasure as some women do. I let my results stand for themselves.

Mentoring and giving back was and is also a key.

Your career shows a lot of time spent in the luxury business and on the experience side. Was that intentional?

Yes, it was intentional. I always live my mantras, or "Eddie'isms" as I like to call them, and one of them is "Follow your passion!"

Luxury was always my personal passion since I was a child. I also consider myself a perpetual student of luxury as I travel the world and personally experience luxury.

I see firsthand how luxury perpetually evolves, the regional tweaks in different cultures, etc.

Since I also have years of luxury experience, I look at it all not only with a consumer perspective, but also with a marketer's eye and how ROI is being delivered. I then think about how they can add to it, do it better or differently, how to increase sales and how to deliver better ROI.

My mind doesn't stop thinking about it when I see it. I'm even more passionate today about luxury and experiences than when I started my career and that passion is what continues to drive me.

You have the unique ability, given your presence on boards, experience and travel schedule, to see global trends taking shape first-hand. Where is the luxury business heading?

What I am seeing around the globe and concurrently based on studies that I have read, it appears about a third of luxury category users expect to increase their spending across a variety of markets over the next year.

Luckily for Ponant, travel is in a strong position, with the highest potential increase in luxury spending based on research participants.

In this same study, the categories that were measured were automotive, alcoholic beverages, consumer electronics, designer fashion, leather goods, fine jewelry, watches, wealth management and luxury travel. This becomes a good indicator for future luxury spending.

Also, awareness of cryptocurrencies is also very high among global luxury consumers, so this is certainly an issue luxury vendors should look at for future form of payment options.

Sustainability is also one of the hottest topics at the moment, especially for luxury consumers. Studies show that millennials, in particular, are willing to pay 10 percent or more for sustainable products, so luxury retailers should remain cognizant of this.

The trend is clearly also that we are living in a global digital world where more and more luxury consumers are buying online and want experiences wrapped around the interactions with brands.

By the way, I do not see this just as a trend, but simply as the future.

What do consumers seek from luxury products or experiences currently that is a sharp shift from, say, a decade ago?

A decade ago the world was in a global economic meltdown down and luxury spending slowed slightly as a result.

However, back then there were still plenty of global buyers, but they did not want to be conspicuous about their purchases.

As an example, as they walked down Madison Avenue [in New York] they wanted to hold plain white bags, not bags with labels that would then be showing the world their spending while so many people were going through financial challenges.

It was also more of an in-store purchase process versus how online has grown now. They also weren't as interested in experiences back then as they are now.

Today, the luxury consumer wants and expects top-notch service, be it online or in store, unique experiences in the pre-, during, and post-purchasing process, robust loyalty programs that both reward and anticipate their preferences, and they want to understand what type of corporate social responsibility (CSR) the brand is supporting.

Today, more than ever, they also want expeditious customer service and responses when they are engaging with the brand.

Is the U.S. market diverging from Europe and Asia in terms of luxury consumption of products and services?

I don't see that yet.

I'm currently seeing that luxury consumption is very robust globally, particularly as many parts of the world continues to get wealthier.

However, in the U. S. as we move into an election year next year, cyclically we may see that change if we base spending habits on historical data.

How should luxury marketers adapt this year and next to changes induced by technology and evolving consumer behavior?

Luxury marketers should remain cognizant of the fact that global luxury consumers/guests regardless of where they are from, are looking not only for the luxury item, but they are also looking for the experience wrapped around the purchasing of the item in the process.

That experience may simply be the online experience of engagement and how user friendly their Web site is, it may be the in-store experience, it may be a concierge service in their home or hotel suite, or perhaps even more importantly, it may be some sort of a surprise-and-delight adventure like a backstage pass that they won't soon forget and will keep them coming back for more.

Technology is important to be able to deliver on these types of experiences but so is the training of their teams for whenever human interaction is involved. To that end, hire for the personality and then train for the skill.

Also, they should keep in mind that while there are some facets that can be micro addressed regionally due to geographical differing tastes and cultures, at the end of the day luxury, in my humble opinion, is an international language of its own and is understood globally to a luxury purchaser in that it transcends languages in the same way emojis are understood globally.

Everyone knows what a smiling emoji means regardless of their first language.

A luxury consumer or guest understands luxury in that same way and their wants and delivery are similarly understood.

As a result, in order to then deliver the "experience" successfully, luxury marketers should harness the power of technology and stay ahead of the curve by understanding first that utilization of technology in their marketing is always about perpetual evolution.

Just as luxury fashion brands release their seasonal changes, they also need to be willing to allocate investment funding to lead on the technological side and harness the power that can bring to allow their brand to consistently remain adaptable to shift to remain fresh and mobile.

Next, they need to understand that today's luxury consumer/guest cares greatly about two things from the luxury brands that they are purchasing from: first, loyalty programs and the one-to-one marketing and benefits that this brings to them as an individual and their relationship and interaction with the luxury brand that they are purchasing from, and second, they want to know that the brands that they are purchasing from are giving back to charities and that they care about the environment in their sourcing and production and as the buyer they want to understand what the luxury brand's genuine involvement with relevant corporate social responsibility is.

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