

MARKETING

## Heritage and disruption rule in luxury, but is there a third path to success?

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Ralph Lauren autumn-winter 2019 collection. Image credit: Ralph Lauren

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By [Susanna Nicoletti](#)

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In the constant evolution of luxury industry, it appears there are only two solutions in which brands embark on to capture consumer attention. It is either obsessively trying to protect their heritage while trying to keep pace with the times as seen with [Ferragamo](#) and [Ralph Lauren](#), or disrupting their brand by recreating new collections, bestseller items and overhauling their brand image, such as [Gucci](#) and [Saint Laurent](#).

While some brands try to find the balance between their codes and the unavoidable evolution that the industry and changing consumer expectations are forcing, other are pursuing specific consumer targets Chinese millennials and Gen Z to do whatever it is needed to increase sales in the short term.

It appears that the most successful way to achieve massive turnover growth is dramatically adapting a brand to the most affluent consumer's needs, which can lead to brand deconstruction and reconstruction on different basis and codes depending on the trends.

But is that all? Is there a third path that could set a different pace for a long-term successful revenues growth and brand evolution? Is there a third solution between disruption and survival mode?

Despite the gigantic business dimensions of fashion and luxury, the key success factor in the industry is still determined by non-quantitative factors: creativity, vision, courage, passion and knowledge.

There is no business plan, not even the most sophisticated one made up of deep-data analysis or machine-learning merchandising, that can boost a brand's growth in the medium to long term.

It is the human factor that makes the difference and cannot be replaced nor forced into pure business metrics.



*Saint Laurent autumn-winter 2019 campaign. Image credit: Saint Laurent*

Some creative directors have left an unforgettable trace in the story of a brand, even after their departure. Phoebe Philo is one of those. Her sharp vision and feminist attitude redefined the industry, and her work at [Cline](#) reshaped how women wanted to dress. We often talk about empowering women. She did it. Just like Gabrielle Chanel did in the past century. The same bold women. A strong brand vision. With the passion and courage to walk off the beaten track.

Martin Margiela is another example, particularly for his "think there is no box" vision of fashion. And he is greatly narrated in the "Margiela. The Herms years" book.

"The biggest change (Margiela) brought to Herms was the use of tones instead of colors, which prioritize the woman who wears them. She is distinguished instead of being the show," Marie-Claude Gallien, the studio director for women's ready-to wear at the French maison, wrote in the book.

"He not only made collections la Margiela for Herms', but he also made articles that were more Herms than Herms', by purifying rather than adding," said Stephane Wargnier, the then-communication director at Herms.

"From time to time, there needs to be someone who comes along and offers a sane, pragmatic alternative. That's why, when subsequent generations of designers rise to think along those lines, they all turn to look at Margiela. The echoes of what he did, so quietly and un-sensationally at Herms, still play through fashion now. Little-reported as they were at the time, the influence and legacy of those collections lives on," said fashion journalist Sarah Mower.

Can we say that Ms. Philo and Mr. Margiela are part of the same side of the coin: once they were called innovators and now their values are considered heritage?

I asked some questions to Barbara Curti, a Milanese professional of the fashion and luxury industry whose job title is "chief memory officer" of the [Archivio Albini](#).

Walter Albini is not presently widely renown like [Armani](#) or [Versace](#), but in fact he was the man who created Italian Prt-porter deciding to show its first collection in Milan, instead of Florence.

Albini was defined "stilista" by his dear friend, fashion writer Anna Piaggi, and a true innovator who paved the way for what we know today as Made in Italy.

"In the 70s, Albini worked closely with factories and artisans, establishing new relations and creating a new silhouette, lighter, more wearable allowing fashion to become more accessible to women," Ms. Curti said. "He created the total look' and the concept of lifestyle,' evolving the fashion designer into an interior and furniture designer with a rounded vision of style. He also introduced the main collections and second, more accessible lines, he created his own advertising campaigns, the set up and music of the fashion shows and he used stunning, unusual locations such as Caf Florian in Venice."

In sum, Albini was an innovator who left beautiful collections and disrupted the fashion system. His archives are cared by Ms. Curti, who underlines the importance of "memory" in fashion.

"To keep the memory of the past is crucial. It's true that everything changes but it is also true that everything is related. Memory helps in finding the right inspiration in order to encourage change and innovation," Ms. Curti said.

"And the chief memory officer has the objective to preserve and transmit the memory as well as, thanks to its knowledge of the matter, to become the key go-to person creating on a daily basis the brand image of the company,

thanks to a constant work of editing of the collections and brand materials to be kept, choosing the ones that have been relevant in the past and that are key today for the brand as well as for its future."

I believe this concept of memory offers a third way for brands to consider their long-term success and brand evolution. Memory that is not nostalgia is an active attitude that any brand must nurture and encourage in order to properly evolve.

While heritage is related to a more static, untouchable set of assets of a brand that might favor the risk of immobility, memory is a dynamic concept that helps any brand to have sense thanks to the awareness of its history, its strengths and its key chapters while keeping a door open for the present and the future.

Memory is keeping the sense of belonging and the sense of the evolution of a brand while constantly adapting and changing.

Valentino is an interesting example of this open innovation attitude. It is not stuck in the past. It continues to introduce new products and categories while keeping a strong *fil rouge* supported by living archives and dynamic memory. The inspiration takes a look at the past to develop new, contemporary flamboyant chic collections that are getting the attention also of the youngest customers.

CREATION AND INNOVATION can rely on the past if they follow a path of continuous inspiration and change.

Memory is the *fil rouge* that links a brand with its past while projecting it into the future. Memory is the future.



*Susanna Nicoletti is founder of LuxFashion*

*Susanna Nicoletti is a brand catalyst and founder of LuxFashion.*

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