

RETAIL

Weakened department stores embolden luxury brands to go seasonless

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Gucci fashion show in February 2020. Image credit: Gucci

By DIANNA DILWORTH

Italian fashion label Gucci revealed plans to scale back the scope of its fashion show business this week, opening the potential floodgates for others to follow.

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Gucci's announcement comes on the heels of Saint Laurent's move last week to drop out of Paris Fashion Week, suggesting that fashion shows are no longer as important as they used to be. Both Gucci and Saint Laurent are part of French luxury conglomerate Kering's stable of brands.

"Fashion shows have been on the wane for a number of years," said Pam Danziger, president of **Unity Marketing**, Stevens, PA. "They are incredibly expensive to put on and it is obvious that they are not generating the excitement and sales they once did. Thus, more and more fashion brands are pulling out, pulling back and looking for alternatives."



Global air travel to fashion shows generates 147,000 tons of carbon a year. Image courtesy of Ordre.

Environmental improvements

Gucci revealed plans to cut back its global fashion show imprint from five shows to two a year in all of the key cities

around the globe ([see story](#)).

"There is already a sentiment among consumers and creative designers that there may be too much fashion' within the industry and that it is not sustainable," said Brian Lee, senior principal in [Gartner's L2 Marketing practice](#), New York.

"This has existed for almost a decade but is now reaching an inflection point," he said. "Burberry was one of the first to move away from seasonality for at least a core set of products back in 2016. We've also seen several other luxury brands release permanent collections since then."

Gucci taking this stand will likely encourage others to follow.

"I think this gives permission for other brands to do the same when a leader chooses to move in this direction," said Sucharita Kodali, Charlotte, NC-based vice president and principal analyst at [Forrester Research](#).

Not only will cutting down on fashion shows help luxury brands save money, it will also make brands more environmentally friendly, which is an appealing factor among affluent shoppers.

The fashion industry has certainly been taking heat for the carbon footprint that these big events have produced in recent years.

The industry promotes a message of an eco-friendly lifestyle, but the total carbon emissions of the travel associated with the wholesale fashion buying process for buyers who attend New York, London, Milan and Paris Fashion Weeks is 241,000 tons of carbon dioxide (CO₂) per year, according to a report from Ordre in association with the Carbon Trust.

To put this in perspective, this carbon usage is equivalent to lighting up Times Square in New York for 58 years ([see story](#)).

Gucci might be able to help change things. But that depends on just what its two shows a year look like.

"There has been talk about this before, the 'open letter' to the fashion industry which essentially asked for the same thing," Ms. Kodali said. "But keep in mind that they said they'll still have two fashion shows a year but what constitutes a show is unclear if they replicate it in multiple cities.

"That to me still says there is a biannual cadence of new product which is somewhat more flexible than a fall and spring season, but sounds to me like a slightly different spin on something that's somewhat, but not radically, different," she said.



Actress Dakota Johnson at Gucci fashion show in February 2020. Image credit: Gucci

Direct marketing

Gucci's marketing has been preparing for this moment for years.

As department stores close down and brands are relying less on the curation of these high-end stores, they are turning to digital channels to connect with consumers more directly. COVID-19 has just sped up the process.

Some even ask, who needs a catwalk when brands have Instagram and Zoom?

"More brands are selling directly to customers anyway, so this has made sense for many years now," Ms. Kodali said.

"You'll still see similar marketing and trending toward marketing on digital channels but less presence in department stores because they continue to close," she said.

"This gives brands the flexibility to release things when they want to release things, not when the industry - i.e. historically, the department store buyers - expect them to release products."

With fewer department store buyers, the traditional model that relies on showcasing products for the season ahead has become anachronistic.

"The advance loading of retail with next season's fashions, not this season's which people want to buy, is also outdated," Ms. Danziger said.

"With more fashion sales going online and fast-fashion brands answering the customer's demand for the current season's fashion, it is long overdue that luxury brands answer the need by introducing new fashions faster and in a way that works better for the brands and their retailing partners," she said.

Cutting down on seasons and shows may have a silver lining for retailers by reducing pressure for them to purchase more with each season such as "cruise" or "pre-fall" and "pre-summer" collections, instead focusing resources with more depth rather than spreading themselves thin.

"These retailers will have to shift focus away from season-oriented marketing towards marketing around the

customer experience," Gartner's Mr. Lee said.

"When questioned on how shifting to season-less marketing has impacted revenues, most retailers say it has been positive for the top line, but required additional investments to transition away from seasonal thinking," he said.

Gucci's new model will do away with seasons and will combine womenswear and menswear into the same events. This will likely mean that the brand will produce fewer products and raise its prices.

"The luxury brands always raise prices," Forrester's Ms. Kodali said. "That is how they thrive they actually don't sell that many more units in any given year.

"Fewer products means that brands like this will destroy less of the merchandise and will not need as much headcount because they'll have less to manufacture," she said. "They cut out all that doesn't sell, or they do more bespoke orders."

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