

APPAREL AND ACCESSORIES

Post-pandemic fashion acceleration

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This has probably been one of the most challenging, most reformatory years for fashion brands in modern history. Everything experts believed to serve as a foundation has crumbled, and new rules emerged with the speed of wildfire.

Over the last 10 months, professionals moved from a reactive economy to a proactive one.

That is to say, rather than unceasingly solving problems, keeping up with never-ending micro-trends, and chasing after new accounts, the very approach to business has shifted.

The reactive system has slowed down, initiatives were cut back, connectivity decreased dramatically. Practitioners shifted focus to investigate their environment, consumer and markets to best implement their sparser initiatives. Attention was brought to traditions that have been traditionally dictating the fashion systems, and what was found that some already existing, and believed to be focal customs no longer cut it.

Of course, the exploration of these new ideas was not novel to them, but the extent and execution were unprecedented. This proactive approach allowed them to reassess what the status quo meant, and how to alter customs, opportunities, and principles specifically for their very own brand universe.

The last year brought drastic changes in four major areas: sustainability; the fashion calendar and its event structure; the meaning of community; and retail strategies.

Rewind to about 10 years ago. Sustainable fashion was pretty much pre-Instagram Birkenstocks with white socks, and for the most part, the whole genre screamed personal sacrifice.

Then 2008-09 financial crisis brought the internalization of luxury you no longer wanted to parade your earthly belongings in a climate where people were losing their jobs, houses or cars.

But, as we know, luxury is an ever-present concept that never ceases, but shifts shapes.

From sacrifice sustainable fashion went to storytelling and, as a result, sustainability 2.0 was born.

Amongst juice bars and new-age retreats, ethical fashion became sexy, too. And so, rather than squeeze all the

ethical and environmental footprint of the production into corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives, and hide it somewhere where no one can see it, brands centered their core messages around the idea of aspirational conservation. While a major step, this with no data to back those claims, was only half of the solution.

Sustainability became the halfway house of fashion. Of course, it attracted more people to want to change the consumer culture in which we live, and while some argue that that is the ultimate goal, it also left more space for greenwashing, directly undermining the ethical and sustainable efforts.

Sustainability 3.0 is now emerging, accelerated by COVID-19. It intertwines storytelling and data, appealing both to private aspiration and traceability.

One brand that already demonstrated this effort is Asket, whose receipts include the environmental footprint of each garment, as well as what that information means in the context for shoppers. Yes, that is right, shoppers want information, but that information needs to be understandable. You should not have a Ph.D. to shop for sundresses. Brands need to dare be more transparent and provide steps of guidance.

Storytelling is still important because the brands we surround ourselves with are essentially the extensions of ourselves. We craft and maintain our identities by attaching ourselves to the images that brands are projecting, and that is not going to go anywhere. But that said, sustainable literacy is growing, and brand professionals must cater to those, with facts, with numbers.

The second area of a shift in fashion concerns a long-debated obstacle: the fashion calendar and its event structure. Mid-season cruise collections were invented to keep up interest, which has led to overproduction, deadstock, aka an enormous amount of unsold goods, and ultimately to land waste.

Price cuts associated with the sales of previous collections strip remuneration from someone in the supply chain. In practice, it is inevitably harming the weakest of the operational level the garment factory workers prompting the marginalization of communities.

On the consumer side, this never-ending cycle of new collections and continuous reduction promotes the idea that you do not need to shop full price, because why would you if you can anything much cheaper. It is an addictive cycle that ultimately undermines fair wages and creative expression: how can a designer produce under pressure sometimes up to 10 collections a year?

There is also a second reason for the downturn of the fashion week, which is located in its deep and devastating identity crisis. That is because originally, fashion shows were meant to be industry events held for buyers and publications. They went, saw, and conquered, and six months later the cycle was repeated. And then, joined the influencers.

As it turns out, consumers are also interested in fashion events. And so the question is up for debate: who are the shows for in the first place? Is it entertainment? Is it trade? Is it exclusive? Is it inclusive?

Moreover, while digitized streaming has given access to many, preserving the trade show form who mandated catwalk as an obligatory concept? also diminishes the potential to use the occasion for branded surprises.

With no possibility to gather under COVID-19, brands were forced to revolutionize the form, adapting presentation strategies to their very own DNA and unique sets of consumers.

Loewe, for example, opted for a smart surprise and delight set that can be enjoyed by private customers as well as buyers, and even media as it embraces intimate exclusive, crafted experiences.

Roger Vivier chose a pop culture blow-up series on Instagram featuring the legendary French actress Isabelle Hupert, and Highsnobiety essentially held an online festival accessible to all called Not in Paris, featuring fashion brands as well as artists, and other creators.

As the name indicates it is a cheeky, rebellious distinction-based approach that embraces the divorce from traditional powers, and repositions itself as the underdog to watch out.

Digital catwalks cater to both business-to-business (B2B) and business-to-consumer (B2C). No longer an industry event, shows should embrace the surprise and delight framework, not providing an ad or a catalog. Consumers have enough of those, and there is a more creative way to present to buyers.

Brands that will be successful in this new era will combine engaging design and facilitating personal connections.

The third domain of accelerated change concerns the concept of community.

The meaning of community has, from a marketer's standpoint, has been a synonym for groups of consumers one can advertise to at once, and consequently the holy grail to obtain.

While in the English language, community refers to either a group of people living together or a group of people sharing significant values, experiences and exchanges that cannot be said about the attempt to forge communities on social media.

These consumers were not meant to engage with one another but parallel to each other, ultimately failing to deliver on a meaningful possibility to connect and to be connected.

Brands that are actually able to act as glue and facilitators in between and not above consumers are the ones with real value.

Let us look at Burberry and the emoticons it brings to its customers. By creating its own language it is quietly able to facilitate the very interaction between consumers and insert them into their daily lives. It creates quite an omnipresence through language.

Look at Wool and the Gang, a knitwear company and collective guiding consumers into collective recreational activities on platforms that allow them to further connect. Not sure how to go on about it? Ask. Inquire your customers about what they want to hear about, what do they need, what are their interests. Reformation at the beginning of COVID-19 did not assume what its role was to best cater to its communities but dared to open up, be vulnerable, and by that earned the role of leadership.

And finally, retail. The big enigma of pretty much the last decade, since digitalization has really taken off. Is it alive and well? Is it dying?

Once again, the answer lies in a non-standardized approach. Hey, compared to pre-digital, we have many status groups we serve with many brands, the era of universal frameworks are gone great news for some pioneers, less great for followers.

Fashion brands must ask what their overall strategy, what they want to achieve, and how bricks-and-mortar can help them capture that. Saturated marketplace and "switching economy," as well as the rise of ecommerce have led to the long-struggle of retail: while certainly still playing an important role, marketers have been attempting to revolutionaries the concept altogether.

The pandemic has further led consumers to the Web over bricks-and-mortar, or the strategic combination of the two.

Balmain has brought the digital Paris showroom space onto our phones note, I did not say digital products but the very environment, the escapade of shopping. You can actually enter the digital version of the Paris headquarters, and no less than Olivier Rousteing's high tech avatar is welcoming you, intertwining heritage and tech.

A very different way to use physical retail in an effective manner is #BlackInCarnaby featured 50 diverse businesses in fashion, art, photography and literature, becoming the center point to communal experience, and new encounters.

This initiative strives on the notion that while anyone can shop online, real-life experiences, connections and curatorships are still irreplaceable.

The key insight here is that the nature of retail will diversify. There will not be one single universal solution for successful retail. Instead, brands will have to understand the unique psyche and behavior of their consumers and communities to best cater to their needs, online or offline. And in the reactive economy, that was largely neglected.

These four major areas in the fashion system were up to reformation for a long time, but this metamorphosis has been dragging on until the global pandemic hugely accelerated it.

Other than breaking away from the status quo, what connects these arenas are the very fact that their path of change could have been assessed much earlier if the study of culture, society and psyche in relation to the marketplace would not have been considered a luxury, or an afterthought.

Brands must understand the larger context in which they live in to innovate and stay ahead of their competition, rather than lead a reactive lifeline, following their peers. While COVID-19 is, and has been, devastating in many ways, it also forced self-reflection onto brands, ultimately forcing them to move forward.

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