

HEALTHCARE

COVID-19 spurs proactive luxury brands to champion mental health

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Brands must continue to speak openly on mental health. Image credit: Getty

By KATIE TAMOLA

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, luxury businesses are supporting employees and embodying brand values by more actively addressing mental health concerns.

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With lockdowns, restrictions and layoffs, many employers have had to seriously consider the state of their mental health offerings and benefits. As the effects of the pandemic are continuously addressed and assuaged, more luxury brands are continuing to speak openly on mental health.

"I would say most brands were not prepared to deal with a crisis with specific programs, because they haven't thought that far ahead," said Milton Pedraza, founder/CEO of research and training specialist **Luxury Institute**. "But some brands because of their values, their purpose, their humanistic approach were more ready to be agile and to take care of associates, clients in a much better way than others."

"I think it's been on a sort of brand-by-brand basis," he said. "I don't think until this pandemic, brands were thinking about mental health as a program or as a benefit."

Mental health matters

Brands are actively finding their footing in terms of how and what to offer their employees in regards to mental health programs and benefits.

According to Mr. Pedraza, there are straightforward ways to communicate to employees that mental health is valued. Primarily, companies must recognize that everyone is a human being with needs that need to be taken care of, time flexibility, showing trust in employees to make up time if they need to leave early or come in late, work from home options and more.

French luxury goods conglomerate LVMH Mot Hennessy Louis Vuitton's "**LVMH 2020 Social and Environmental Report**" outlined ways that the group strove to promote mental health practices and offerings for its employees. In 2020, the group introduced "report it," an anonymous and confidential hotline employees can use to report harassment, inappropriate behavior or other ethical concerns.



Even before COVID-19, the prevalence of mental illness among adults was increasing. Image credit: Leslie J. Garfield & Co

Brands including Krug, Mot Hennessy Diageo, Veuve Clicquot, Christian Dior Couture, Parfums Christian Dior, TAG Heuer and Zenith operate telephone helplines and psychological support units. Louis Vuitton gauges mental health throughout the house through questionnaires, monitoring systems and dedicated working groups.

"To help employees achieve a harmonious work-life balance, LVMH must make their daily lives easier," the report said.

According to LVMH, 95 percent of maisons allowed employees to work flexible hours, including part-time or remote work. Additionally, 48 percent of the group's employees benefitted from an Employee Assistance Program in 2020.

The COVID-19 pandemic only further highlighted the importance of mental health wellbeing, including in the workplace.

In the 2020 "LVMH Global Pulse Survey" out of 78,000 employees surveyed, 89 percent of employees commended the way the group responded to the global health crisis, and 93 percent reported feeling proud to belong to LVMH.

"When we experience something new, unpredictable, or out of our control, our bodies respond by producing hormones including cortisol, adrenaline, and noradrenaline that prepare us to deal with that stress," said Emily Balcetis, associate professor of psychology at [New York University](#) and author of *Clearer, Closer, Better: How Successful People See the World*. "These hormones impact the functioning of our hippocampus, amygdala and frontal lobes, our most important brain structures for learning and memory."

Acknowledging and supporting their employees' mental health, especially during a time of upheaval, is good for business.



Johnstons of Elgin offers its employees mental health support. Image credit: Johnstons of Elgin

"People want their humanity back," said Janine Nicole Dennis, chief innovation officer at consulting firm [Talent Think Innovations](#), New York. "They want to do good work, earn a livable wage and take care of themselves mind, body and spirit.

"If you are a brand that makes wellbeing and mental health central to your culture; exemplified and encouraged in both values and behaviors, you will find yourself with a much more resilient and willing employee population," she said. "Moreover, having the right mix of programs, benefits and offerings that address mental health will not only be a defining factor for the profitability of your business but for the attractiveness of your brand both on the consumer

and candidate sides of the house."

In an interview with U.K. luxury trade group [Walpole](#), Kristina Blahnik, CEO of footwear label Manolo Blahnik, discussed her efforts to de-stigmatize discussions on mental health within her company and beyond.

Ms. Blahnik encourages her employees to be open about their feelings, particularly during the pandemic, so that they could be supported by the company and one another. The label also deepened an existing partnership with the [Mental Health Foundation](#) with a donation to help fund the Mental Health: Coronavirus and the Pandemic project, a research program that examines the impact of COVID-19 on individuals and communities across the U.K.



For Mental Health Awareness Month, Saks is encouraging shoppers to "let it grow and let it go." Image courtesy of Saks Fifth Avenue

Many employees and consumers alike are ultimately seeking messaging from brands reflecting that they acknowledge and care about mental health, in their own organizations and in the greater world at large.

Regardless of the brand or organization, an employer's ability to acknowledge and prioritize mental health is crucial.

"Too much cortisol that sustains over long period of time can lead to anxiety and depression, digestive problems, heart disease, sleep problems, weight gain, and memory and concentration impairment," Dr. Balcetis said.

"Prioritizing mental health in high-pressure jobs is critical to managing every aspect of your physical and mental health.

"If you don't, you can have much longer lasting impacts than you might have otherwise imagined," she said.

What has been done, and what must continue

Concerns and prioritization of mental health is not going anywhere. Brands are now realizing that they need to acknowledge the mental health of both consumers and employees during unprecedented times as well as everyday living.

Department store chain Saks Fifth Avenue has often supported mental health programming and awareness through its foundation.

Since its creation in 2017, the [Saks Fifth Avenue Foundation](#) has invested more than \$3 million in U.S. mental health initiatives and reached nearly 2 million individuals with messages that combat the shame and stigma surrounding mental health struggles ([see story](#)).

In March 2020, the Saks Fifth Avenue Foundation made a \$600,000 emergency grant to support patient care and offer funding to charitable partners as they tackle mental health needs in response to COVID-19 ([see story](#)).

This May, Saks is marking Mental Health Awareness Month by sharing resources and related activities in-stores and online. The brand will also raise funds for non-profit organizations working on mental health through the Saks Fifth Avenue Foundation ([see story](#)).

In June 2020, online menswear retailer Mr Porter focused on male mental health with a new book instructing men on how to live life elegantly and without much fuss. One hundred percent of the book's net profits fund the Mr Porter Health In Mind Fund powered by Movember ([see story](#)).

Brands need to make internal and external efforts to show their continued dedication to mental health.

"I can't underscore the importance of ensuring that wellbeing is an exemplified value within the organization," Talent Think's Ms. Dennis said. "Employees watch what their peers do and what leadership illustrates through their

behaviors.

"You can build all of the programs and create opportunities for vulnerability and none of it will be utilized if they don't see it in action or if they see punitive measures being taken against people for prioritizing their health," she said. "The key to getting this right is embedding it in the culture, training leadership along with staff to be good stewards of healthy practices is important."

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