



CEOs, Not Designers, Are Fashion's New Stars

By Lauren Sherman

July 18, 2019

Business-side executives are becoming brand ambassadors, sometimes surpassing their creative counterparts in public profile.

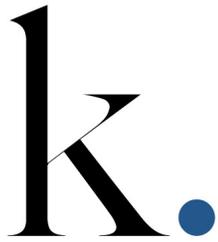
PARIS, France — For his most recent Louis Vuitton runway show, men's artistic director Virgil Abloh transformed Place Dauphine on the Île de la Cité into a veritable carnival, complete with a bouncy castle — rendered in the luxury brand's signature red — and park benches engraved with its monogram. Aside from the square's residents, who stuck their necks out of high-up windows in order to get an aerial view of the catwalk, guests were seated in clusters of café chairs, neatly arranged in such a way that every person had a view worthy of an Instagram post.

That includes Bernard Arnault — chairman and chief executive of Louis Vuitton's parent company, LVMH — whose prime positioning on the terrace of Le Caveau du Palais, a restaurant on the square, allowed him to take plenty of photos with his phone.

Arnault has billed himself as the biggest fan of the brands he owns, including Christian Dior, Celine and Givenchy. The sense of wonder he displays at major events — whether he is posing for the press with Dior brand ambassador Charlize Theron or snapping runway looks — is a performance in itself. One that everyone is watching more closely than ever. Abloh might be an international star, but so is his employer.

As the second-richest person in the world, according to Bloomberg, Arnault receives an outsized amount of attention when compared to his fellow industry executives. But while he might be recognised as one of the first business leaders within luxury to craft a public persona, he is no longer alone in drawing a spotlight once reserved for top creative directors.

It wasn't always like this. In the famous designer-CEO partnerships of fashion's past — such as Yves Saint Laurent and Pierre Bergé, Marc Jacobs and Robert Duffy, Calvin Klein and Barry K Schwartz, or Valentino Garavani and Giancarlo Giammetti — business leaders often played a supporting, if not silent, role.



But as fashion has evolved over the past 30 years from a collection of small-to-medium-sized private businesses into a global industry dominated by publicly traded, multi-billion-dollar conglomerates, the executive profile has changed.

In addition to running the daily operations, effective leaders must be able to communicate on every aspect of the strategy, from sales to merchandising to creative direction. This includes responding in times of PR crises, which can spin up overnight in the age of online activism and callout culture. A company's reputation is directly linked to that of its CEO, according to public relations agency Weber Shandwick's global survey of more than 1,700 executives working at companies generating \$500 million a year or more. Half of the executives interviewed posited that CEO reputation will matter more to company reputation in the next few years.

This new generation of CEOs "understands the power of the image perhaps as much as the creative directors," said recruiter Karen Harvey, the chief executive of her namesake consulting firm.

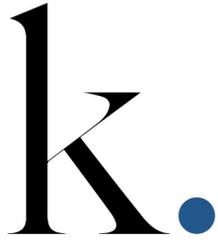
"CEOs are becoming the brand ambassadors," added Caroline Pill, who runs global executive search at Kirk Palmer Associates. [Thom Browne's Rodrigo Bazan](#) and Saint Laurent's [Francesca Bellettini](#), for example, are almost always dressed head-to-toe in their designers' wares for public appearances, physical embodiments of the brands they run.

So, whether they intend for it to happen or not, the CEOs often become as famous as the designers who work for them — sometimes even more so. Gucci's [Marco Bizzarri](#), OTB's [Renzo Rosso](#) and Tory Burch's [Pierre Yves Roussel](#) might not be taking the final bow at the end of the runway show, but they, and others like them, have established a public presence that goes far beyond the requirements of a quarterly earnings call.

Executives are publishing thought-leadership essays on LinkedIn — as Patrice Louvet began doing when he joined [Ralph Lauren](#) — crafting Instagram personas and making declarative statements on Twitter, like when [Francois-Henri Pinault](#) released his €100 million pledge to support the rebuilding of the Notre-Dame Cathedral via Kering's account.

"What has changed is the visibility brought by social media," said executive recruiter and human-resources consultant [Floriane de Saint-Pierre](#). "CEOs have just adapted to this reality, dedicating more time to this part of their role."

And yes, CEOs now often outlast their creative counterparts. "Managing the business is a bit different than before," said luxury analyst Mario Ortelli. "Sometimes CEOs are more committed to the brands than the designers, and that's part of why they are more visible."



Executives are also becoming savvier about cultivating and burnishing their personal brands. Stefan Larsson, the recently named president of PVH Corp, has worked at several big-name companies — H&M, Gap, Inc, Ralph Lauren — but his reputation as a supply-chain expert and turnaround specialist transcends any one position. Kering’s Bizzarri is famous for growth stories — both at Gucci and, before that, Bottega Veneta — while Louis Vuitton’s Michael Burke is known for his ability to manage and grow complex businesses. Angela Ahrendts, who helped to transform Burberry and then led retail at Apple until earlier this year, is viewed as an innovator.

A heightened public profile doesn’t always equal success. Ahrendts’ successor at Burberry, Christopher Bailey, did not impress investors in his dual role as CEO and chief creative officer. In the end, Bailey was replaced by low-profile career-CEO Marco Gobbetti, whose work at Givenchy and Céline earned him the chance to try to turn around the business.

And then, of course, there is Chanel. Chief Executive Alain Wertheimer — whose father was Gabrielle “Coco” Chanel’s early investor — is notoriously private, leaving interviews and public appearances to Global CFO Philippe Blondiaux and President Bruno Pavlovsky. While the company now shares its annual sales figures, which surpassed \$11 billion in 2018, Wertheimer seems determined to remain behind the scenes. He did, however, participate in the filmed eulogy for late designer Karl Lagerfeld that was broadcast at the “Karl Forever” memorial in Paris earlier this summer. It marked the first time many attendees had ever heard him speak.

“CEOs must focus on performance, and have a track record of getting things done,” Harvey said. “It’s good to make sure that people understand who you are, but it’s more important to be substantive.”

Disclosure: LVMH is part of a group of investors who, together, hold a minority interest in The Business of Fashion. All investors have signed shareholders’ documentation guaranteeing BoF’s complete editorial independence.