

Fashion and talent, an infrequent entente

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Talent is a scarce good, and fashion is no exception to it. This is why we need to know how to detect it to make it profitable later. From Marc Jacobs to Anna Wintour, from Domenico de Sole to Yves Carcelle, talent has found different ways of serving a market in constant change.

There are no recipes but mechanisms to explain it.

Is talent a gift? Are we born with talent or can it be acquired? Is it related to genius? Talking about talent in any field requires first of all to define concepts. Generally speaking, talent is nothing else than a potentiality subject to be developed or not, whereas gift and genius are inborn capabilities.

Talent is a rising star in fashion. Today, fashion is a system affecting companies and people, hence it is indispensable to know how it is detected, fostered, managed and capitalised.

The French philosopher André Comte-Sponville defined talent as follows:

«It is more than gift, less than genius. [...] Gift is an ability to learn; talent is a potency to create. Gift is inborn; it is a matter of genetics. Talent is acquired especially during childhood and adolescence; it is related to the history, the psychology and the adventure of being or becoming oneself. Gift is impersonal. Talent would rather be the very person when they achieve to express themselves in a creative and singular way. It is well known that the word stems from a metaphor. In the famous Parable of the Talents, Jesus compares implicitly the abilities everybody has received with coins («talents») they need to have them fructify. The talent one has is less important than what is done with it».¹

Given these considerations, the matter we are dealing with is not only if one has talent or not but how it is managed. In the world of fashion, as in any other field in which creativity plays an especially important role, talent is a rising star. Today, fashion is a system affecting companies and people, hence it is indispensable to know how it is detected, fostered, managed and capitalised.

Among the different stakeholders in the fashion industry, designers and managers are the

pillar of it all. Being a designer with talent is not enough; one also needs to be a manager with talent, which is difficult but not impossible. If one does not have the talent to manage, it has to be delegated to a talented manager. History of fashion proves it.

A mythical case is that of the Dior-Boussac-Rouët triad. In 1946, at the age of 41 and without any outstanding career in fashion so far, Christian Dior managed to convince the cotton tycoon Marcel Boussac to fund a haute couture company bearing his name with 60 million old francs (about 100,000 euros). It was Dior himself who hired his financial manager, Jacques Rouët, to make sure his company's profitability:

«I am going to be frank. I want a director who, first of all, has never worked in fashion. And secondly, considering my experience in this field, I will always have to play the good. You will be my secular arm, but when there are difficult decisions to be taken, it will be you who does it. Of course, you will have my support – among ourselves, we will always agree. But you will eventually be forced to play the bad!»²

After three years, Boussac earned 94 million francs,³ a figure that multiplied later thanks to licenses, a system Dior, with an excellent view for the future, was first to adopt as part of its business strategy.

The case of Yves Saint-Laurent is also legendary. In 1955, he was hired as the only aide of Christian Dior, and two years later he became the youngest couturier at the age of 21, when he followed Dior after his death. Dior himself said, shortly before he died:

«Yves Saint-Laurent is young, but he has an immense talent. [...] I think the moment has come to make him known to the press. My prestige is not going to suffer from that».⁴

However, Saint-Laurent's great talent was limited to knowing to create. This is why, when he founded his own haute couture company in

1961, he did it together with Pierre Bergé, his partner (both financially and sentimentally) and from then on the thinking mind in charge of the company's success.

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Domenico de Sole, the lawyer of the Gucci family, decided to reconvert the brand to the luxury segment amidst a crisis. Besides his strategies to seize power, he trusted a young, ambitious Texan with hardly any experience in fashion, called Tom Ford. De Sole and Ford proved that talent is not only about being a good designer or a good manager, but also about being able to create a team of brand strategists, so they achieved that the «Gucci effect» became the role model in luxury brand management in the end of the 1990s.

Another example of a talented couple was that of Ralph Lauren and Peter Strom. In 1972 Ralph Lauren, then bankrupt, hired Strom and offered him 10% of the company:

«We split the work the following way: I do all that Ralph doesn't want to do and I do nothing he likes to do. He designs, he does the advertising, public relations – I do the rest».⁵

Thanks to Strom, the «Laurenification» of America began, and both invented patriotic marketing. The value of the Polo Ralph Lauren brand does not lie in its designs being especially creative but in the added value of the story they tell – by the way, a completely invented story.

There are few cases in fashion of talented creators with enough managing talent. The paradigm is Coco Chanel who managed to create out of the blue an empire that lasts to the day. Not only did she manage to turn upside down



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fashion of her time, but she also was a pioneer in conceiving and applying the concept of global brand.

Giorgio Armani is another peculiar case. Though he started his career in 1975 with Sergio Galeotti, his boy-friend and partner, he also had to point his talent towards management after Galeotti's death in 1984.

A talented designer teaming up with a partner with managing talent is the ideal way; thus everybody does what they know best. It is a success story, but it is not easy because designers and managers usually talk different languages.

«I live in a sort of split-up. First I am creative, and then I dive into the other part, that of the entrepreneur who assesses the collection from a commercial point of view. And I contradict myself, as what I liked to do up to the day

before as a designer, the day after, considering figures and calculations, I shall not like any-more».⁶

A talented designer teaming up with a partner with managing talent is the ideal way; thus everybody does what they know best. It is a success story, but it is not easy because designers and managers usually talk different languages. Anyway, the standard story is that of the designer, let's say with talent, not finding a manager or unable to survive as a company; or that of the designer with few creative talent who finds a talented manager thanks to whom they sell.

Talent means to have a clear and recognisable brand image connecting with consumers and making a true difference with the other brands.

However, the world of fashion requires another kind of talent since its domination by great holding companies – searching talent. And the unchallenged leader there is Bernard Arnault, chairman of LVMH (Louis Vuitton Moët Hennessy), who always has characterised himself for gathering rebel talents such as the designers John Galliano (Dior), Alexander McQueen (Givenchy) and Marc Jacobs (Louis Vuitton), each of whom brought considerable revenue sources to the group. As an entrepreneur, Arnault has managed to detect the talent of designers who had not had a remarkable career in fashion until they joined LVMH, though they had started making noise after graduating from their fashion school. Arnault provided them with first-class managers such as Sidney Toledano, Marianne Tessler and Yves Carcelle.

However, there was an exception within LVMH – Christian Lacroix. In 1987, Bernard Arnault decided to fund a new haute couture company and gave it into the hands of a talented creator, Christian Lacroix, and a talented marketing and PR expert, Jean-Jacques Picart. Arnault did not

achieve to make it the counterpart of Yves Saint-Laurent nor a profitable undertaking, so he decided to sell it in 2005 to the American Falic Group after seventeen years of financial loss.

If a French luxury brand is unable to be profitable with three first-class talents (design, management and marketing), what else does it need? When talking about fashion, it is indispensable to go with the spirit of the time; that is, the product is also important. Being flamboyant in the 1990s, in the midst of a minimalist wave, did not connect with the audience.

Jean-Jacques Picart left Lacroix in 1999 to create a consulting firm funded by Arnault himself, devoted precisely to searching talents. But in fashion, talent can also be found elsewhere. The example for this is Inditex.

Who knows the name of the designers at Zara? Does anybody care about it? Only 0.46% of the Inditex staff – more than 65,000 employees – are designers. In this case, talent lies in having invented a business model that turned the world of fashion upside down and has placed Spain on the world fashion map for the first time. According to the annual ranking of brands with the highest value by the reputed brand building consulting firm Interbrand, Zara was 64th in 2007, above fashion brands such as Adidas, Hermès, Rolex, Tiffany, Cartier, Prada, Burberry and Polo Ralph Lauren. It only was preceded, by this order, by Louis Vuitton, Nike, Gucci, Chanel and Gap.

These five are precisely the brands getting the best of their big investment in brand identity and communication. Following the famous American brand strategist, David Aaker, talent means to have a clear and recognisable brand image connecting with consumers and making a true difference with the other brands.

Communication is another field that requires talent, and media play a very important role in fashion. Without communicators no message is passed. Carmel Snow, the famous editor of

Harper's Bazaar (1934-1958), explained very clearly the talent needed to do her job well:

«It is our role to recognize fashions when they are just the germs of future. Designers create, but without magazines their creations would never be recognized nor accepted».⁷

Without the sense of the relentless chief editor of the American *Vogue* edition, Anna Wintour, neither John Galliano nor Marc Jacobs nor the Proenza Schoulers would ever have become what they are now.

But talent in fashion is not just that – stylists, make-up people, hairdressers, models, artistic directors and photographers are among the other key stakeholders in the industry who, together with designers, managers and brand strategists, need to be detected, fostered, managed and capitalised.

Education, from Latin *educere* ('to guide'), is the core to push any talent as it builds the support and development context in materialising potential talents. People can have two very different attitudes towards education: either they resign to what they are taught or they discover what they can learn. Talent is in the latter, making learning a never-ending journey, the more in the world of fashion, the landscape of which changes constantly.

It is difficult to detect talent as it is a scarce gift, but it is easy to recognise once it is found. Hence not only the attitude of those learning is important but also that of the person acting as an intermediary in learning, both in teaching (professor) and professionally (boss). The role of the mediator is knowing how to raise and drive the motivation of the talented and unleash the necessary process to have this talent grow and be applied. It sometimes occurs that the mediator shows too much favouritism and fosters only those having their same way of doing things, though they should try to get the best out of everybody. Or it also happens that the mediator obstructs those who may become better than them.

How is a talented person discovered? Through their ability and their attitude – motivation, questioning it all, nonconformism, higher requirements, knowing how to surprise, giving more than expected and obtaining different, special, riskier, innovative, above-average results, that is, their capacity to create.

To foster talent, a context allowing its development is needed.

To be able to foster detected talent in any discipline related to fashion, a context allowing its development is needed. Designers, managers, communication agents and the rest of related professions need a framework of professional projection. Otherwise, talent will be wasted or wander off to better prepared markets.

Experience is a necessary step to fully deploy talent. In fashion it mostly occurs that, for instance, a designer works for others before creating an own brand. One of the most influent designers today, Stefano Pilati, started working for the Cerruti design team with 22 years. Six years later he came to Armani and then to Prada where, at the age of 32, he became design assistant of Miu-Miu. Finally, he joined Yves Saint-Laurent in 2000 as design director, becoming the artistic director of the brand two years later. In the United States, one of the most reputed agencies in detecting and fostering talent to create new fashion brands, GenArt, does not accept any designer file with less than four years of proven experience in the industry.

It is demonstrated that exploiting talent in fashion returns on the profitability of a country's economy, either directly in turnover and job creation or indirectly in international professional capture and tourism, besides enriching its cultural capital. A company like Ralph Lauren, with a turnover of 4,295 million dollars (2007), employs 14,000 people; a fashion school like Central Saint Martins in London attracts students from all over the world each year, and

a city like Paris generates an enormous flow of visitors attracted by its *savoir-faire* in fashion.

Given these facts, it can be inferred that having talent only is not enough. Its development process is like a mechanism all pieces need to fit in to work properly. It is therefore paramount

to know how to deploy correctly all tools that help detect, foster, manage, retain and capitalise talent.

A country able to take advantage of talent is a bright country, as we must not forget that talent will remain a scarce good.

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Notes

1. COMPTE-SPONVILLE, André (2003). *Diccionario filosófico*. Barcelona: Ediciones Paidós Ibérica, p. 511.
2. POCHNA, Marie-France (1994). *Christian Dior*. Paris: Éditions Flammarion, p. 257.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 236.
4. BENAÏM, Laurence (2002). *Yves Saint-Laurent. Biographie*. Paris: Éditions Grasset, p. 66.
5. FERRETTI, Fred (1983). «Fashion Profile». *New York Times Magazine*, 18 September 1983.
6. MOLHO, Renata (2006). *Essere Armani. Una biografia*. Milan: Baldini Castoldi Dalai Editore, p. 138.
7. POCHNA, M.F., *Op. cit.*, p. 140.