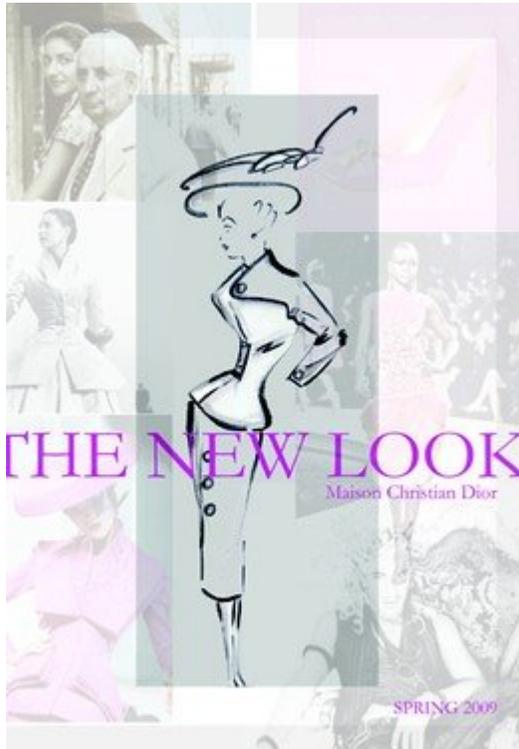


Learning Luxury

by Jessica Iredale

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The Dior magazine, proposed by students.
Photo By Courtesy Photo

“What can we do for you?” It’s the luxury sector’s big question, one that executives from six top-tier brands — Christian Dior, Louis Vuitton, Luxottica, Lalique, Cartier and Hermès — posed to students in “The Design and Marketing of Luxury Goods,” an interdisciplinary course sponsored by the Luxury Education Foundation and co-taught by professors from Columbia Business School and Parsons The New School for Design. Students presented their answers Tuesday night at Columbia’s Uris Hall.

Now in its 14th year, the focus of the class, in which students from both schools team up to tackle a particular company’s project, has shifted from product design to service innovation, a clear reflection of the times. Whereas in the past the challenge was to relaunch a classic shoe or develop products geared toward a younger audience, this semester’s mandate was all about personalization and experience. “People realize that it’s important to make the consumer experience the best possible,” said Kitty Maisonrouge, adjunct professor of marketing at CBS and president of LEF. “Now [the executives] said, ‘Don’t redesign; find an angle.’”

All topics were designated by the companies and seemed to represent current retail objectives — among them, creating a signature shopping experience at Dior and Cartier, and engaging a younger audience at Lalique. For its part, Hermès’ project was the most reality-based and specific: Its team, limited to CBS students at the company’s request, was asked to develop the marketing and launch campaign for its first men’s store, which is set to open on Madison Avenue and 62nd Street in the fall.

Daniel Lalonde, president and chief executive officer of Louis Vuitton, which has participated in

the program twice before, said two of his top executives worked with students on the project, which focused on accessories. “We meet with them, tell them, ‘This is what we want. You’re off track here,’” he said. But ultimately the final product reflects the students’ vision and the execution is up to them. The course has become a recruiting vessel for luxury firms, which have, on occasion, implemented strategies from the proposals.

Students conducted customer — current and potential — surveys and went on secret- and comparative-shopping expeditions. Retailwise, Apple’s Genius Bar was cited as inspiration more than once, and interactive shopping experiences were featured in almost all the presentations: a Watch Bar and Proposal Concierge at Cartier, styling services at Dior, customization options at Luxottica and spaces dedicated to trying on accessories at Vuitton and Hermès.

Interestingly, there was little mention of utilizing social networking sites such as MySpace, Facebook or Twitter as marketing tools. The students still favored such tried-and-true methods as the celebrity testimonial (Carla Bruni-Sarkozy for Lalique), print media (a quarterly Dior magazine) and the blowout store-opening bash (Hermès). Indeed, the fictitious plans for the latter, which included erecting a building-sized orange gift box in the middle of Madison Avenue to house an Hermès exhibition, staging a full runway show, and serving hot chocolate and baguettes in the store, sounded fabulous, not to mention expensive.

When asked about a budget, the group said the lavish event was priced to be on target with a real Hermès expense plan. That statement was reaffirmed by Robert Chavez, Hermès’ president and ceo, who added that his students were encouraged to go for broke. “We didn’t give them many restrictions,” said Chavez. “A really great idea will never cost too much money.”