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Holographs At Hermes And Other Innovative Ideas Students Pitched To Luxury Brands At LEF Program

Final presentations in [Columbia University](#)'s Uris Hall during early December—something seemed different than your usual end-of-year exam scene. For one, many of the students were carrying Loro Piana shopping bags. They also seemed remarkably well-dressed for students, with some in proper business attire and others wearing designer outfits, in a few cases sporting serious looking jewelry. They were actually executives from the world's top luxury brands who participate in the [Luxury Education Foundation](#).



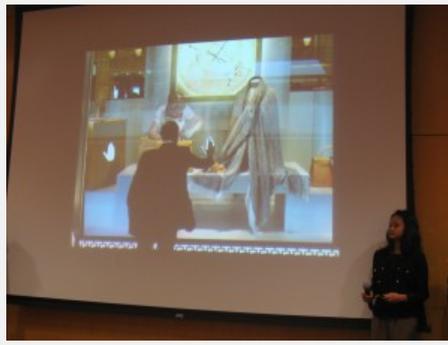
Ketty Pucci-Sisti Maisonrouge, Luxury Education Foundation president, addresses attendees prior to the student presentations.

Established in 2004, LEF is a public, not-for-profit organization focused on educational programs for undergraduate and graduate students in design and business students related to the creation and marketing of luxury goods. It is unusual and perhaps groundbreaking in several ways, most noticeably because it combines students from two distinct universities whose intellectual paths at first seem far different: [Columbia](#) MBA students and undergrad students from Parsons The [New School](#) for Design. It is this combination of business and creative skills that make luxury and fashion so different than other industries and it is the main reason why this program has had a great deal of success.

“Many times we talk in Columbia about integration, but we are talking about integration between accounting and finance, or economics and marketing,” said Amir Ziv, vice dean of the Columbia [Business](#) School, during opening remarks. “But this is a different level of integration. This is integration between two schools that are very different in their nature. Actually they’re coming from two different universities.... They are in a completely different stage of their life and career. Still we

are integrating and this is wonderful.”

In addition to academic integration, there's the involvement of luxury businesses. Approximately 30 luxury brands, nearly all of them household names, participate. There are a number of educational components to LEF but the main program is the “Master Class,” where teams of eight students (four from each school) are given a direct problem from one of the brands to solve for them. These are real life challenges and they work directly with the executive staffs of each luxury brand. It's a semester-long program that culminates in the final presentation, such as the one held in December 2012 where teams of students presented solutions to problems proposed by luxury brands Hermès, Van Cleef & Arpels, Pomellato, Loro Piana and [Chanel](#).



An image from the Hermès presentation.

LEF is certainly a group effort, but the person who makes this complex, convoluted engine hum is Maisonrouge. Her duties include designing the course, personally attending every meeting between the brands and students, teaching classes and choosing the Columbia MBA students who will participate and for which brand. She says her main job is making sure the brands, in particular the CEOs, put the work in.

“The reality is yes I work hard on it but I make the CEOs work harder than they ever thought they would,” the French native said. “The more time they give the more they will get back.”

Maisonrouge's counterpart at Parsons, Jessica Corr, an assistant professor and a product design consultant who is new to LEF, selects students from the design school based on their skills. For example, the Hermès project required students with creative technological ability.

The final presentations for public viewing are 15-minute versions of approximately hour-long proposals that the brand executives saw. In addition to time constraints, the reason for this is so brands can maintain an advantage over what Maisonrouge describes as their “friendly competitors.”

“What you saw is what I call the politically correct version,” she said.

The brand executives choose the topics or challenges for the students to solve but Maisonrouge “tweaks the problem” to ensure that everyone benefits. The students benefit through real life implication of what they learned in the program. The luxury brands benefit through the ideas generated from young consumers, particularly through the use of technology, and they gain a better understanding of what young consumer expect from a luxury brand.



Students present their ideas for marketing Van Cleef & Arpels' bridal line in the U.S.

For the Hermès presentation titled, “The Living House,” one of the challenges the students faced was how to make entering an Hermès store a less intimidating experience. The answer they presented was to use technology to engage pedestrians. They built a storefront window with handprints that looked as if they were created by light or frosted glass. This invited pedestrians to place their hand over the handprint. Doing this activated a holographic image of a Hermès craftsman at work behind the window.

“They come up with many things that we never thought of and that’s what’s so refreshing and rewarding,” said Robert Chavez, Hermes USA president and CEO, who has been involved with the program since the beginning. “I thought it was just genius. I give them a lot of credit.”

He said during the course of the semester, there were about five meetings with the students. The initial presentation where they receive in-depth knowledge about the brand and a “rough guideline of the general theme,” then follow up meetings to determine the progress.

“We don’t really have input into their presentation,” Chavez said. “What we do is we guide them. They ask us a lot of questions and we’ll answer all of their questions. We always let them do the actual presentation themselves. What they come up with are their ideas and concepts.”

For Van Cleef & Arpels, it was the first time they participated in the program. The brand asked the students to come up with a marketing strategy for a new bridal line for the U.S. market.

“The entire process from choosing an engagement ring to walking down the aisle is a very sociological process and one that varies even within cultural subsets by age,” Nicolas Bos, CEO Van Cleef & Arpels Americas. “The opportunity to work with students was particularly intriguing because this is a generation who consumes incredible amounts of information from all different types of media in virtual real-time; who are both influenced and influencers within their social and familial networks.”

Bos said the brand had five meetings with the students and spent a great deal of time educating them on the history of the brand. Bos said the students “got it” almost immediately.

“What was especially surprising and exciting about the student team was their capacity to work at a very fast pace, to understand our Maison and values in the space of not only the luxury world but also the fine jewelry world, and their agility moving forward quickly through the project without delays or confusion,” he said.

The team developed a story telling strategy that focused on two-way communication between the brand and customer. “Where Van Cleef could reach into their rich history and tell their stories to the customer, but also hear from the customers themselves and take those stories on board,” one of the team members said during the presentation.

The story they told was the love story of Estelle Arpels and Alfred Van Cleef who married in 1896 and established the first Van Cleef & Arpels boutique on Place Vendôme 10 years later. They presented as a video with music in storybook form but it is designed to be used for all media purposes. They also used the story in a window display at the Van Cleef New York boutique.

The second part of the strategy is a call for the general public to present their love stories through Facebook. The winner will receive a free trip to Paris to have a custom ring designed at the Place Vendôme boutique.

“While this information is historically a part of who we are and why we are here, the students’ reactions to and inspiration from this information reinforced this story of love, family and legacy, to reposition it from unique backgrounder to impactful messaging points—particularly as it pertains to the bridal market,” Bos said.

In others words the students were able to bring a new perspective to a timeless love story.

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