Kering's Marie-Claire Daveu: “Sustainable development is no longer an option for the luxury industry”

By Dominique Muret - 18 October 2018

Marie-Claire Daveu joined French luxury group Kering in 2012 to lead its sustainable development strategy, in her role as chief sustainability officer and head of international institutional affairs. In this interview with FashionNetwork.com, Daveau reviews Kering’s approach, its objectives and the advances it made in the field of sustainability.
FashionNetwork.com: Kering published its first environmental performance report in 2015. What is the current status of the group’s engagement in sustainability?

Marie-Claire Daveu: We launched a 2012-2016 action plan that was highly focused on the environment, with quantifiable objectives. But the plan was too short-term to change things. On the strength of that experience, we understood that a more holistic approach and a more long-term vision were needed. We therefore added a community dimension to our environmental plan. In January 2017, we published a new strategy with a 2025 horizon. We will assess our progress every three years, and the first waypoint will be early 2020. To underline the importance of this issue, the members of the group’s executive committee make up the leadership group for this strategy.

FNW: Which new objectives did you set yourselves?

MCD: Our main environmental goals are a 40% reduction of our environmental impact and a 50% reduction of our CO2 emissions by 2025, achieving 95% traceability of the raw materials we use by the end of 2018, and 100% traceability by the end of 2025. In parallel, we introduced raw material sourcing and manufacturing process standards, which were published on our website last January. After working on this for two years, we entered the pilot-test phase for some processes and materials. All of these standards will have to be 100% implemented by the end of 2025. Our new strategy rests on three mainstays, labelled ‘Care’, for the environment and natural resources, ‘Collaborate’, with reference to our community engagement, and ‘Create’, for our focus on innovation, a fundamental step in reaching our goals.

FNW: What do you mean?

MCD: Through the policies and projects we identified on the sourcing front, for example working with sustainable wool or organic cotton, and on the production front, we know we can manage to reduce our environmental footprint by 20%. But this will still fall short of our 40% reduction goal. We will therefore have to rely on innovation and disruptive technologies, whether in the production process, sourcing or other areas. In a few years, incredible innovations will emerge, things that have not yet been invented and whose effects we cannot yet imagine. This is the challenge!

FNW: How are you planning to rise to this challenge?

MCD: We need to have an entrepreneurial approach, and to be open and receptive to the innumerable initiatives that are cropping up everywhere. Then we need to experiment, see how things work. Hence the importance of investing in this area. In 2015, we invested with H&M in the Worn Again start-up, which discovered a way of breaking down the fabrics of clothes made of blended fibres, and of separating dyes and other polluting agents from polyester and cellulose. In 2017, we set up a partnership with the Fashion for Good/Plug and Play start-up accelerator. For example, working on how to create a dye from micro-organisms, or how to produce imitation leather in a laboratory. All of these initiatives require a sizeable investment effort.

FNW: Sustainable development has a cost. What is the order of magnitude of these investments?

MCD: What you regard as a cost is an investment for us. Sustainable development is no longer an option for the luxury industry. If we want to make our business durable, we have no choice. We must adopt a sustainable strategy on all fronts. But in this matter, it’s impossible to have a traditional approach to profitability. In terms of energy reduction, the return on investment is easily quantifiable. But it’s much harder for other parameters. You may end up investing in a new technology or a start-up that isn’t viable.

FNW: What are the latest projects you have developed in the field of sustainability?

MCD: This year, with the London College of Fashion, we set up the first online course on sustainable luxury, a Massive Open Online Course (MOOC). It lasts six weeks, it is free and open to anyone. The first session took
Massive Open Online Course (MOOC). It lasts six weeks, it is free and open to everyone. The first session took place in April, and had 10,000 entrants from 144 countries! We did not expect so much success. The second session will start soon, in October.

FNW: Social media are piling on the pressure on fashion labels about ethical issues. What is your opinion about this?

MCD: Social media has a doubly beneficial effect. On the one hand, they have a pedagogic dimension, making information sharing easy and simple. On the other, they expose bad behaviour. If a brand isn’t genuine, or is simply greenwashing, this can immediately turn against it. For me, this is both positive and important. Consumers too have a responsibility.

FNW: Politicians, on the other hand, seem to be rather holding back on this…

MCD: Society is evolving, and it’s evolving fast. In terms of sustainable development, everyone has their own responsibilities, and it serves no purpose to pit one against the other: politicians, consumers, the media and business leaders. Corporations have a responsibility, and they have an impact too. Everyone must act.

FNW: Lately, animal welfare issues have become more widespread. What initiatives are you taking on this subject?

MCD: When in 2012 I talked about the welfare of animals, of pythons for example, I made people smile. Nowadays, the thinking has changed. This is an area in which Kering is keen to make progress, and to have a leadership role. In our Kering Standards, we included recommended breeding methods species by species, and also defined the standards for taking animals from their natural environment and for their culling. These animal welfare policies, which go way beyond existing regulations, should be made public in the first half of 2019.

FNW: It must be complicated to put such measures in place, seeing how many suppliers you have.

MCD: We held many meetings with our suppliers, with tanners and others. I sense there is an increasingly stronger awareness on these subjects. But [suppliers] need to be supported and trained on these issues. Our approach is to build genuine partnerships with our suppliers.

FNW: The general public too seems to be more aware of environmental issues. Do you detect a sense of urgency on this matter?

MCD: The urgency is there. But it isn’t anything new for Kering. Clearly, the resonance in 2012 wasn’t the same as now. Now it’s a matter that affects the whole of society. Climate change is something that affects people’s daily lives. As for biodiversity, it’s a tougher issue, but a crucial one. We must act fast, concretely and in operational terms.

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