

Fashion

Big deals and Hollywood: where fashion marketing is headed next

The co-founder of communications group The Independents on its latest acquisitions and feeding the fashion entertainment machine

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Public relations maven Karla Otto and events guru Isabelle Chouvet set out to build “the biggest luxury brand management agency in the world” when they merged their two companies, Karla Otto and K2, in 2017, to create communications group The Independents. Seven years later, with 15 agencies under their belt, that remains their guiding star.

“It has always been the goal,” asserts Chouvet, who is CEO of the group, from her home in Paris. A backdrop of earthy wall panels reminiscent of those in Japan, where K2 was founded back in 2002, are visible on our video call. When we speak in August, there’s an industry-wide summer lull, but Chouvet isn’t taking the opportunity to slow down. “We have more acquisitions coming.”

A week earlier, The Independents added Bureau Béatrice – a Dubai-based creative agency that uses technology to create immersive experiences for luxury brands including Prada, Bulgari and L’Oréal – to its roster. Now, it’s announcing another addition: Kitten Production, a creative production agency that works with its clients, including Louis Vuitton, Saint Laurent and Jacquemus, to execute marketing campaigns and produce video and digital content.

Diversification is top of Chouvet’s mind. The Independents brought in \$600mn in revenues in 2023, which Chouvet attributes to the group’s widespread reach, meaning it is not reliant on a single market or channel. That’s all the more pertinent amid a luxury downturn and a turbulent macro-environment that have caused other big players to experience a setback in growth.

From creative consultancy Sunshine to events production firm Bureau Betak (among the companies now part of The Independents), Chouvet sees the group as “an orchestra of specialists” at a time when brands need to be more strategic in how they engage with customers. Each acquisition brings the founder of the business on board as a partner at a holding level. “We want them to stay, to be motivated and to share the success together,” says Olivier Chouvet, co-founder of K2 and The Independents, also Isabelle’s husband.

The Independents’ recent spree is made possible by the \$580mn it raised across 2023 from investors TowerBrook Capital Partners and Banijay Group, as well as debt financing. But it’s not the only communications firm to invest in its operations through strategic acquisitions. In June last year, The Lede Company, the public relations firm representing stars including Rihanna, acquired Paris-based agency Olivier Bourgeois Communication and Marketing. Two months later, France’s billionaire Pinault family bought a majority stake in Hollywood talent firm Creative Artists

Agency from private equity firm TPG in the largest-ever transaction for the family’s holding company Artémis.

The level of dealmaking reflects heightened competition in the industry, as companies of all sizes seek to create cultural relevance, which in turn can help build brand equity and sales. It’s difficult for smaller agencies to offer such a wide scope of services globally. There’s also less margin for error, warns Isabelle Chouvet. “You cannot make any mistakes, knowing that now everything is published in a second,” she says, referring to the watchdog culture that has emerged online, where brands can easily be called out on social media for any mis-steps.

The next big opportunity for brands is leveraging the convergence between fashion and entertainment, Chouvet believes. It’s evident in the evolving role of celebrities, who are not only dressed by brands as they sit front row at fashion shows or appear as ambassadors in campaigns, but are now involved in aspects such as design – and, in some cases, have even launched their own labels.

The development is mutually beneficial for brands, which have been racing to lock in exclusive contracts with the next big name. Talent management is not an area that The Independents dabbles in yet, but it’s “something that we’ve been discussing a lot over the past few months”, says Chouvet. “Partnerships between brands and talent are at the centre of lots of things we’re doing.”

New formats blurring product with entertainment are gaining ground. In 2021, Sunshine co-created the Balmain TV series Fracture on Channel 4, the channel’s first-ever branded entertainment drama. While product placements on the big screen are nothing new, financing or partnering with the film and TV industries to create more of a cinematic experience marks a change in luxury marketing strategy.

In recent years, Chanel has supported several films, including the Lady Diana biopic Spencer (starring Kristen Stewart, a longtime ambassador of the house) and Sofia Coppola’s Priscilla, through financing or providing costumes and make-up. In April 2023, Kering-owned Saint Laurent became the first luxury brand to establish a movie subsidiary; for two years running it has shown its film productions at Cannes. (Kering became an official partner of the film festival in 2015.) LVMH also wants a slice of the pie; in February, it announced the launch of 22 Montaigne Entertainment, a division aimed at developing film, TV and audio productions across its luxury brand portfolio.

“The brands that are going to win are brands that become entertainment companies, because entertainment is amorphous, mouldable and can have any

kind of creative output,” believes Jenna Barnet, CEO of Sunshine. She adds that “every brand has that potential, but right now, many still function as aggregators of customers, not aggregators of audience. They’re not yet programming constant cultural output.”

Where do fashion weeks fit into all this? They remain a vital industry event but have become a smaller part of The Independents’ overall business as the group diversifies, says Chouvet. She recommends identifying other key moments on the cultural calendar and leaning into partnerships with communities that have traditionally been overlooked and underserved.

Some luxury brands are finding success in developing marketing templates which they can recreate, but which cannot necessarily be replicated by others (for example, travelling social club Prada Mode or contemporary salon Miu Miu Club). While such events require just as much investment as a traditional fashion show – if not more – “The audiences you derive from that are deeper, richer, stickier and want to spend more time with you,” says Barnet.

The key is to think beyond an event or a marketing initiative in isolation, says Guillaume Troncy, co-CEO of Bureau Betak since September 2021. “When [founder] Alexandre [de Betak] started back in the ’90s, fashion shows didn’t have this kind of creative direction, they were very industry-focused,” he recalls. Now, with influencer partnerships and social media clout in the mix, there are “different layers” to consider. “You cannot only cater to the 500 people coming, but you need to cater to the massive audience outside of it” – those who may be tuning in digitally from anywhere in the world, he says.

The next development for The Independents will be the opening later this year of an office in New York, which will act as a central meeting hub for all its agencies (they currently operate from their individual offices). Olivier Chouvet hopes the new space will “reinforce” creativity and inclusivity. “The priority is for our brands to be international and for our approach to be global, because you need to be able to go with the customer everywhere they are, at the same time,” he explains. “We need to be agile. When I wake up every morning, I want to make sure that each agency is moving at the speed of culture – and how fast is that?”

Perhaps Troncy sums it up best, describing the group’s goal to “create something memorable that travels the world and ignites conversations around the brand”. The best marketing, he concludes, is “a reflection of society”.