

In Focus: Leadership

SUSTAINABILITY

Burak Cakmak on Fashion, Sustainability and the Classroom

● Parsons' dean of fashion on social responsibility efforts, and leading a premier fashion education program.

BY WWD STAFF

Career paths often take winding and unexpected turns, even with the clearest of intentions. For Burak Cakmak, dean of fashion at Parsons School of Design, that meant first studying international relations at Turkey's Middle East Technical University, having an interest in government, nonprofits and business – but then working at a leading, global fashion brand: Gap Inc. as a senior manager of social responsibility.

This role led to others in the industry, which included serving as the director of corporate sustainability at Gucci Group/PPR, now Kering, for brands such as Gucci, Alexander McQueen, Bottega Veneta and Stella McCartney, among others. Later, Cakmak landed at the Swarovski Group and applied lessons learned about global value chains to serve as the company's first vice president of corporate responsibility.

Now, at Parsons, Cakmak is helping students embed sustainable and ethical fashion perspectives and practices into their work. Here, as part of an ongoing series of executive interviews, Tim Boerkoel, founder of global executive search and strategic consulting firm The Brownstone Group, talks with Cakmak about what formed his perspective while also sharing insights into the current state of fashion.

Tim Boerkoel: What interested you in pursuing a role at Gap Inc.? And what did you do once there?

Burak Cakmak: I was looking for opportunities where I could tap into my interests in both international development as well as the business. Gap Inc. was looking to build a team to work on labor standards on the ground, and at that time they were the largest specialty retailer in the world. Ultimately, they were really interested in figuring out how to deal with the range of the allegations that were brought up around labor conditions in the factories that were part of their supply chain. At the time we were working with more than 4,000 suppliers in over 50 countries, and as far as I remember the annual turnover for the suppliers was over 50 percent – the scale was grand.

It was an exciting adventure for me to jump into, to work with a team and to learn about a highly complex supply chain model. I was primarily focused on building systems to address some of the labor challenges we saw in the outsourcing structure we operated in, which took me around the world to many factories across several continents. In my early twenties, I had to engage directly with the union reps in countries like El Salvador and Guatemala to discuss the needs of the workers and act as a mediator between factory owners and worker representatives.

T.B.: And how did this work help



Burak Cakmak

shift efforts toward other aspects of sustainability and corporate social responsibility?

B.C.: My experience at Gap Inc. really gave me insight into the challenges of understanding how to manage a complex supply chain from a business perspective, but also understanding what it would mean to be a responsible company and a sustainable company.

The conversation around climate change and the environment gained a lot of traction in the early 2000s, and with that evolution, we started to focus a lot more on expanding the definition of what a responsible company is expected to focus their efforts on regarding societal engagement. So, we evolved from risk management all the way to understanding the company's social and environmental impacts throughout the whole value chain. And then we worked to build some of the systems around addressing these issues across the board at a very large, multinational fashion business.

T.B.: How did your work in luxury, such as at the Gucci Group, add to this perspective?

B.C.: It gave me a chance to really engage in a different way around what being a responsible business means when you consider process, structure and the branding of a luxury brand.

A very revealing moment for me was recognizing a big way in which luxury businesses differ from mass-market brands. Although the luxury brands I was working with were part of the same group, it was very important for each that they be at the forefront of innovation individually, to be the first to arrive at product-focused sustainability initiatives – to differentiate from other brands including those under the same corporate structure. We had to put our primary focus on highlighting what's unique to each brand versus doing something across the whole group – a great challenge. I had to really customize and tailor my approach to working with each, figuring out what was truly relevant to their core values, to their customers, and how to

their own python farm in Thailand. So today, they're working with a farm they own, where they aim to provide full traceability for python sourcing, and provide transparency as they directly manage the site.

I've also done some case studies, working with nonprofits around the world on establishing recommended guidelines around how to trade in biodiversity in a responsible manner to support the preservation of ecosystems around the world. I have specifically researched sourcing and conservation of species such as the yellow anaconda from Argentina and alligators from Louisiana. Recommendations included methods on both species and ecosystem conservation while supporting livelihoods for local communities. For example, for communities that are living in marshes or wetlands, research included recommendations on creating relevant income to ensure that the local populations preserve the land itself rather than turning it into farms, condos or for other uses.

All of that knowledge really enriched my understanding of what sustainability is about, and more than anything, the full considerations of what it takes to create a product. Where does it come from? What goes into it? How is it being sourced? Who are the people impacted on that journey? And ultimately asking, what is the true value of a product that you're buying in the market?

Most of the time, people don't have exposure to this full journey, and it's critical to understand the great number of people that are impacted by or involved in the creation of a single product that a customer might buy from a brand. Giving visibility to that journey would help a customer to better understand the impact of their purchasing decisions as the end user.

T.B.: And with all these great product development and sustainability lessons you've learned, how are you leveraging them in your role as dean of fashion at Parsons?

B.C.: We are fundamentally changing the curriculum and extending academic offerings so that our students are prepared to create and produce relevant and important fashion designs. For example, sustainability is now fully part of the conversation in our core courses. We are also encouraging and facilitating real-world exploration of design impact, from making fashionable and functional products such as our recent partnership with a health wear start-up Care & Wear to create the new hospital gowns, to working on female hygiene products for girls and women living in refugee camps in Kenya in partnership with the United Nations Population Fund and our manufacturing partner Hela Clothing.

In addition to updating our curriculum for our undergraduate studies, we are expanding continuing education and graduate programs, including launching a master's in fashion management program in August 2019, and a recently launched master's in textiles degree at Parsons. We are committed to making sure what we teach, and the doors we open for students, capture the reality and future of fashion and design. What they study, who they meet and the conversations we foster, we're ensuring students graduate knowing their interests and their strengths, and understanding real-world applications.

tell a unique story even though they all shared resources behind the scenes.

Another great learning was that mass-market brands' business models build on outsourcing their supply chain, and the main challenge is primarily on the manufacturing side. Most brands struggle with the manufacturing and outsourcing model and rarely have time to focus down onto the material level. Conversely, with the luxury supply chain, there is a lot more control over manufacturing, something especially true for European luxury brands. Luxury brands are typically more vertically integrated, and therefore control most of their manufacturing; they own quite a lot of the factories and work with suppliers based in Europe who are producing 100 percent specifically to a brand, allowing for considerably more insight into working conditions. For instance, these brands, all part of a group, worked with tanneries that were also owned by the same group, supplying them with high-quality leather and exotic skins. This allowed the group to really understand and manage the impact on the environment, as well as how the labor conditions were handled directly at a facility.

These experiences revealed to me that the primary opportunity for a luxury brand is to figure out how to keep the core values at the forefront, to tell a unique story to the customer, and engage them in a topic – such as being a responsible citizen and understanding their own individual impact.

T.B.: Can you share how you've seen the traceability of products evolve, and the challenges associated with different materials?

B.C.: In terms of luxury, consider exotic skins – we traced snakeskins all the way to the forests in Northern Sumatra, Vietnam and Burma. This allowed us to examine the sourcing process and identify the challenges across the supply chain for sourcing exotic skins. It became clear very quickly that full traceability is really hard to guarantee. This ultimately led companies such as Kering to establish