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Parsons and Columbia Students Reimagine Luxury Brands

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Ferragamo's revamped Vara shoe.

NEW YORK — Still searching for the perfect gift? How about a trip to Louis Vuitton Island? If that doesn't do it, what about some mercury-encased jewelry by Lalique?



All it takes is imagination. These were among the luxury brand offerings created by students from Parsons The New School for Design and Columbia Business School during presentations this month of final projects for a dual-school course, sponsored by the Luxury Education Foundation, in which they were assigned as teams to collaborate with senior staffers from Hermès, Ferragamo, Graff, Louis Vuitton, Lalique and Saks Fifth Avenue.

Through meetings with their respective company's senior management, they were presented with a design and marketing challenge, usually revitalizing a feature of the brand that the company felt consumers overlooked.

The Louis Vuitton team had to find a better way to publicize the company's travel offerings. The group came up with one of the most extravagant ideas: a Vuitton island sponsored entirely by the luxury brand that would be used for promotions and vacations, all of which would ultimately necessitate only the choicest of travel accoutrements.

"We love the island idea, not only because it, of course, speaks about travel, but also because I think our customers feel such a close relationship with the brand. It's really a community for them, and an island extends on that idea," said Blair Lawson, director of merchandising and leather goods at Louis Vuitton.

Graff gave students the task of creating a timepiece that could comfortably fit among the brand's high-price offerings. The group came up with a marketing theme, "How long must I wait for you?" intended to build anticipation for a limited-edition, diamond-bespeckled watch worthy of the most lavish Swarovski creations, recommended to retail at \$1 million.

The students who got the assignment of boosting Lalique's jewelry line came up

with an idea infused with Gothic undertones: a Femme Fatale line, complete with a mercury-encased bangle.

Team Salvatore Ferragamo may have had the most daunting assignment: relaunching Ferragamo's Vara shoe, an all-time bestseller from the 1970s. "We gave them a big challenge," said Linda Russell, senior vice president of women's sales for Ferragamo. "Any time you have to touch somebody's icon, it's a very controversial issue."

Team members modernized the design by playing with heel height and color patterns, and unraveling the original bow.



monochrome leather.

Hermès asked students to help the brand reach a younger consumer and a wider audience. The group came up with several designs, including a re-imagined "H" belt. The "H" is crafted from colorful enamel and the belt itself boasts lively patterns and is reversible, as opposed to the

Robert Chavez, chief executive officer of Hermès USA and treasurer of the Luxury Education Foundation, said he planned to integrate the student's designs into Hermès offerings. He has communicated with Hermès in Paris and said he is "99 percent sure that they're going to incorporate the enamel concept."

Team Saks created a networking program that combined charity and social events to promote awareness of Saks' men's department. Jim Miller, a vice president and general manager at Saks Fifth Avenue, said of the effort, "With the objective of awareness and acquiring new customers, I thought you did a great job ... I love the idea that you've got us to think outside the box."