

Net-a-Porter Says No to Fur

By Vanessa Friedman

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The fur is flying again in fashion. Although Fendi has held dedicated fur runway shows with impunity for a few seasons now, suggesting the one-time cause du jour may have faded from the front lines, this week Yoox Net-a-Porter, the internet fashion behemoth that owns Net-a-Porter, Mr Porter, the Outnet and Yoox.com, announced it was going fur-free.

Given that Yoox Net-a-Porter is widely seen as the pioneer and leader in the online high-fashion space, that fur is generally seen as a high-fashion staple, and that the group has 2.9 million customers in 180 countries, 29 million monthly unique visitors and 2016 net revenues of €1.9 billion, this is a pretty big deal. It is the most prominent retailer to take an anti-fur stance yet.

The group sites will not sell fur as defined by the Fur Free Alliance, an international coalition of animal protection organizations, where the list of banned skins “includes, but is not limited to, mink, coyote, sable, fox, muskrat, rabbit and raccoon dog.” Additionally, employees have been asked not to wear fur to any public occasion where they are representing the sites. Like fashion shows, for example.

(The alliance does allow members to sell products made from leather, wool, fleece and sheepskin, and Yoox Net-a-Porter will continue to sell shearling coats from Moncler, among other brands.)

So what’s going on? Has PETA, which has recently been targeting the high-fashion world, going after brands such as Prada and Hermès, had a meaningful effect?

Yoox Net-a-Porter positioned the decision as part of the sustainability initiative it began in 2009, and Matteo James Moroni, head of sustainability at the group, said in the announcement, “We have a strong sense of responsibility and recognize the importance of making a positive contribution to society.” But Federico Marchetti, the group’s chief executive, said the reason for the decision was simple (and maybe a little less high-minded): customer feedback.

The group, it turned out, surveyed more than 25,000 clients, including the E.V.I.P.s (those who spend more than \$1 million a year on the sites), and more than half the respondents said they would like the sites to stop selling fur. Since the decision, which was first noted in Yoox Net-a-Porter’s 2016 sustainability report last month, Mr. Marchetti said he had gotten lots of emails “with the common word, ‘finally!’ With an exclamation point.”

While fur has never driven a lot of sales for the group, it has been, said Mr. Marchetti, “a minor but decent part of the business.” Though he would not disclose exactly how much, he did say, “We’re making some sacrifices.”

However, he continued, “You can’t go around saying you are a customer-centric business and not listen to your customers.”

Mr. Marchetti said that Yoox Net-a-Porter first began discussing the possibility of going fur-free about a year and a half ago, but it took this long to implement the decision, from making sure fur products were no longer on the sites to teaching employees in the supply chain how to check products for compliance.

Asked if the sites’ luxury brands such as Marni (which began as a fur house), Fendi (ditto), Valentino and Michael Kors were upset by the change, Mr. Marchetti said, “We are growing by 20 percent a year, and our buy is growing, too. So even if we are giving up one kind of product, we are replacing it with something else. Everyone is happy.”

Plus, brands such as Stella McCartney, Armani and Calvin Klein are already fur-free (at least if you don’t count leather and shearling).

This is not the first time a retailer has declared itself fur-free, of course, and some have gone back on their word. In 2004 the British department store Harvey Nichols announced it was dropping fur, but in 2013, rabbit, fox and coyote were once again on the shelves.

So is this a permanent change for Net-a-Porter and its sister sites, or a temporary stance?

“We are a public company,” Mr. Marchetti said. “When we commit to something, we really can’t change our minds.”

A correction was made on June 9, 2017: Because of an editing error, an earlier version of this article misstated the 2016 net revenues of Yoox Net-a-Porter. It was €1.9 billion, not €1.9 million.

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