

OPINION

# A Wake-Up Call for YSL's PR Team

BY IMRAN AMED 2 OCTOBER, 2012



*Source: Dandy Diary*

**PARIS, France** — A few weeks ago, Yves Saint Laurent's PR team wrote to BoF, asking that we edit a tweet.

We had shared one of the striking new Saint Laurent campaign images with our followers, referring to the campaign as 'Saint Laurent Paris.' Brands often write to thank us for sharing their advertising campaigns with our community, but this was the first time that a brand had written asking us to rewrite a tweet.

What was the problem?

"Paris is only used in the logo and not for the RTW name, that being just 'Saint Laurent,'" the PR wrote, referring to a number of changes to brand communications implemented by **Hedi Slimane** when he took the creative reins at the house. As many in the PR and communications world know, however, tweets are not editable. They are also usually consumed within the first hours, if not minutes, of having been published and are soon buried under the hundreds of others that come in their wake. But not wanting to get into a debate, we simply deleted the tweet and edited a corresponding [Tumblr post](#) displaying the campaign image in question.

Then, last week, Saint Laurent’s press office sent out a mass email instructing media on the nomenclature we should use when referring to the brand. “The House is referred to as ‘Yves Saint Laurent.’ The ready-to-wear collection by Hedi Slimane is correctly referred to as ‘Saint Laurent’. (‘Saint Laurent Paris’ is used in the logo but not when spoken/written about the collection). Collection credits, should you photograph any items, is [sic] correctly written ‘Saint Laurent by Hedi Slimane.’”

Another mass email soon followed, saying that the previous email was “not for official use or for lifting quotes.”

Oops.

It was the latest in a series of bizarre communications from a PR team whose attempts to control communication about YSL — whether coming directly from the brand itself or independent media outlets — seems obsessive. In today’s media reality, where words and images can be shared and commented on by millions of end users on social platforms like Facebook and Twitter, seeking this kind of control is not only doomed to failure, but it is also misguided.

When YSL introduced a new logo for the house, designed by Mr Slimane, on the brand’s Facebook page earlier this summer, minus any explanatory context, they had apparently not considered how their fanbase might react. Instead of adulation and adoration, thousands of YSL’s Facebook fans led a sizable backlash, partially because there was misunderstanding around how the new branding would actually be used.

A few weeks earlier, we thought it would be constructive to set the record straight. So, in an [extensive feature](#) on YSL’s new ‘retrobranding,’ BoF took care to explain the details and thinking behind the moves, collecting background information from YSL in order to understand their rationale and speaking with branding experts to gauge their reaction. The piece was widely picked up by other media and credited with helping to clarify YSL’s new branding strategy. But still, shortly after publication, we received yet another email from the company, this time from YSL’s New York press office, asking us to revise our piece without specifying what they thought was incorrect. A follow up email from our team asking for clarification was met with silence.

You see, BoF has always aimed to provide a factual, balanced and analytical perspective and when we make mistakes, we strive to correct them. Indeed, we take this very seriously. So, I must confess my surprise when I was informed by the House of Saint Laurent that I would not be invited to Hedi Slimane’s debut show for the brand because they were unhappy with the “tone of voice” that we have used when writing about YSL.

Upon further investigation, it seems they took issue with the content of some of our pieces.

Specifically, they did not agree with our columnist **Colin McDowell**'s **conclusion** that while Slimane's work at Dior Homme was massively influential and built a huge cult following, "it didn't *always* translate into convincing sales." When we explained our thinking, namely that no designer can claim that every single collection is a commercial success, and politely declined to change the article, we were informed via email: "Don't correct, fare [sic] enough, we won't collaborate on any kind of project in the future."

More recently, the brand took issue with a **piece** we published, mentioning that *some* in the industry (including highly regarded *New York Times* critic **Cathy Horyn**) credit **Raf Simons** with pioneering the skinny silhouette in menswear, "though it was undoubtedly Slimane's reign at Dior Homme that made it a commercial success, bringing it into the fashion mainstream."

In all my years editing BoF, I have never encountered this kind of ultimatum from a fashion brand threatening non-cooperation. Indeed, every single time BoF has written about YSL (or Saint Laurent, or Saint Laurent Paris) we have received some kind of request to change the article to comply with what seem like the whims of the brand's PR team, who appear to think that the media exists solely to serve as their mouthpiece.

Perhaps I should have been honoured that — **along with Ms. Horyn**, a writer who always calls it like she sees it and whom I greatly respect, even if I do not always agree with her — I was not invited to this season's YSL show. But when a friend offered me a spare standing ticket to attend at the last minute, I couldn't resist the opportunity to see Hedi Slimane's debut for myself and I decided to go.

Despite all of the hype and anticipation, it was clear from the first few looks that the collection wasn't going to change the future of women's fashion, as Slimane had done for menswear during his tenure at Dior Homme. Everything I saw was true to the codes of the house and very 1970's YSL — undoubtedly desirable for those in the market for a French rocker chick vibe. But perhaps, the somewhat muted applause and hushed voices after the show were the most telling.

I'm still not sure if attending the show was the right decision. Part of me thinks I should have just stayed away, but as my peer **Lisa Armstrong** wrote in her **review** in the *Telegraph*, "Judging by [Slimane's] apparent fear of any kind of objective criticism, however, I fear I won't be allowed back."

Ultimately, this kind of behaviour is not only arrogant, it also reveals a fundamental misunderstanding of how winning brands are built in today's world. Successful brands aren't defined by a set of rules conceived in the control

tower of a company's headquarters and broadcast to the world. They are ideas that live *in conversation with the world*. They can't be dictated. They must be nurtured.

It's a serious wake-up call for a PR team that is clearly living in the pre-digital age.

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