

# MULTIDISCIPLINARY EDUCATION AS A UNIQUE MODEL TO SUPPORT INNOVATION IN THE FASHION INDUSTRY: THE CASE OF MILANO FASHION INSTITUTE

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## ABSTRACT:

Milano Fashion Institute (MFI) represents a unique initiative on the educational level to support innovation in the Fashion Industry. MFI is a consortium set up in Milan in 2004 to provide higher education in the fashion sector by three Milanese universities: Bocconi University, Cattolica University and Politecnico di Milano, which are also recognized as international centers of excellence in conducting research and educational activities in the fashion sector.

The paper aims to present in detail the Milano Fashion Institute educational model, pinpointing the specialist interdisciplinary skills offered to effectively manage a fashion business, and how that theoretical multidisciplinary approach is demonstrated in the practice, presenting the most relevant field projects in the two first offered master programs, Brand & Product Innovation Management and Retail & Experience Management.

## 1. INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

Nowadays, Design, as discipline and practice, is referred to the interpretation of the contemporary culture, in its tangible and intangible expressions (Colombi 2010:28-49 in Bertola, Colombi 2010). That interpretative attitude, that is implied in the capabilities to preview possible solutions, is strengthened by a dialectic relationship among Design and other disciplines, from Humanities to Economics (Celaschi 2008:40-52), that offer analytical

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research tools to probe the context of reference. As our networked 24/7 global culture is getting more complex, the more our need of understanding through modeling is growing (Bertola, Manzini, 2004). In the last decade, the design practice has been widely crossing disciplines and their inputs to empower its capability to create a synthetic model of the observed reality and, then, to re-shape it by new reading and representations that, again, influence the context and so modify it, in a continuing design process (Caves, 2000; Earls 2003; Florida, 2003).

Referring to that multidimensional perspective, Fashion, as one of the most advanced design oriented sector, represents a peculiar case. Fashion is a typical new old economy (Whitford 2005) sector, producing hybrid products whose value depends on the intangible content of knowledge they build up, through specific processes and services. According to this, a multidisciplinary approach is needed to face the emerging issues that fashion industry is experiencing today (Cillo, De Luca, Mazursky, Troilo, 2005; Nardin, Marchi, Martinelli, 2007).

Milano Fashion Institute (MFI) represents a unique initiative on the educational level to address those challenges. It is a consortium devoted to post graduate education, created to guarantee the disciplinary richness needed by fashion and to provide a new cognitive and operational approach to higher-level professionals.

The fashion industry is a complex context where professional roles and functions have mainly aroused spontaneously without a dedicated educational path. Fashion design education have almost always been based on the arts and craft approach relying on an obsolete vision of fashion not as a modern industry but as an art's practice. Social sciences have also approached the field in terms of research and education since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, but with an exclusive theoretical and critical approach. Finally business studies are still very general, and almost never specialized on the specific fashion sector. While programs in the fashion industry usually involve only one or two disciplines and therefore have difficulty introducing students to the huge range of issues raised by the social, creative, production and communication processes of the fashion businesses, MFI

offers a whole interdisciplinary approach applied to competences contributed by the academic partners. In fact, the educational programs involve academics and researchers in Economics and Management disciplines from Bocconi, in Social Sciences and Communication from Cattolica University, and in Technology and Design from Politecnico di Milano. This unique partnership, after some years of experimentation, has already experienced a new educational model, not simply integrating different fields of knowledge, but also setting up a peculiar learning environment.

## 2. MILANO FASHION INSTITUTE MODEL<sup>2</sup>

Postgraduate programmes proposed by MFI<sup>3</sup> have been set up through a process of interaction and dialogue with the companies of the fashion system, and focusing on those professional profiles, which have proved to be of great interest for companies represented by the leading trade associations involved in the project (White, Griffiths, 2000).

The goal of training is to enhance relations with the professional and entrepreneurial systems, which each of the three universities has consolidated in its own particular area. Specialization is the tool that lets new graduates dialogue with the job market in an immediately practical way, leading to the employment in the best companies and encouraging an understanding of typical processes and operations in the sector.

The two fields identified as strategic for implementing new profiles and experimenting a multidisciplinary approach to education are related on one side to fashion brand & product management, on the other side to fashion retail and experience management (Aaker, Joachimsthaler, 2003). These two fields are addressed by two different master programs that share the same educational structure.

The first one, titled "Brand & product innovation management" is aimed to educate professionals able to manage and coordinate the process of brand management, from the declination of the brand language on different

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<sup>3</sup> Many information provided are present on the website [www.milanofashioninstitute.it](http://www.milanofashioninstitute.it), whose contents have been created by Paola Bertola, Emanuela Mora, Salvo Testa and Nicola Guerini.

lines/collections/brands, to the planning and development of the collections, and finally up to the management of product's communication to the trade market. Thus, the professional figures represent the ideal connection between the conception of creative products and their integration into managerial processes, at different levels: corporate, brand and business unit (Castaldo, Verona, 1998; Burrelli, Guercini, 2005). The most important professional roles addressed by this program are: assistant brand manager, product merchandiser, product manager, production buyer, supply chain manager, licensing manager, assistant marketing manager.

The second master, titled "Retail & experience management" is aimed to train professionals responsible for the channels and distribution processes. In particular, the profiles will be capable to plan and manage distribution and retail in several different typologies of retail-oriented companies: brands that are integrated downstream in the pipeline with their own network of directly operated stores (DOS) or franchising stores, department stores, international retail chains and small local retail chains, on-line retailers, etc. (Malossi, 1998; Di Maria, Micelli, 2007). The main professional roles are: retail area manager, store supervisor, retail buyer & merchandiser, stock and logistics manager, visual merchandiser, customer relationship manager, online retail manager, event manager.

The different orientations of out-coming profiles are also determined by students' previous educational background, being the programs multidisciplinary also on the side of recruitment. In fact, the class' groups are created with attention on mixing different educational backgrounds, such as humanities and social sciences, design and economics. These differences create a rich learning environment, particularly relevant as much as the programs become applied, along the educational structure they are characterized by.

In fact, the innovative model is based not on a disciplinary organization but rather on the peculiar fashion processes, considering how the different disciplines collaborate in developing and completing those functions and in drawing new professional competences and roles. Common fashion education programs are usually focused on some disciplinary "ingredients" which finally

creates the general picture of the field, leaving students the task of integrating them and applying them into practice. MFI programs are focused instead on typical processes and real professional tasks which characterize fashion organizations (Fashion Processes: ex. "Merchandising", "Product development", etc.) and finally on real projects/problems which are typical in a fashion companies (Fashion Field Project: ex. "Development of a new retail concept", etc.). This processes and projects based educational model needs by definition a multidisciplinary approach, able to face a complex task or a project goal, accessing all different knowledge and competences needed (ex.: "Merchandising": stylistic guidelines and sensitivity, fabric/material knowledge, quantitative planning, etc.).

The model is applied not only to the key courses but also to the fashion pillars, as socio-economical history of fashion and research methods for fashion, offering an innovative approach to the basics. Moreover, methods, tools and contents acquired in the theoretical phase are put in practice, then, through field projects concerning real business case studies.

The Masters consists of 720 hours of classroom activities and a final internship of at least 480 hours. The structure is composed of learning blocs: warm up, fashion pillars, fashion processes, learning by doing (field projects, empowerment & internship). These units are intended to accompany the student to the progressive knowledge of the industry and the key processes that characterize the professional profiles addressed by the two programs.

MASTER IN FASHION DIRECTION	BRAND & PRODUCT MANAGEMENT	RETAIL EXPERIENCE MANAGEMENT
<b>01. WARM UP</b>	/ MANAGEMENT, ECONOMICS, QUANTITATIVE METHODS, DESIGN TOOLS	
<b>02. FASHION PILLARS</b>	/ PROJECT MANAGEMENT / FASHION HISTORY SEMINARS / CULTURAL FASHION STUDIES / FASHION BUSINESS MODELS / RESEARCH METHODS FOR FASHION  / MERCEOLOGY	/ DISTRIBUTION CHANNELS, PROCESSES AND ECONOMICS
<b>03. FASHION PROCESSES</b>	/ BRAND DIRECTION / MERCHANDISING & PRICING / PRODUCT DESIGN & DEVELOPMENT / PRODUCT & CORPORATE IMAGE DESIGN	/ BUYING AND STOCK MANAGEMENT / EXPERIENTIAL STORE DESIGN AND VISUAL MERCHANDISING / CUSTOMER RELATIONSHIP AND HUMAN RESOURCES MANAGEMENT / DIGITAL FASHION
<b>04. LEARNING BY DOING</b>	/ FIELD PROJECTS / EMPOWERMENT & CAREER MANAGEMENT / INTERNSHIP	

Figure 1. Master in Fashion Direction Structure. By Paola Bertola

## WARM UP

Educational activities aimed at providing an instrumental and basic training, through the learning of tools, techniques, methodologies and the use of specific software and applications. These activities enable participants to fill several gaps with reference to the background studies they carried out previously. Warm up are carried out through lectures and exercises and there is no final test.

## FASHION PILLARS

Didactical activities of introduction to the knowledge of the fashion industry, its evolution and historical criticism, the predominant organizational models, the main products' typologies and the instruments necessary to explore and know the fashion market, and finally the techniques of project management. Fashion Pillar courses are carried out through theoretical lectures, seminars and exercises.

## **FASHION PROCESSES**

Educational activities aimed to the formation of specific competences in managing key processes that characterize the functional and professional areas identified by the two masters. They are carried out through lectures and direct testimony from professionals and each module has a final assessment exam through a written test or the presentation of a project by students.

## **LEARNING BY DOING**

Educational activities aimed at field testing the competences and skills learned during the previous courses, through team-field-projects that involve groups of students working on real topics agreed with companies. The activity is performed in classroom under the supervision of teachers and tutors and companies are strongly involved in the initial brief and final evaluation.

The learning by doing package is completed by activities for the development of relational skills of students. They include a period of compulsory internship in qualified business realities, during at least three months, organized by the MFI under the supervision of one company tutor and one academic tutor.

While the first two learning blocs are shared, "fashion processes" and "learning by doing" units are "master specific" and they focus on key processes and competences referred respectively to one of the two professional areas addressed by each program: "brand & product management" and "retail & experience management".

Learning by doing activities are the most innovative ones characterizing MFI's educational approach, and they starts with applied field projects that involve students for ten full time weeks. These activities are a preparatory environment for the compulsory internship students start just after, and they distinct MFI model from other traditional fashion programs.



Figure 2. Contribution by Economics, Humanities and Design in Brand & Product Management. By Paola Bertola.



Figure 3. Contribution by Economics, Humanities and Design in Retail & Experience Management. By Paola Bertola.

### 3. PROJECT BASED EDUCATION<sup>4</sup>

After the first theoretical core part, the master's structure propose field projects' phase, aiming at field testing the competences and skills learned during the previous courses, through team-field-projects that involve groups of students working on real topics agreed with companies.

Each field project is a five weeks full-time project, coordinated by a multidisciplinary team of professors from MFI faculty. It consists in the development of research and design activities based on a real case study provided by leading companies in the Fashion sector, directly involved by the Faculty in the educational activity.

Referring to a brief, defined by MFI team with the involved company, a team of students develops a viable proposal to answer to the brief's requirements, in the most credible way.

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The overall objective of the field project is the development of a business strategy (integrating brand strategy, product strategy, retail strategy and communication strategy) with a high level of innovation and consistent with the identity of the client, simulating processes as close as possible to the reality of the professional contexts.

The activity is performed in the classroom under the supervision of teachers and tutors, while companies are strongly involved in the initial brief and final evaluation.

The field project is structured into five phases, with specific inputs, defined goals and expected outputs, as follows (Figure 1):

### **PHASE 1 – COMPANY BLUEPRINTING**

Through a brand analysis, a marketing study, a competitors' analysis and a brand strategy evaluation, an analysis of critical issues and possible scenarios is set, identifying all the elements which can be shared by potential consumers as contexts of use, functionalities, soft qualities which distinguish the product and values in it (Celaschi, Deserti 2007).

### **PHASE 2 – METADESIGN**

Starting from the company's analysis, a possible "vision" is developed. As a "vision" we mean a description of a possible scenario for the development of a new "brand concept" for the company.

The outcome is a concept chapter with the definition of the scenario of reference, the emerging trends, the brand values and the identity's codes associated to the brand (Celaschi, Deserti 2007).

### **PHASE 3 – CONCEPT**

Starting from the vision, a concept is developed in order to, on one hand, translating the vision into a real solution and so verifying its feasibility and, on the other one, to strengthening the narration of the vision itself.

This phase is summarized in a merchandising/retail chapter.

#### **PHASE 4 – PRESENTATION**

This final stage concludes the design process, with the definition of all the elements, including technical ones, and the delivery of a final report.

All the phases are strongly interrelated to assure coherency of the final proposal. However each of them is completed and concluded in itself, offering a full research demi-product. That is possible as each activity is developed not using just a marketing, humanistic or design point of view but combining all those approaches and related tools to achieve analysis or research and design statement as complete as possible.

Starting from that general structure, each field projects, in the Brand & Product Innovation Management Master (BPM) or in the Retail & Experience Management Master (REM), develops a specific project declination, referring to the peculiarities of client and the brief. The strong context and path dependence in the innovation processes management demonstrate the importance of a work methodology more than the success and the infallibility of certain business formulas. For those reasons, the field projects are set as key educational activities that allow the students to learning by doing (Schön 1983), experimenting and practicing the provided theoretical contents and understanding their implications and possible development.

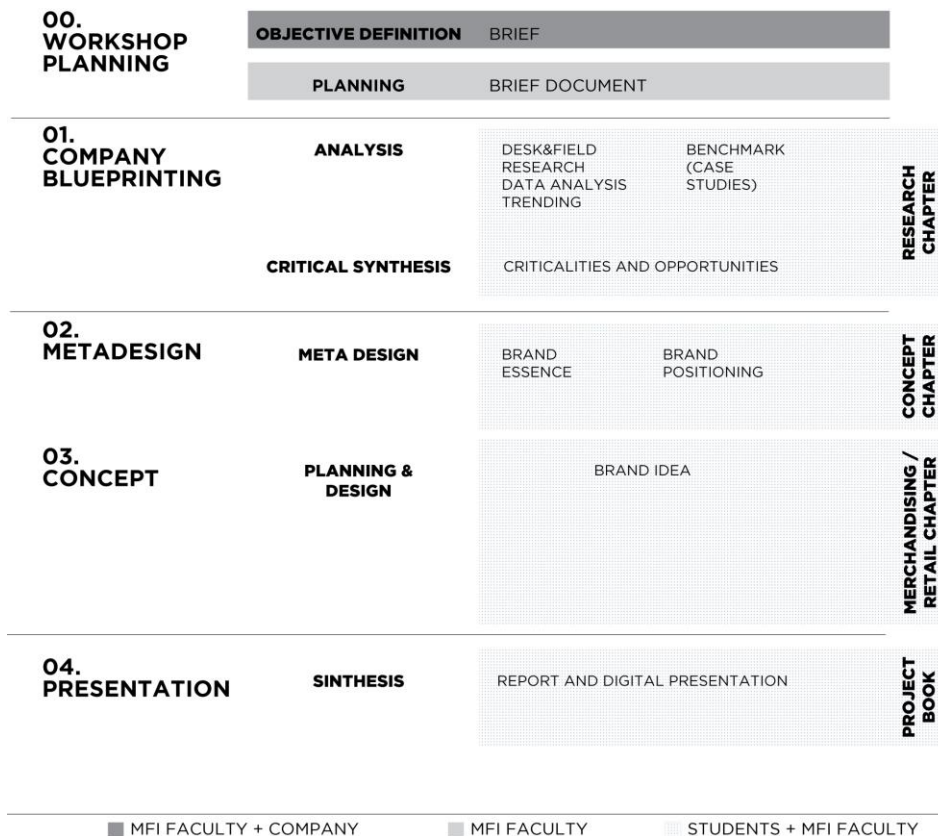


Figure 4. MFI Field Project Activities Structure. By Chiara Colombi

### 3.1 BRAND & PRODUCT INNOVATION MANAGEMENT<sup>5</sup>

BPM master aims to provide the knowledge and the tools to manage the creative processes that concur to the brand competitiveness on the market, coherently with the brand identity.

In this case, the whole field project experience is centered on the relationship between the socio-economical-cultural context in which a company is immersed and the product-distributive-communication strategy that a company acts to reflects that context and offers as new possible interpretation of it (Saviolo, Testa 2000).

The dimensions that can describe a socio-economical-cultural context of reference are found in the qualitative analysis of the socio-political systems that defines the evolution of values and behaviors in the collective imaginary (Colombi 2010:122-143 in Bertola, Colombi 2010). The comprehension of those values drives the verification of the brand identity, in its vision and objects, values proposition, offered benefits, market positioning and

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developed attributes. And, subsequently, a comparison with defined benchmarks is needed to comprehend the state of the art in a certain benchmark and to be updated of what already available. Especially in Fashion, where radical innovation does not exist, it is important to have a wide knowledge of the market in order to propose a continuing even if incremental innovation (Colombi 2010:122-143 in Bertola, Colombi 2010). Therefore, the understanding of the intangible and tangible assets of a brand is the first reflection of an interdisciplinary research and analytical activity that requires the integration of managerial, humanistic and design knowledge. Referring to the concepts of brand equity and brand identity (Saviolo, Testa 2000), it is evident how relevant is the cooperation of managerial skills, to govern a brand as intangible strategic asset of a company and define guidelines to orient the tangible brand strategy on the market; humanistic approach to search the context of reference and set its boundaries and relevant contents; design thinking abilities to project all the acquired information into a counter-brief that will be the starting point for the next concept phase.

Operational processes (Colombi 2010:52-89 in Bertola, Colombi 2010) that build up the product, distributive and communication strategy follow the definition of the brand identity and positioning and their eventual corrections or implementations.

In particular, in the concept phase, through an extensive design activity, the brand values are materialized in main stylistic codes, which represent the brand related physical and aesthetic characteristic. In this step the design practice reveals its nature of anticipating possible solutions, mediating the qualitative and quantitative issues, and founding the product strategy.

Those elements, that embody the brand DNA, are subsequently developed into an ideal collection's architecture, from the definition of the collection inspirational theme to the identification of components and details, up to the design of iconic product and their engineering. Also in this step the main approach is referred to research methods for the investigation of fashion markets and consumers, basically from sociology, and to previewing capability and technical knowledge that are typical of design professionalism.

However, it is necessary to constantly refer to the business model, as so the productive and distributive system, drawn by the company profile and the brand positioning (Ricchetti, Cietta 2006). The strategic dimension of the collection's structure is also detailed by a merchandise mix that takes in consideration the seasonal development of the collection; the variety of typologies, referring to different functions of use; the economic offer (pricing, volumes, costs, margins for each merchandise category). That so called "merchandising plan" is highly linked to the distributive strategy, as it is the starting point for rationalizing a product delivery and turnover plan in the retail chain.

The brand and product development process is closed supporting the product and corporate image, through a coherent communication strategy that find its assumptions in the initial socio-cultural survey. Here sociological and visual dimensions are integrated, supported by and supporting the context of reference.

In conclusion, referring to the phases previously introduced describing the general field project structure, we can summarize the integration among Economics, Humanities and Design approaches and tools in a Brand and Product Innovation Management Master as follows:

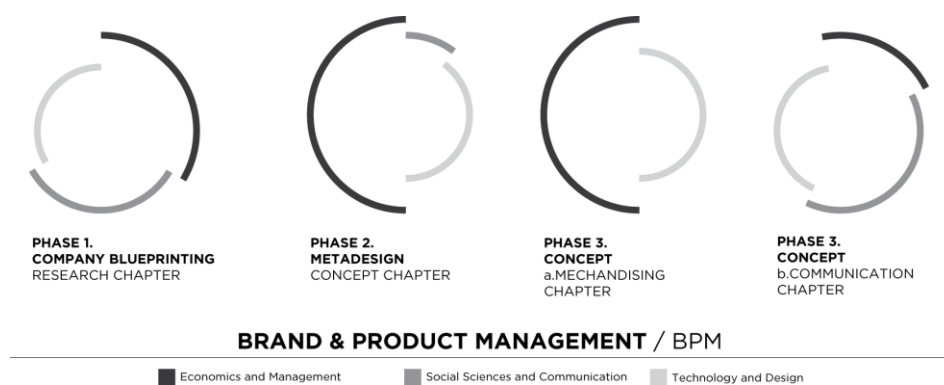


Figure 5. Contribution by Economics, Humanities and Design in Brand and Product Innovation Management field project. By Chiara Colombi.

While a strategic dimension as brand management and brand driven operational processes permeate the entire processes, with different intensities, a humanistic methodology of research and analysis help to read the context and understand the drivers for the contemporary meanings'

construction, explaining motivations and values of society and market of reference. Design thinking and design practice provide a synthesis of quantitative and qualitative data and information, proposing interpretative reading and possible solutions to the initial brief.

Moreover, the interrelation among those disciplines is augmented by the fact that they are not simply integrated but, better, they are confirmed and confirming one with the each other, in continuous check of available opportunities and potential successful choices.

### 3.2 RETAIL & EXPERIENCE MANAGEMENT<sup>6</sup>

REM master aims to give the knowledge, the methodology and the tools to manage the project of the spaces of consumption, taking the experiential dimension of the store as reference, in its narrative value and not just the sales and distribution function.

In fact, in recent years the spaces of consumption have assumed an increasingly important role in the relationship between company and consumer. These are spaces that communicate with their intended audience, and these are places where the implementation of innovative strategies of retail design, management and humanistic approach take place.

These are species of spaces (Iannilli, 2010) that integrate within themselves different functions. They identify an indissoluble relationship between the space and the object. Shifting interest from the material component of the product to the intangible and immaterial value of the product-system (Iannilli, 2010). As they are conceived, planned and designed, the places of sale become spaces of the shopping experience in which the end user is seen as the main actor and not only as a consumer. Retail outlets are not only places of image, but also places of a strategy and of relations between company and the consumer with the use of tools such as design, management and communication.

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A project-based education in REM is then used through an interdisciplinary approach and an integrated project that is capable of handling complex elements and different operating methodologies (Iannilli, 2010). Integration of knowledge from design, management and humanities are able to build up an innovative atmosphere and lifestyle that are offered to the consumer.

Referring to the four phases, introduced at the beginning of this section, the first activities of the project concern an in-depth Analysis of Brand Identity. It involves the company's organizational structure and examines the production, distribution and communication processes. Great importance is given to the current retail strategy considering aspects such as the different distribution formats (flagship store, shop in shop, corner), the market clusters (city, suburbs, resort) and the related assortment plan, visual merchandising, marketing and communication activities, customer relationship management activities. Contrary to what it might be thought, in a retail project, the analysis of the merchandise is essential to understand the quality of the product, its characteristics and the values it represents as well as to design an effective and comprehensive retail strategy (Saviolo, Testa 2000). Indeed it is necessary to understand the product before it can deliver more value within a retail space that represents it. Even the architecture of collection becomes a parameter of analysis indispensable especially in reference to the products' occasions of use that often suggest effective strategies of visual merchandising.

Anyway, the core of the REM Project is Metadesign and Concept phases. These two phases define the main design soft qualities that can materialize the brand identity into a physical space as a retail format, creating a coherent customer experience.

Designing the Store Scenario means to build up the atmosphere of the store. It is a strongly design-oriented and business-oriented action and it describes the customer journey experience. That is a sort of storytelling on the interaction among the ideal consumers, the products and the services, which describes the experience that is lived out in the store.

The In Store Experience is the actual construction of the shopping experience that sees interfacing the design and management knowledge. The focus is on the development of processes and display strategies that highlight the more distinctive aspects of the brand, that enhance the sense of unity and help in resolving critical areas of retail, increasing the visual aspects of the product. In this phase it is important to develop a visual plan, designed to deliver seasonal themes and a retail manual that serves as a guide for the training of sales assistants, with a specific focus on the individual needs of the consumer for clusters and regions. Ultimately it is a project proposal of solutions to optimize the "customer experience".

In this context, the Customer Experience Management (CEM) is the ability of the company to create a good relationship with their consumers through a series of services that are designed and developed ad hoc. Those services affect not only the "in store" phase but also the "pre" and "after" sales phases which serve to improve the shopping experience of the customer and make it an all-encompassing experience.

Last but not least, the project of a (online and offline) Communication Strategy and the planning of a calendar of events are able to communicate in an effective and original way values and assets of the company, consolidating brand awareness on a national level and building a brand reputation that appeals on an international level.

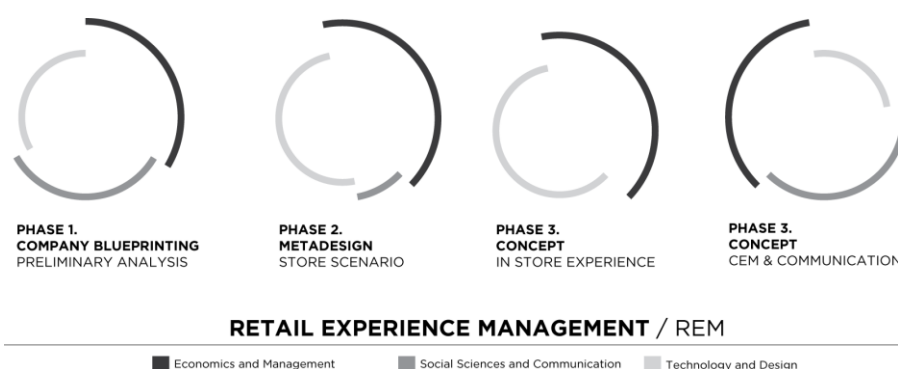


Figure 6. Contribution by Economics, Humanities and Design in Retail & Experience Management field project. By Federica Vacca.



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