

Wallpaper*

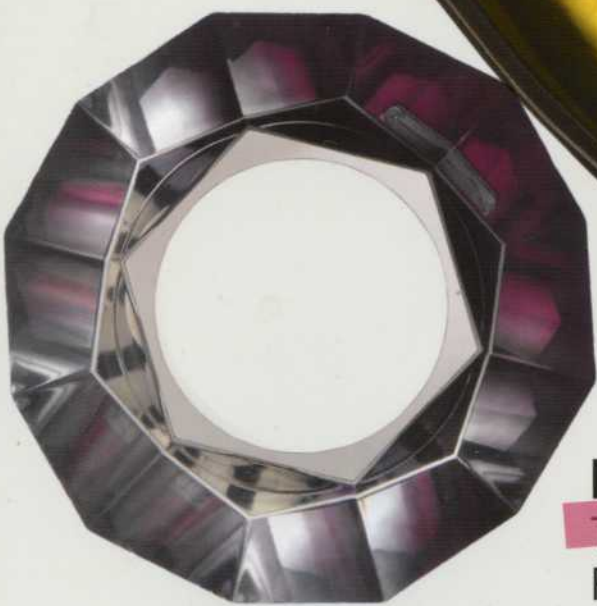
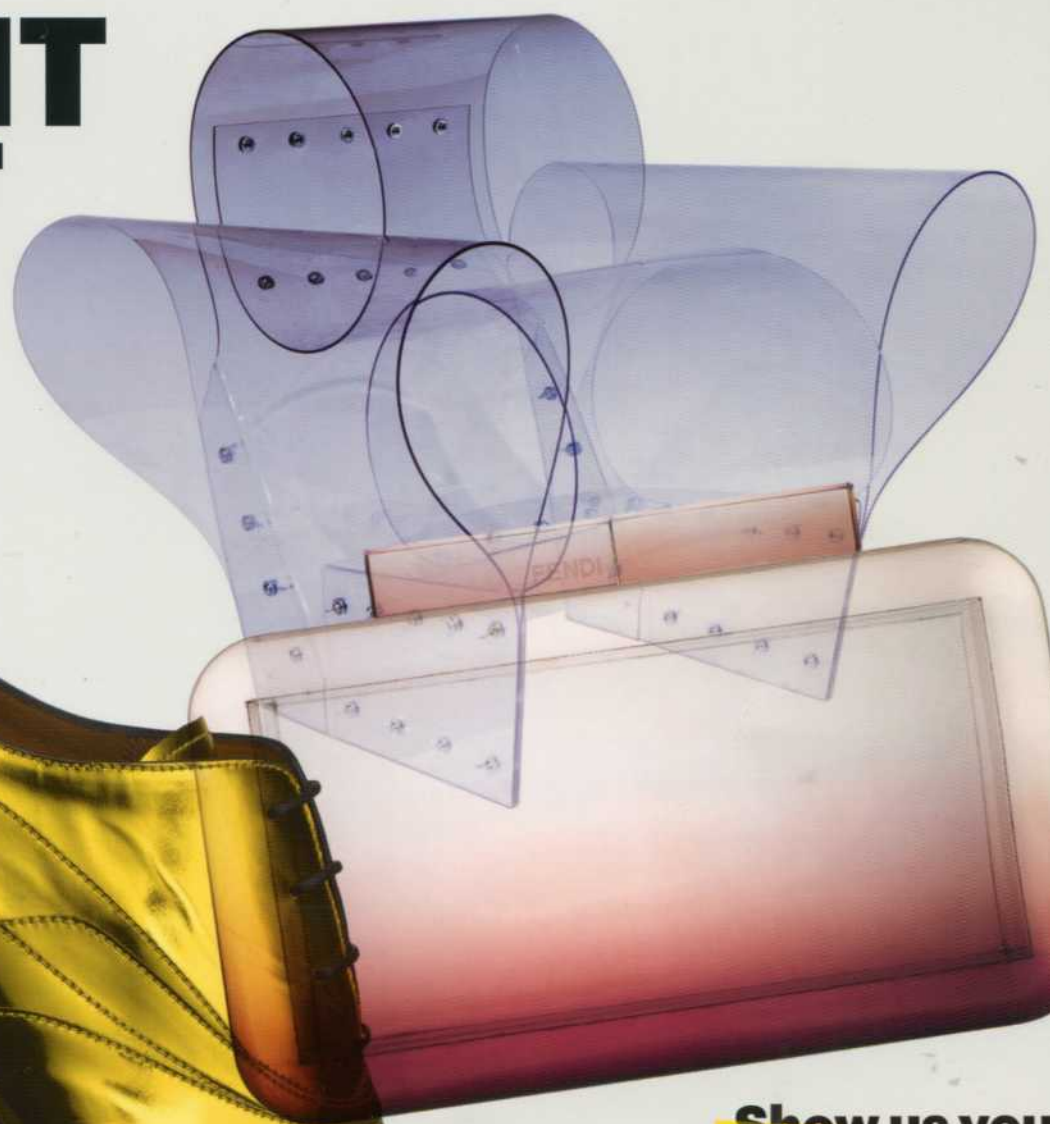
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MARCH 2010

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Dover Street Market store, insists that the main challenges still lie in reworking the mechanics of an actual shop and creating inspiring spaces. Indeed, even though his brand's online sales have grown by 200 per cent in a year, Joffe says he cannot foresee a time when online stores will replace the experiential pull of physical retail spaces: 'The experience of Dover Street Market must be live and real. We still believe that shops are the only places to give a real sensation of the values of a brand.' And perhaps Joffe doesn't have to worry just yet. According to Lorna Hall, senior retail editor at WGSN, it's 'not a simple case of stores versus online'. Indeed, with online shopping still limited to a very specific demographic, brands have to employ a number of channels to reach target audiences. 'There's an older customer base who still want to visit a store. And in many of the countries where luxury is looking for its biggest growth, online is nowhere right now,' argues Hall.

For Prada's chief operating officer Sebastian Suhl, supporting a wide variety of distribution channels is key: in 2007 alone, the group increased investment in new stores and online retail by 69 per cent, with a particular emphasis on bespoke projects backing up essential brand values. He cites Prada's latest store in Milan (see W*129) as hinting at the way forward, both in terms of the architecture, unique to this store, and of the product on offer – its Made to Order service allows shoppers to personalise certain products.

As for e-commerce, Suhl suggests it 'must be an extension of the store'. But with the rules of e-commerce continually shifting, it is easier said than done. As Hall argues, bringing consistency to their message is one of the biggest tasks facing luxury brands: 'They now have to think about so many points of entry that didn't exist until very recently. Everywhere you touch the brand, it should feel seamless.'

Inevitably, this means trying to bridge the current disconnect between the online and physical retail experience. Already brands such as Burberry are introducing in-store tablets that enable the consumer to order out-of-stock items instantly. But perhaps the key development lies in the growth of m-commerce. With UK-based Juniper Research forecasting mobile payment transaction values to shoot up from \$8bn to \$30bn in the next three years and brands such as Emporio Armani developing their own phone platforms, 'near-field' marketing (where companies use mobile phones to track and target customers within a certain distance of their stores) has become one of the key investment areas within retail right now.

And with good reason. 'Very soon it will be the norm to have our card details,

The screenshot shows the Oki-ni website interface. At the top, there's a navigation bar with 'all pages', 'latest products', 'for sale', 'about', 'contact', and 'login'. The main header displays 'OKI-NI' and 'check out' with a shopping cart icon. Below this, the page is titled 'DAMIR DOMA' with a sub-header 'about damir doma / view all'. The main content area is divided into sections: 'damir doma', 'about the collection', and 'buyers note'. A grid of 15 product images is shown, each with a caption and price. For example, 'Damir Doma 'Winter' Jacket' is priced at £1150.00. A large image of a man in a dark jacket is featured on the right side of the page.

'Luxury brands have a new set of tools available to romance their customers'

size and colour preferences all stored on our mobile handsets,' says Jaana Jättyri, CEO of Trendstop.com. 'As we browse a near-field equipped store, we'll be able to scan the tags of items we wish to buy. These items will then be charged directly to our mobile devices and packaged, ready to be collected at the exit.' With consumers increasingly doing most of their research online, such developments could soon change the whole dynamic of sales and in-store hospitality altogether.

It may still be a few years before such technology goes mainstream, but brands can't afford to wait. 'When it moves, it's going to move very fast,' says Hall. This may not mean the end of the physical store, but it could redefine the nature of retail. 'Shops will no longer necessarily involve a transactional experience – and maybe that's OK,' says Hall. 'Luxury has always been about storytelling, and now brands have a new set of tools available to romance their customers. Stores will just have to find a new way through.' ★

Oki-ni: online

'You should never write a brand off,' says John Skelton – and he should know. As Oki-ni's creative director, the 28-year-old has overseen its conversion from overconceptualised retail venture to one of the most exciting online stores around. Exciting and, it must be said, rather lucrative, with sales increasing seven-fold in the past two years. One of the original concept stores, Oki-ni began life in 2001 as a pioneering London gallery-cum-shop used as a showcase for products (such as limited-edition sportswear collaborations) which could then be ordered online. By the time Skelton joined the company in 2006, however, Oki-ni's offerings were, in his words, 'admittedly pretty rubbish'. His plan was to shift the focus from collaborations to providing a broader, more authoritative take on menswear. 'At that time, I felt nobody was really giving a big offer of what's available out there in terms of menswear,' he says. 'We wanted to be the independent store for the world, where you could find these leftfield little treasures all gathered in one space.' Key to Skelton's vision was the idea of broadening out the site's focus from just shifting product to reflecting the lifestyles and interests of Oki-ni's team of young creatives. 'We wanted to incorporate everything that we are, that we listen to and engage in,' he says. 'To try to get not just product on the site but real content. Stuff that gives a real opinion or a real feeling of what is going on, through our eyes.' Hence, the introduction of an online archive of designers Raf Simons, Martin Margiela and Damir Doma (above); a new travel arm featuring bespoke adventures in partnership with Black Tomato; and a music section offering exclusive tracks and box sets. And with an emphasis on width over depth in terms of volume of product – everything from Aya Agoka's over-the-knee socks to Jil Sander's paint-effect jackets – and an impressively low returns rate (currently only 11 per cent compared to an industry standard of 25 per cent), Oki-ni's decidedly esoteric buying choices continue to hit the mark. 'Often when we put a product up there and it's been really hard to track down, the take-up is instant,' says Skelton. 'I guess our biggest commercial asset has been that we simply don't "do" commercial.'

www.oki-ni.com