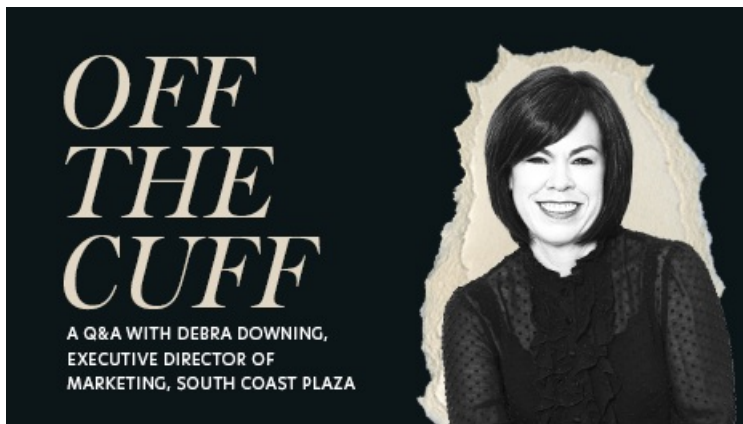


Q&A

Off the Cuff: A Q&A with South Coast Plaza's Debra Downing

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Debra Gunn Downing is the executive director of marketing at South Coast Plaza.

By AMIRAH KEATON

Introducing “Off the Cuff,” a new Q&A series from Luxury Daily exploring the career paths, current projects and next steps of those shaping the world’s best luxury brands.

The interviews feature a Proust-style twist, allowing readers to get to know industry leaders on a personal level. The seventh edition features Debra Gunn Downing, executive director of marketing at South Coast Plaza.

In this Q&A, Ms. Downing discusses the changing face of luxury retail, relationship-building as the bedrock of business, South Coast Plaza’s steady expansion and more. Here is the dialogue:



South Coast Plaza is the West Coast’s largest luxury shopping destination. Image credit: South Coast Plaza

What was your first job ever? What did it teach you?

Looking back, you can often see how the seeds of what you love to do were planted long before they germinate into a full-fledged career.

In college I worked at an independent women’s luxury boutique, which was my first foray into retail. Then retail came knocking once again in business school when I took a job doing the marketing for a small mall of about 25 stores where I reported to a committee of tenants.

While it was my entry into the foundations of running a shopping center business, it was more importantly where I honed my ability to be nimble, think on my feet and work with myriad personalities.

Which skills have been critical to your success? Did you gain these skills within or outside of the workplace?

Those first jobs in college and business school certainly gave me the foundation of the shopping center business from budgeting and working with tenants to delivering presentations.

But above all, the most vital skill I've learned is the art of finesse. Relationship building is the bedrock of any business and especially ours which is a family business.

Fostering those connections is at the heart of everything I do, whether that's working with colleagues, partnering with our brands or members of the media.

What is the best piece of advice you've ever received?

I owe my work ethic to my father, an entrepreneur who owned and ran a large farm and other businesses. Through him, I learned flexibility, adaptability and the importance of a positive attitude.

I took a job in the oil industry right out of college, which was not exactly my first choice of an industry. But I had a mentor at my university who encouraged me to take it and simply soak up everything I could about the job.

He knew what I couldn't see at the time: that everything you do prepares you for the next position.

Turns out that I ended up working there for seven years and it was invaluable. Life is an evolution, not a straight line.

Where do you see your industry in 10 years?

The retail industry is in a state of constant reinvention. But the continued elevation of services and experiences is what is driving brick-and-mortar businesses.

Maintaining success means being willing to throw out old ideas of how things were done to make room for innovation.

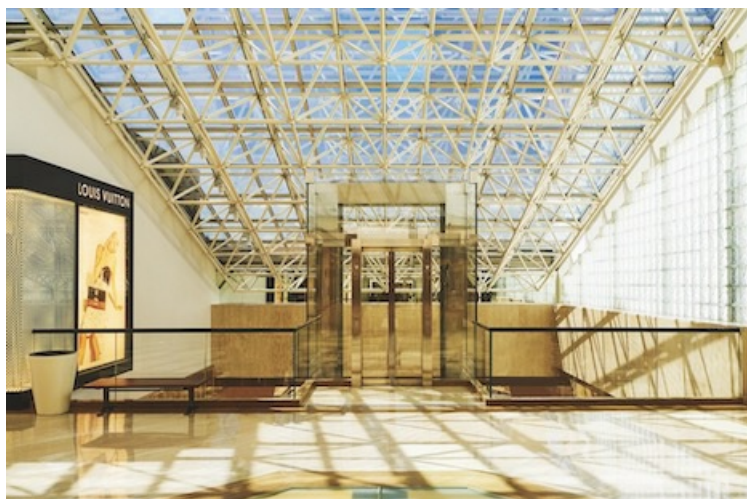
Our industry continually evolves, as does the culture it reflects and its audience. It's important to embrace that change, and to get it right.

What recent projects at South Coast Plaza have ignited your passion for working in luxury?

I am incredibly fortunate that I get to have a front seat to the constant innovation of these incredible brands we work with at South Coast Plaza.

In the past year, South Coast Plaza has opened more than 40 new stores from Balmain, Maison Margiela and Palm Angels, which are new to the center to incredible new flagships from existing brands such as Bulgari, Cartier, Gucci and Lanvin.

Adding to that is our deep partnerships with nonprofits, from American Ballet Theatre to City of Hope and many more, that highlight the depths of human ingenuity, passion and creativity.



In May, South Coast Plaza announced the grand opening of newly designed and expanded Bulgari, Cartier and Gucci boutiques. Image credit: South Coast Plaza

Who, in any industry or sphere, would you most like to share a long lunch with and where would you take them?

I would have loved to have the late Iris Apfel, a fabulous and unabashedly original fashion icon, for dinner.

I'd invite her to my candlelit garden, which is exploding with blooms right now and matches her exuberant style perfectly. Her philosophy of abundance and positivity is something I deeply admire.

How do you get into the right mindset before a big meeting or presentation?

I prepare deeply and believe in the power of a good ritual to put you in the right head space. I am a kinetic learner, so I put on music and take a moment to get centered first.

I write out the presentation and rehearse the rhythms of what I'm going to say until it feels right. I also write out all the questions I might be asked and prepare my responses.

Then, I rehearse it all again often in front of a mirror until it feels effortless.

On your days off, what can you be found doing to relax or have some fun?

Spending time at the beach is my happy place, and you can often find me on the beach deeply absorbed in a book as my husband surfs.

My current read is Song of Achilles by Madeline Miller. I also love to garden and can't resist a challenging hot yoga session!

What does luxury mean to you?

Luxury is a mindset, not a price point. The late Henry Segerstrom, who hired me at South Coast Plaza, loved luxury.

But what I love that he defined it as "the best-of-the-best in every category" regardless of price point. And it's the bedrock of the experience that we strive to offer at South Coast Plaza.

Whether a product or experience, what is your favorite luxury indulgence?

Luxury is all about pleasure, and time is one of the ultimate luxuries. I cherish time with my family, time gardening or relaxing on the beach.

And like Henry Segerstrom, I also deeply appreciate life's luxuries as well, whether it's a beautiful bar of hand-milled artisanal soap, George Esquivel's signature candle, an incredible coat from a MaxMara or a day at the Montage spa.