

e-Revolution in luxury fashion brands communication

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ABSTRACT: The concept of luxury is as old as humanity even if over time it meant different things, luxury is a conceptual and symbolic dimension and is today the result of a historical evolution. Luxury is a culture and a philosophy and therefore requires deep understanding before the adoption of business practices because its particulars are fundamentally different from other types of goods. There is no luxury without brands because luxury brands go beyond the object: they are built from the reputation made from their creations (products and services) within the social elites and trendsetters. “Luxury is in fashion and the fashion is for luxury” (Kapferer 2009). This paper identifies the major key factors for luxury fashion brands success; people, “product” (product & service), passion, pleasure, purpose and price. What would the world be without communication? Unimaginable! In today's world everything is communication; brands and their logic are always present. Fashion and communication are consubstantial because one of the main roles of luxury fashion brands is to recreate social stratification and communication is the most appropriate tool to achieve this. The Internet offers remarkable new opportunities; therefore e-communication is the oxygen of fashion online presence and allows different combinations to communicate with different realities and costumers. The future presents important opportunities and challenges, so far the extraordinary results of the luxury fashion industry reveals that the path of success is still a reality.

Keywords: luxury, brand, fashion, costumer, success, communication, internet

Introduction

The concept of luxury is as old as humanity even if over time meant different things, luxury is a conceptual and symbolic dimension and it is today the result of a historical evolution¹. The word luxury comes from the word in Latin “*Luxus*” which had its origin in agriculture and it meant “exceeding growth” and became the word for exceeding in general; only in the 17th century did it acquire the significance that it has today².

Luxury is mainly irrational and engages strong and intense emotions, it is multisensory³. All definitions end in concepts of beauty, exquisiteness, perfection, pleasure, excellence, elegance, sophistication and exclusivity but also superiority, power, authority, distinction, ostentation, etcetera.

The Sociovision Confremca institute elaborated an international study² and revealed that luxury can be characterized by being distant, desired, merited, and providing a sensation of recompense, recognition and reward². Still according to this worldwide study, luxury offers an emotional sensation of calm and tranquility in the moment of consumption. Luxury is experienced as a gathering between the “object” and a personal and private meaning of luxury which provides pleasure, comfort and harmony. Luxury is qualitative and not quantitative. For instance, the number of diamonds in a watch indicates its opulence not its beauty or aesthetics³.

Luxury

“Luxury is something that we do not need but we cannot do without” Jean Louis Queimado - Vacheron Constantin Iberia (2009)⁴.

Luxury is a culture and a philosophy and therefore requires deep understanding before the adoption of business practices because its particulars are fundamentally different from other types of goods⁵. The original function of Luxury is rooted in the social classes of societies when royals and aristocrats used pretentious consumption to

¹ Luzzini D, Ronchi S (2009) Purchasing management in the luxury industry: organization and practices. Springer Science+Business Media, LLC

² Lipovestsky G, Roux E (2004) “El lujo eterno”, Anagrama

³ Kapferer JN, Bastien V (2009) The Luxury Strategy. Kogan Page

⁴ de Azevedo Rosa C (2010) Império do Luxo. Lidel

⁵ Okonkwo U (2009) Sustaining the luxury brand on the internet. Palgrave Macmillan Brand Management (vol 16,5/6,302-310)

demonstrate their superiority and maintain their distance from “others”. Even if this social structure is no longer dominant in the world the need for the individual to show his distinction, to be admired, recognized, appreciated and respected through differentiating himself in most cases with his possessions⁵, has not changed.

Today the concept of luxury has changed profoundly and it is incredibly fluid; luxury is no longer preserved for elite, people are enjoying more material comfort resulting in a cultural shift for personal achievement and aspiration through experience⁶. Therefore it could be assumed that luxury is more and more about experience and authenticity rather than monetary value. This focus on aspiration and experience means that consumers want to improve their life mainly through personal transformation. The feminization of luxury was identified by Danziger (2005), Israel (2003) and Gambler (1997) as; where luxury was moved from status symbols towards experience and indulgence.⁶

Professor Kapferer estimated the luxury market to be 2 trillions of Euros in 2010³ and as Bernard Arnault, founder and CEO LVMH (Louis Vuitton Moët Hennessy), said clearly: “Luxury is the only sector that can provide luxurious margins”⁷.

Luxury Brands

“Luxury is above all a world of brands” Philip Kotler⁴

The father of Marketing Mix – “The 4 P’s” - provoked a revolution in the 50’s with his model centered on the product with little competition. In those days brands weren’t important. In the 70’s, brand appears as an additional element to the product but after the 90’s of the last century, brands took the power and became a recognized signature with individuality and unique characteristics expressed by products and services⁸.

Therefore it is easy to accept that there is no luxury without brands³. The exception that confirms this rule is diamonds which are loved and admired in themselves, their nature size and purity, even if the jeweler is often a prestigious and luxury brand.

⁶ Yeoman I (2010) The changing behaviors of luxury consumption. Macmillan Publishers Journal of revenue and pricing management (vol 10,1,47-50)

⁷ Jean-Noel Kapferer (2012) Abundant rarity : the key to luxury growth. Business Horizons. Kelley School of Business. Indiana University (55, 453-462)

⁸ Chevalier M, Mazzalovo G (2008) Management et Marketing du Luxe. Dunod

“Luxury objects are objects of luxury brands.” (Kapferer 2009)³.

The luxury brands go beyond the object: they are built from the reputation made from their creations (objects and services) within the social elites and trendsetters. A recognized signature of all the stunning and beautiful distinction in the product and service, thereby the luxury brand has particular significance: it relates a social and cultural stratification and makes the wearer someone distinctive. Consequently the luxury brand is a social indicator and creates distance.³

Brands in luxury are most relevant since they are used as a social marker. In democracy people are free and equal, so they use components to differentiate themselves socially³. Within the limit of their financial means, they employ luxury as an instrument of social stratification. Consequently luxury brands are a symbolic desire to belong to a social class, most of the time superior, even if this aspiration is rarely assumed.

Money only measures the wealth of the buyer and not his/her elegance. However the codes of luxury are cultural and to be successful it is fundamental for luxury brands to first encode social distinction, that way luxury brands exchange money into a culturally sophisticated social stratification³. The luxury brand is therefore the social and cultural visa for the product and the person.

A luxury brand is often a signature of the person whose name it bears, its founder⁹. The creator precedes the brand, has a history and social, cultural and geographical roots therefore the luxury brand is a real and living person. Like it is founder the luxury brand progressively builds its reputation and its network of followers over time³. Gabrielle Chanel died in 1971 but Coco Chanel is still living.

Luxury Fashion Brands

Luxury is in fashion and fashion feeds luxury”³.

Despite the importance and growth of the luxury sector in general and luxury fashion brands in particular, research has received limited empirical exploration within the investigative literature. Fionda and Moore (2009)¹⁰ did an interesting study and

⁹ Garcia S.C. (2003) El universo del lujo. Instituto de empresa McGrawHill

¹⁰ Fionda A.M., Moore C.M. (2009) The anatomy of the luxury fashion brand. Palgrave Macmillan Brand

identified nine interrelated key attributes in the creation and maintenance of a luxury fashion brand, these are: product integrity; design signature; premium price; exclusivity; heritage; environment and service; culture; clear brand identity and marketing communications.

Another important contribution is Winsper's (2007)¹¹ model "The 6 P's of luxury marketing", sustained on luxury brands consumers buying behavior studied by Professor Dubois and colleagues (2001)¹² that can easily be transposed to luxury fashion brands.

As said before most people seek ways to climb up different levels, be these: cultural, social, economic, etcetera. Luxury is one of the ways to achieve this goal and luxury brands are its tool. The use of luxury is perceived not only as a reward and recompense but also as a symbol of success and achievement.

To preserve its status, the luxury fashion brand must dominate its client in the sense that it is a reference and an authority to him or her¹³. In order to be successful it is essential to achieve a perfect balance between a distant and mysterious connection with a trustful and intimate relationship with the customer.

Therefore it is imperative to establish a permanent dialogue between customer and brand, known as "image through action"¹¹. The luxury fashion brands tell their story and the accuracy as the story that is told by others defines the success of the relationship. The luxury brand has the responsibility to begin and feed a personal connection with the client and will be capitalized by the consumer's per-to-per communications¹³.

People

The value of people in the luxury fashion world is beyond concepts or words, it is crucial. Luxury fashion brands sell someone before they sell something¹³, that's why

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¹¹ Winsper J (2007) The 6 P's of Luxury Marketing. Winsper Inc

¹² Dubois B, Laurent G, Czellar S (2001) Consumer rapport to Luxury: analyzing complex and ambivalent attitudes. Cahier de recherche n° 736

¹³ Kapferer J.N., Bastien V (2009) The specificity of luxury management: Turning marketing upside down. Palgrave Macmillan Brand Management (vol. 16, 5/6,311-322)

human resources are vital, everyone is a permanent “ambassador” of the brand (from the CEO to the doorman)⁴. A luxury product is passed on (rather than sold) this one-to-one relationship is a key factor for the accomplishment of the luxury brand¹³.

The most prestigious luxury fashion brands devote most attention and investment on educating and training of their employees⁴. It is crucial to create and feed a personal, emotional and affective relationship between the customer and the “ambassador”. The success of the established relationships is materializing by brand loyalty and purchase.

The “stratification” of modern fashion designers is an important requirement if luxury fashion brands want to reach larger audiences. These designers are leaders who take their followers into the world of style, creative culture, taste and sensory experience so far restricted to the elite⁷.

In our impersonal and cold world customers look for attention, consideration, friendship and someone who they can trust. The “ambassador” must aggregate all of these requirements (and more) to be successful in his goal which is to: “make the customer happier”, because a pleased client is a loyal one and most important of all, himself he becomes a positive “ambassador” to potential clients.

Personal advice in the luxury world is imperative, most of the time the customer looks for advice from the people he trusts. The “ambassadors” fulfill this role and the luxury brand will be as successful as the quality of his ambassadors (internal and external)⁴.

The brand affect on its own is not enough to build brand loyalty and proper brand management specially focuses on brand trust, and is necessary to successfully maintain longer-term customer relationships¹⁴.

Product

Everything begins with the “product” (that is to say product or service, which is redundant because, in luxury, an object is always accompanied by a service). What does the product need to become a representation of a dream, pleasure, happiness and

¹⁴ Song Y, Hur W-M, Kim M (2012) Brand Trust and affect in the luxury brand-customer relationship. *Social behavior and personality*, 2012, 40(2), 331-338

fulfillment? In fact, a luxury “product” is a complete holistic experience, lived in a multi-sensory way by the client³.

The luxury product corresponds to a dream but always comprises a symbolic side and a functional side. Recovering Professor Dubois’s study¹² (2001) it is possible to identify four key characteristics intrinsic to a luxury product.

Luxury is synonymous of Excellency so its products must be of outstanding and of exceptional quality at all levels. Creative process based on innovation and originality is a must. The high quality materials and the production methods (high incorporation of manual labor) used and the presentation must always reflect the *savoir faire* of the brand. A good example is Louis Vuitton *Malletier* with its perfect handmade suitcases.

The luxury fashion brands create authenticity around a myth with values that are the origin of a lineage of “products”. Even recent brands can build a history based on lineage and inheritance like Ralph Lauren. Brand legend gives deepness to the luxury brand and timeliness to its “products” by heritage and continuity³.

Preserving integrity is also essential for luxury fashion brands¹². It can be achieved by ensuring stylish and esthetic constancy, committing to traditional production practices and by using history and culture in communication. Adapting to its time and remaining consistent is a challenge for the luxury brand, the balance between these two aspects will sustain its success. Chanel launches new collections every year with creativity and new elements however Chanel remains unmistakably classic.

Luxury is something that has to be earned so the greater the inaccessibility the bigger the desire³. Time is a key dimension in luxury, waiting for something makes people enjoy it even more. Luxury brands have to know how to put up the necessary difficulties to increase desire and needs to progress constantly in practices of distributing rarity. A good example is the “3” years’ waiting list for a crocodile’s Birkin (Hermès).

Passion

The pursuit of luxury is often a passionate attempt and luxury costumers can be very passionate consumers. Frequently it is their passionate nature that has put them in a position to access luxuries that comprise their lifestyle⁴.

Passion drives the consumer to know more and became connoisseurs, specialists and collectors⁴. The virtual, online world, gives an all new importance to the communities of passionate consumers as it eliminates time zone and distance barriers. These groups, either large or small, are highly powerful and growing daily in influence. They generate word-of-mouth buzz therefore luxury fashion brands have to be attentive to detail and be present to constantly feed these communities.

With internet penetration increasing rates the functions of online expand beyond information exchanges and include services and communities¹⁵. This new reality provides fantastic opportunities for luxury fashion brands but it can turn into serious threats if not properly monitored.

On the internet the consumer is not only in total control of receiving and interpreting messages from luxury fashion companies but also for deciding their legitimacy, endorsing them (or not), spreading their approval (or not) and generating discussions about the luxury brand while influencing millions around the world in a matter of hours and often minutes. The challenge for luxury brands is to the use social web to engage luxury fashion costumers in a permanent and enduring dialogue¹⁵.

At the individual consumer level, supporting passionate clients also means indulging costumers in what may appear to be irrational and impulsive behaviors. A luxury fashion brand may have to close a store to service a VIP client, this kind of consideration and attention generally pays back in loyalty, reputation and word-of-mouth recommendations.

In the social network Facebook, one can find pages of all luxury fashion brands, clubs and passion costumers and collectors. In Tumblr the most prestigious and influent fashion blogs are followed by thousands of fashion enthusiasts 24 hours a day 7 days a week.

¹⁵ Okonkwo U (2009) Sustaining the luxury brand on the Internet. Palgrave Macmillan Brand management (vol.16, 5/6, 302-310)

Pleasure

Luxury is experiential. Luxury fashion brands provide a sensory fulfillment beyond the functional attributes of the product or service¹¹.

“When a person buys a service, he purchases a set of intangible activities carried out on his behalf. But when he buys an experience, he pays to spend time enjoying a series of memorable events that a company stages to engage him in a personal way” Pine and Gilmore (1999)¹⁶.

Luxury fashion brands have to understand the sensory markers that their different customer’s best respond to and determine how to express those markers. Luxury “products” need emotional marketing to give them that other dimension where customers are seen as emotional beings focused on achieving pleasurable experiences.

Fashion is charming and surprising, so magical and “irrational”, so the most important factor is the sensory experience. The focus is on customer experiences and luxury brands used different aspects either in the form of extravagant stores, limited editions or restricted services⁴.

To be successful the luxury experience has to express a lifestyle message and provide pleasure to its customer by a personal experience where; the customer senses the magic, is surprised and feels loved and unique.

Purpose

Luxury is often associated with superfluity and only used as a means to spend money and show wealth, this supposition is incomplete. The luxury fashion products always comprise a functional side and a symbolic one.³

The most difficult thing is to separate the functionality aspect that justifies its acquisition and the dream that it carries³, even *Pièce Unique* (Goldfish – Genève) - the most expensive mobile phone in the world - makes phone calls. In other words luxury must be both excellent in function and form.

¹⁶ Atwal G, Williams A (2009) Luxury brand marketing – the experience is everything. Palgrave Macmillan Brand Management (vol.16, 5/6, 338-346)

Price

“The price is the exchange value of a product, but what makes luxury is the “symbolic value” (Kapferer 2009)³.

Nevertheless the price is still a decisive operational decision and it is fundamental to understand the competitive environment and to “perfectly” balance both function and dream. The luxury fashion brand has to sell the “product” and be very attentive to final client’s reaction and adjust if necessary.

Customers expect luxury to be expensive, high price creates a barrier of entry, increases exclusivity and desire¹⁰. By increasing prices luxury brands lose the bad clients and became interesting for others¹³, however the brand must be careful not to fall into a niche. In a focus group a *nouveau riche* Chinese man said: “What I like about luxury is that it is expensive.”⁷

The price must preserve some secrecy. Therefore all communication must make an effort to position the product at the highest possible level without directly mentioning the price. That is one of the difficult aspects for luxury fashion brands on using the internet as a distribution channel³.

Communication

What would the world be without communication? Unimaginable! In today's world everything is communication; brands and their logic are always present⁸. Globalization brought new challenges for brands in general and to luxury brands in particular, which were the first to go global as ambassadors of a culture and promoters of a world’s vision³.

Fashion and communication are consubstantial because one of the main roles of luxury fashion brands is to recreate social stratification and communication is the most appropriate tool to achieve it. Additionally luxury is a transmitter of taste, aesthetic and must be active at a cultural level³.

Luxury fashion brands are a universe and have their codes, Kapferer (2009)³ identified nine; the figure of the creator (Yves Saint Laurent), the logotypes (Dolce & Gabanna),

the visual symbol (Gucci), the repeated motif (Burberry), the brand color (Tiffany), the favorite material (Prada); the cult of detail (Hermès); the constant hymn to the manual work (Louis Vuitton) and a way of doing things (Chanel). These codes are present in communication but also in the entire universe of the brand (stores, package, etc.)

Luxury fashion brands communicate to create virtual rarity⁷, to build the dream and to revive its values³. The “product” and the luxury fashion brand universe are spoken of in a dreamlike way, consequently communication has to be adequately vague so that many people can identify with it and find their personal part of the dream. On the other hand, luxury communication has to; reflect brand values, provide factual information, and transmit emotions and states of mind as well as be remembered⁸. How can this be achieved?

For luxury communication to be effective it must employ a “sensory language” (verbal, visual, auditory, etcetera) extremely refined, creative, imaginative, highly coded and symbolical but never direct³. Every word, image, sound, etcetera should nurture all of the brands imaginary and be a mirror of its universe. Asking clients is an important way to measure qualitative impact. In fact clients are always delighted and flattered to be consulted because it makes them feel special and that their opinion counts.

As referred above, luxury fashion brands seek participation and an active relationship with the client, so public relations (PR) events are an efficient tool as well as corporate patronage. Nevertheless the luxury fashion brand should not disperse in multiple events or sectors but concentrate in a single universe in which can develop a very strong image by applying its entire available means to it¹³, like Louis Vuitton Cup or Grand Prix de Diane (Hermès).

Advertising is not the most important vector of luxury to legitimize brand’s position as a cultural transmitter and a creator of taste and social distance. Fashion companies increasingly utilize different combinations of direct communication¹⁰ such as; fashion shows, entertainments and reward shows, PR events, global events, celebrity endorsements, direct marketing, to develop their relationship with the costumer and seduce others.

When Brazilian H. Stern jewelry fashion brand was launched in the United States one of its actions was to dress show business stars for several editions of events like Oscar’s,

Grammy's, etc. On the other hand events are simultaneously exclusive and unique, powerfully translating values to which only a minority is invited. Of course the luxury fashion brand must be very creative in these events so that the buzz around it provides an enthusiastic and exhaustive media coverage (much more efficient). The openings of Louis Vuitton's mega stores in Champs Elysées , Soho or Shanghai were covered by the media for weeks. And the buzz around Chanel's advertising movies; hiring the movies stars of the moment, the best director and so on offered much more visibility than the spot itself.

Fashion and art preserve a constant and intimate connection³. Art, by its essence aspires to eternity: the piece will outlive the creator and his time. Today, following the pioneer Cartier and his *foundation pour l'Art Contemporain*, all the major luxury groups, as Louis Vuitton and Prada, are, through their foundations, most important patrons of all types of arts. It is a bright approach to the exclusive and influential elites allowing permanent communication with them.

Internet offers remarkable new opportunities for communication; e-communication is the oxygen of fashion online presence¹⁷. Luxury fashion brands do not control the information that is passed about them online but the public is able to filter what they want to receive and is in command of their choices.

Uché Okonkwo (2010)¹⁷ advises luxury brands to communicate effectively online. Several steps are pointed; first the luxury brand has to define an objective to communicate and determine the message that it should pass on. The next step is to understand its target audience online, then identify the websites where people meet or visit. The next action is to build the format of the message that individuals will most likely respond to. Finally, evaluate the quality of the website and its level of relevance and produce a communications program. Subsequently there is the format and content of the communication itself. Creativity and originality is fundamental to hold the attention, curiosity and interest of the customer so he will decide to read the message sent.

As reported by Okonkwo (2010)¹⁷ to be successful in communicating online it is not sufficient to place banner advertisement on media websites or reproduce the

¹⁷ Okonkwo U (2010) *Luxury online*. Palgrave Macmillan

advertisement images on the brand's website. It is imperative to have an integrated approach to creative and cross-communication that is both interactive and engaging because the real online consumer has to be reached, enchanted, surprised and informed through rich content and be affiliated with a two-way exchanges.

In 2011, Louis Vuitton started its own digital in-house agency, a team of 400 people, mostly the best professionals in the market. Its goal is to diffuse content about the brand all over the world, including history, heritage, craft details, PR events, imaginative interviews, fashion shows, inventive travel guides, exclusive editions and launch products and services⁷. Frequently they created Facebook's app dedicated to special events, with live streaming, offering the possibility to update fan's status with news, comments on the video – and thus interact with worldwide users reinforcing the feeling of belonging to a community. What is extremely clever is that the events directly appear on fan's news feed, exposing Facebook friends to this incredible quality content.

Louis Vuitton's example should clearly be watched and be an inspiration to other luxury fashion brands whether they are focused on High Fashion or not, as it provides key learning on how fashion brands can master the art of social media¹⁵. Their success evidently the consequence of an important investment in a permanent reinvented digital communication with worldwide actual, future and aspiring costumers.

Clearly the internet is a precious tool that allows different combinations to communicate with different realities and costumers. Globalization introduced a new variable in luxury brands equation because the same brand can have different significance and meaning according to the country. Louis Vuitton in Asia is the top symbol of success and social achievement, in Europe it is perceived as creative genius when loved and *passé* or “show-off” when not. Brands are therefore transformed by being international so luxury brands must adapt their communication as well.

The Future

Today the world faces an uncommon and violent turbulence; severe crisis in Europe, instability in United States and accelerated growth in BRIC countries (Brazil, Russia, India and China) and soon in the CIVETS's (Colombia, Indonesia, Vietnam, Egypt,

Turkey and South Africa). In these countries, gross domestic product (GDP) growth is high and it is a fine prospect for luxury fashion brands, because as Bernstein Research⁷ revealed luxury market growth is closely correlated with GDP growth because it creates or increases middle class and promotes optimism. These nations developed consumption societies quite late, people advance by leaps and claim their right to success and therefore are eagerly looking to spoil themselves by acquiring luxury fashion brands.

The luxury fashion companies that successfully prove the exclusive qualities of their brands (products and services), their irrefutable heritage, their refined creativity, their astonishing innovation and their unique experience will pass through beautifully and will emerge stronger than never. It is a continuous regenerating process at all levels. It may seem contradictory but luxury fashion brands have to go back to their roots and renew the magic and beauty of the brand by reinforcing the myth through permanent creativity and innovation. The luxury fashion consumer has to be seduced constantly.

In fact, the extraordinary results of the most important luxury groups are encouraging and reveal that so far challenges have been transformed in great opportunities.

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