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## Times of turmoil provide creative freedom for brave luxury brands

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*De Beers diamond rings*

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By JEN KING

NEW YORK – In times of political and socio-economic turmoil, a brand’s resourcefulness and tact can help secure its standing in consumers’ minds as they work through a troubled time together.

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**Luxury Daily**

For the diamond industry, the recession of 2008 caused the celebratory and self-congratulatory category to drop out from underneath the feet of jewelers, both mass and high-end. During this time, marketers could no longer position advertisements as they had done when the commercial and consumer landscape was at full strength.

“2007 through 2009 was not a fun time in marketing and certainly we had seen troubled times before, but unlike in 2001, 2002, this time we as luxury marketers were definitely the enemy,” said Shireen Jiwan, founder/CEO of [Sleuth](#). “It was a difficult time to put forth any type of messaging.”

A new meaning

During Luxury Daily’s Luxury FirstLook: Strategy 2015’s “How Luxury Brands Can Be Brave in Times of Turmoil” session on Jan. 13, Ms. Jiwan and Cristina Lilly, vice president of

global brands Steinway & Sons, formerly the vice president of marketing for De Beers' "A Diamond is Forever," discussed their role in repositioning the meaning of diamond purchases during the recession.

Before the recession struck, De Beers had a very formulaic ad strategy with its A Diamond is Forever campaigns, which had become one of the most recognizable taglines since its introduction in 1947. But even with messages of enduring love and romance, selling diamonds in 2008's consumer climate would be criticized.

At the time, there was a significant amount of "luxury shaming" as the majority of consumers resorted to conscientious consumption rather than lavish purchases. In turn, consumers leaving department store Bergdorf Goodman wrapped packages in brown paper instead of the retailer's signature purple and the popularity of private shopping parties surged.



*Luxury shaming was rampant in 2008*

Ms. Jiwan and Ms. Lilly worked with the Diamond Trading Company, including De Beers and Tiffany, along with mass jewelers such as Zales, to reconceptualize how to market diamonds when most consumers were avoiding such purchases, especially something as flashy as high-jewelry.

This resulted in product design, advertisements and out of home displays that showed resourcefulness on the brand's part and reflected the sentiment of consumers while rationalizing the purchase. But, this resourcefulness by brands, such as De Beers, had to ensure its sense of self as to not dilute the jeweler's status.

On the product end, the DTC developed two concepts to help jeweler's take a different angle on marketing diamonds. The first, the "past present future" three-stone ring design, a result of a surplus of small- and medium-sized diamonds, was positioned as celebratory for occasions outside an engagement, such as a 10-year anniversary.

The other, a diamond ring worn on the right hand ring finger, what Tiffany choose to refer to as the "Celebration" ring, was aimed toward self-gifting for women who wanted to celebrate an inner achievement. Essentially, this design gave women "permission" to purchase their own diamond without a spouse, thus becoming an iconic piece for strong, independent women.



*Cristina Lilly, right with Shireen Jiwan, left at Luxury FirstLook: Strategy 2015*

Both designs rationalized the purchase in the minds of affluent consumers and made purchasers feel good about the spend.

Brand interaction without purchase was a focus to keep the brand top-of-mind as consumers navigated economic troubles. This resulted in two large-scale out of home displays in New York, one for Mother's Day and the second for the holiday season, both executed by Ms. Jiwan and Ms. Lilly.

For Mother's Day, the A Diamond is Forever team created a living sculpture, "Roses," in Grand Central Station made of more than 30,000 red roses fitted to read "a diamond is forever." As the flowers wilted, De Beers was able to drive home the notion that flowers, and other gifts such as chocolates or Champagne, are temporary and fleeting, but a diamond is forever.

Embedded Video: [//www.youtube.com/embed/9uPyQ4wcHdE](http://www.youtube.com/embed/9uPyQ4wcHdE)

### *Roses*

The second, the "Unbreakable Kiss," was set up in Madison Square Park for the holidays and invited consumers to visit a stage where couples could kiss under the mistletoe, redesigned as the diamond symbol in the De Beers' A Diamond is Forever logo. When under the "mistletoe," 60 cameras took a 360° still video of the consumer, using the technology used in movies such as the Matrix, that could then be downloaded off the De Beers Web site.

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### *Unbreakable Kiss*

These initiatives gave consumers the sense, whether they were able to buy a diamond that year or not, that even during hard times love endures and that there is still a "forever" in their lives – their loved ones. Also, even if a De Beers diamond is never purchased, interacting in this capacity allowed for consumers to experience the glamour of the jeweler's wares.

Both installations also encouraged participation with De Beers on a level that had not yet been explored by brands and opened a dialogue with consumers, whereas before the conversation was very monotone.

Be brave

Marketers will always need to navigate economic, cultural and social issues, but bravery to diverge from tradition, especially in the luxury space, combined with thoughtful tact is an appropriate response. Overall, Ms. Jiwan said that “constraint is the breeding ground of ingenuity.”

With these challenges, brands are given permission to break from tradition, examine objectives beyond point of sale, cultivate core aspects of the brand in new ways through language and merchandise and forge new relationships with brands, personalities and organizations such as philanthropy.

For example, Swiss jeweler Chopard worked together with the Happy Hearts Fund to help rebuild schools and aid children that have been affected by natural disasters with an exclusive bracelet designed specifically for the cause.

The Happy Hearts Fund was created by model Petra Nemcova in 2005 after she was injured in Thailand during the 2004 tsunami that devastated the region. Chopard’s involvement with Ms. Nemcova’s charity is likely to attract affluent philanthropists interested in giving back to their global community ([see story](#)).

Above all, the team suggests that in times of turmoil brands must be brave and can benefit from articulating the brand’s core meaning to consumers, a strategy that affords creative freedom.

"Know your core message, understand what that is," said Cristina Lilly, vice president of global brands [Steinway & Sons](#). "Know your core audience and who you’re talking to and what they’re feeling and thinking at that time.

"If there’s a difference in their economic status or what’s going on in their culture that is effecting how they think about your brand, you need to know that and you need to know how to react to that," she said.

"Rather than be afraid and be silent, it’s okay to engage and it’s okay to move forward understanding who you are and making sure you know who your consumer is, so that those messages can align in a beautiful way."

Final Take

*Jen King, lead reporter on Luxury Daily, New York*

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