

COLUMNS

How Apple could redefine luxury – or not

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By A LUXURY DAILY COLUMNIST

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The world is split into those who think watches are for telling the time and those who think that they are for telling people about yourself. It is this gulf that Apple needs to cross if it is to leap into the world of luxury.

It is pretty simple, right? A \$17,000 price-tag, a 12-page ad spread in Vogue, placement in Colette's boutique in Paris, hiring former Burberry CEO Angela Ahrendts to head Apple retail stores and cover editorial in Vogue China. So how hard can luxury be, especially for Apple – the world's most valuable brand and company?

We have already seen Apple become the most desirable luxury brand in China, we have seen proposals with 99 iPhones, the gold hue of iPhone seemed designed for coffee-table placement in Dubai. What more is needed?

Going for gold

I think people mistake the gulf between premium and luxury – the strange thing about technology and innovation, while never obviously contrary to luxury, does create a lot of

tensions.

It may not seem obviously apparent, but most aspects of true luxury jar uncomfortably with true technology.

There is a duality between the complex world of craftsmanship and utility, between modernity and timelessness, how classic thinking jars against the notion of rapid progression.

For all the R&D money and product designers in the world, the one thing Apple seem unable to fabricate are strong reasons to want one.

For the world's wealthy, armed with gold-plated iPhone cases and iPads to control their smartphones, does the Apple Watch do anything they want to do? Is not the real estate on their wrist more for status than function?

Luxury and technology are uncomfortable bedfellows.

Utility

To a great extent, utility, not vulgarity, is the opposite of luxury. Daimler-Benz's Maybachs are not the best ways to get from A-B, Christian Louboutin shoes are famed for toppling supermodels, Leica makes the most expensive but hardest to use cameras and ultra-high-end watches are demonstrably less accurate and way harder to maintain than anything one-hundredth the cost.

While premium maybe about the very best, true luxury is almost the ostentatiousness of sabotaged utility.

The uselessness of art is probably the purest demonstration of luxury, functionally useless, purposefully expensive, and a perfect representation of the intangible wonder that comes from uniqueness, imagination and craft that makes luxury what it is.

The very statement that you can afford something, demonstrably not better than cheaper versions, is a clear sign of class.

For a very short time in 2003, having a BlackBerry became a key way for high-powered executives to demonstrate important and their vitality. It is now no longer the case.

Those will real power have limited functions on their phones, work from tablets and employ assistants.

Perhaps, today, the real luxury in life is being able to disconnect, to not suffer the endless vibrations of the notification layer. In this environment, the most luxurious watch is still one that is there to signify status, not do anything.

Timelessness and craft

Luxury is the epitome of everything classic, timeless and traditional. True luxury is about the backstory, the artisans that craft select items. It is the provenance of materials. It is being part of history.

There is no greater contrast between the slow, steady evolution, steeped history and

humanity of a crafted accessory and the cold, modern manufacture of a Shenzhen production line.

Technology is rapid-upgrade cycles. It is software, not hardware. It is beta testing, fast failing, about what can be done conquering what people want.

Everything about the culture and methodology, not least the manufacture of technology, stands against everything for which luxury stands.

Exclusivity

While most fashion brands have tiered brands to allow access to different products, brands and different ranges at price points to recruit a wide variety of users, they have done so with patience, nuance and care.

Nobody mistakes a Chaps or Armani Exchange user with a Giorgio Armani or Ralph Lauren owner. These brands may be bound by a profit and loss statement, but by little else.

Apple has for 20 years made premium products at premium prices, but to move up in exclusivity, to create a luxury high end tier, is not normally just as easy as 12 pages in Vogue, and a refit with mirrors and safe in an Apple store.

To making investing \$10,000-plus in a watch that is identical functionally to a \$350 version and worn by every teenager with a summer job is not the easiest marketing maneuver.

Status

The real value of a gold Apple watch will not be the notifications that your plane is running late – you are flying private. It will not be that there is traffic on your route home – you are in a chopper – or hands-free calling, your EA holds it. It will be a symbol of status and personality.

What vintage Rolexes, new Tag Heuers and a host of other brands have done is relayed subtle cues about who you are to those few who you care what they think of you.

It seems likely, although collectively the world has yet to decide, what the Apple Watch will exude is a deep fondness for technology, total self-involvement and the need to know everything about your personal movements, and a desire to be connected to everything and everyone around you. This does not shout luxury to me.

THIS IS THE challenge, if somehow – and some markets will be easier than others – Apple can make demonstrable productivity cool again, if they can make unabashed self obsession seem palatable, and if they can make perishable technology feel timeless, they will have done something remarkable and transcended the line between technology and luxury.

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