

COMMERCE

British brands must assert heritage and difference in US market

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Bremont Jaguar Lightweight E-Type Watch

By FORREST CARDAMENIS

NEW YORK British brands looking to gain a foothold in the United States would do well to emphasize their "Britishness," according to panelists at "GREAT Britain on Madison Avenue" held on Nov. 5.

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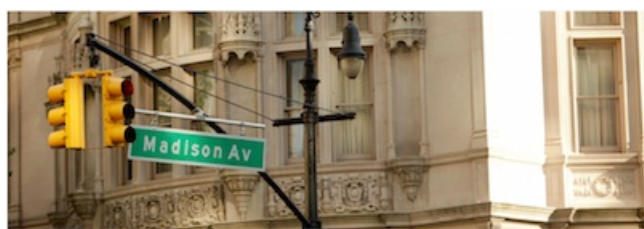
British identity is wrapped up into ideas of elegance, heritage and wit. Brands venturing out of the United Kingdom into the U.S. or other countries need to find ways to inform consumers not just of the brand but of the significance of its home country.

"We've talked a little bit about British luxury, and I think there's something there that you just can't replicate, but it makes a difference," said Jerome Mackay, marketing director at Ettinger. "Is it in the blood? I don't know, it might be, but it's something."

Hometown heroes

The panel was hosted by Madison Avenue Business Improvement District and featured Ettinger, Bremont, Halcyon Days, and Clive Interiors in conversation. The highest concentration of British luxury outside of the UK is between 57th Street and 86th Street on Madison Avenue in New York, a stretch home to Jimmy Choo, Mulberry, Belstaff, Anya Hindmarch and Bremont, among others.

Nonetheless, many incoming brands may not be well known in the U.S. or may otherwise have trouble carving out spaces for themselves.



Madison Avenue

For example, leather goods maker Ettinger is relatively unknown in the country despite prominence back home and in Japan. Nonetheless, the brand has the hallmarks of luxury: it has been family-owned since its founding in 1934, its factory near Birmingham, has been used continuously for the production of leather since 1890 and its products are

carried in a number of department stores in the U.S., including Bloomingdale's.

Others face the opposite problem. For instance, British watchmaker Bremont is only 13 years old, meaning it is still creating the heritage that many brands rely on. The brand was founded by two aircraft mechanics, Nick and Giles English after an accident took the life of their father and which Nick barely survived.

From that moment, they decided to continue to engineering mechanical devices but felt the need to make a mark, therefore deciding to bring watches back to Britain. Although luxury watchmaking is not usually associated with Britain, numerous advancements in the field prior to the boom of Swiss watch brands are accredited to the UK, and Rolex began its history there.

For Bremont, its story needs to be told, both through its founders speaking and, as it practices, through sharing social photos of the timepieces being worn by the Oracle Team USA racing team and Mount Everest climbers, working both wet and frozen to emphasize quality. In this way, Bremont is making an organic use of digital to craft its story.

Luxury brands are seen as leaders and role models, so a sense of nationhood in both identity and production of product is important. To successfully differentiate themselves from competition, British brands need to create an idea of what it means to be a British brand as opposed to a French or Italian brand.

Accordingly, Halcyon Days prides itself on having all three royal warrants, awarded by British royalty for excellence.

"Having a royal warrant is something special, every brand that has one is very proud of it," said Zenouska Mowatt, marketing manager at Halcyon Days. "It's a sign of quality, excellence and craftsmanship."

"I think, contrary to a lot of European luxury, we start with a function. There's intrinsically elegance and wit, and that's what characterizes British luxury," Ettinger's Mr. Mackay added.

All hail the Queen

Numerous recent happenings indicate that British luxury brands are especially proud of their heritage.

For example, British heritage brands recently joined in the festivities as Queen Elizabeth II becomes the longest reigning monarch in the United Kingdom's history.

Queen Elizabeth accessed the British throne on Feb. 6, 1952 after the death of her father, became the longest-lived British monarch in 2007 and today has surpassed her great-great-grandmother Queen Victoria as the longest-reigning British monarch. Due to longstanding cultural ties as well as business connections through the appointment of royal warrants, British heritage brands often celebrate the royal family's personal milestones such as weddings and births ([see story](#)).

The panel was part of an ongoing initiative to highlight British brands on Madison Avenue.

From Nov. 5-8, the Madison Avenue BID will highlight the growing number of British-based brands that call the street home. This include brands such as Mulberry, Barbour, Belstaff, Graff Diamonds and Jo Malone, among others.

During the week-long event, approximately 20 luxury boutiques, restaurants and galleries will hold special events such as afternoon tea, guest speakers and exhibitions ([see story](#)).

For the brands in conversation, quality and heritage go together.

"There's so much variety," Mr. Mackay said. "I think if we're trying to find some common threads, a lot of British luxury is steeped in the condition of history."

"You have, I think today, this timeless, understated elegance that will characterize a lot of what British luxury is about, and yet the formalities of the past are less important now than an attitude that can transcend the product from something that is just classic to something intrinsically interesting," he said.

Final Take

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