

COLUMNS

Best practice for mobile customer experience

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If last year was the digital tipping point for luxury fashion brands, 2011 will be the year that marks the industry's full embrace of the mobile medium.

Brands leading the pack include Chanel, Hermès, Louis Vuitton and Van Cleef & Arpels, with native applications loaded with branded content already in the market.

Net-a-Porter and Tiffany & Co. were early to introduce Web experiences optimized for mobile. And Jimmy Choo and Marc Jacobs both experimented with location-based promotions on Foursquare, rewarding check-ins with shoe giveaways and sought-after passes to runway shows, respectively.

Contemporary luxury brands have always had a unique imperative to stay ahead of the cultural curve.

Now, luxury marketers are realizing that they have to stay ahead of the technological curve as well: 50 percent of affluent customers currently have a smartphone and 2.3 million affluent customers already own tablets.

And in the last quarter of 2010, sales of smartphones outpaced sales of personal computers for the first time in history.

For all users, mobile is rapidly becoming the first screen rather than an ancillary one, providing utility, social connection and entertainment.

In late January, Apple reached 10 billion app downloads and in February, as the number of Android users continued to grow rapidly, Google finally fixed its Android Market app store, making it easier for app providers—read: brands—and users to find each other.

Forty percent of tweets are now posted from mobile devices.

Popular apps such as Instagram, too, are connecting people as never before.

Networks keep getting faster while data plans decrease in price. And given that mobile technology has caught up to the standards luxury brands have set for their consumer experiences, 2011 will no doubt be the year mobile gets haute.

As the luxury marketers make a more sophisticated foray into mobile, here are some best practices to help them uphold a customer experience worthy of their brands:

Utility

Brands that provide useful mobile tools guarantee deeper and longer-term engagement with users.

Amazon's app, for example, allows consumers to scan a bar code to research related product information and compare prices.

This is a game-changer for how consumers will shop in retail.

Indeed, bar code scanning nationwide is up 700 percent since this time last year. And a poll distributed by Scanbuy found that 97 percent of consumers during 2010's holiday shopping season found the ability to scan mobile bar codes useful.

This is a concept Google takes to the next level with its Shopper app, which allows users to obtain information on millions of products—such as prices and reviews—by snapping a picture of cover art, scanning any bar code or searching with text or voice.

As well, UNIQLO adds value with its charming Calendar for iPad, a free app that syncs up with Google Calendar. And Benjamin Moore's Color Capture app enables users to snap a picture of any color, anywhere, and match it with one of more than 3,300 colors in the database.

Premium content

Provide excellent, one-of-a-kind content and users will keep coming back for more.

Stella McCartney's new iPad app includes an interactive look at its new Kids collection shot by Ryan McGinley, a video starring Dree Hemingway set to music by Brian Eno, and backstage content from recent shows. It is a chance to interact with this beloved brand in an exciting new editorial format.

Net-a-Porter's iPad app, too, has an editorial, curated feel, with purchasing just a tap away.

Retail and social integration

The more integrated the mobile, retail and social experiences, the stronger the overall brand experience.

Starbucks recently announced that its 6,800 stores nationwide will begin accepting mobile payments. This offers customers an even easier way to buy their coffees and pastries, and Starbucks a chance to better understand its customers.

Likewise, the Tesco Finder app helps users not only find a nearby store, but once inside, “find any grocery product on any shelf.”

This app demonstrates an astute understanding of how to improve the experience of grocery shopping and thus increase mobile brand engagement.

And Nike’s Nike+ GPS app not only provides tools to help users become better runners, including progress tracking. It also provides motivation via Facebook integration that allows friends to like users’ runs: the likes translate to cheers they hear while running.

Also, when Steve Madden introduced Facebook’s like feature to its mobile site, it saw a traffic increase of 30 percent in 24 hours.

Simplicity

The most effective brand apps are the simplest. The Sampler App by Converse is a three-step experience: browse, try on via augmented reality and then buy.

EBay’s app, too, is dead simple, with a streamlined, intuitive interface.

The auction platform’s reward for this approach was \$2 billion in mobile revenues in 2010. This clearly indicates that enabling easy transactions with products and services is best—and that mobile commerce is not a market that brands can afford to ignore.

Premium service and exclusivity

The free app by Fox Searchlight Pictures offers—alongside exclusive content—exclusive access to regular free screenings nationwide and the ability to purchase tickets.

Now luxury brands are beginning to realize that digital technology is uniquely capable of delivering and scaling up ubiquitous customer service and exclusive access—core attributes of true luxury—in a way that was impossible before.

Donna Karan’s app includes runway footage and regularly updated content, and encourages app users to forward a wish list to a personal shopper or “call now.”

With those lessons in mind, here are some guidelines for brands as they get serious with mobile in 2011:

Set a new standard for personalized customer service

Mobile technology is a tremendous opportunity to evolve the current superior customer service offered by luxury brands into a more personalized, immediate digital one.

Through mobile, brands can offer customized product recommendations and content, and invitations to exclusive events.

And, if properly leveraged, the possibilities for portable profiles and instantaneous service offered by mobile will augment the premium personal care offered by luxury brands.

Finally, mobile interactions provide brands with a more detailed knowledge of their consumers, enabling insights and innovations in this field down the road.

Pre-tail to create more informed purchases

Luxury brands should be cognizant of the growing popularity and prevalence of comparison shopping.

However, with a target demographic concerned more with quality and value than price, pre-tailing for luxury brands should comprise stories of product craftsmanship and brand heritage that educate and, of course, drive purchase intent.

Strive for the highest-quality experiences

All mobile efforts should uphold the prestige and heritage of the brand.

Popular mobile tactics such as coupons, QR codes and augmented reality must be filtered for suitability for this discriminating audience.

Luxury brands should use Foursquare and Facebook Places to surprise and delight customers, not to overload them with promotions and rewards programs.

Increase efforts in mobile commerce

McKinsey & Company forecasts that mobile commerce will generate \$50 billion in sales in the United States by 2014.

Luxury brands must begin laying the groundwork for this growth, especially since affluent customers are early adopters and already expect the best service and purchase experiences possible.

Ensure that all mobile efforts are multifaceted

Brands should combine SMS, mobile Web and native app offerings across devices. With this tactic, brands can reach every last user on the devices of their choice.

THIS YEAR, A GROWING number of luxury brands will be providing mobile experiences.

These should be simple, elegant and visually rich experiences that push creative and technical boundaries.

As such, they should uphold the rich heritage and integrity inherent in these brands, offering the ever-improving, personalized service that affluent customers expect.

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