COLUMNS

Luxury consumers blurring lines between offline, online and mobile

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By Javier Calvar

We often use the metaphor of a "journey" to describe how consumers build relationships with brands.

Like all metaphors, this one is imperfect, but it is extremely helpful in some respects. It helps us to define the stages of the growing relationship, from initial encounter to post-purchase contact. It asks us to consider the ways that a consumer's first experiences will affect her subsequent path. It suggests the possibility of roadblocks, detours, and delays that might drive the consumer towards alternative options.

Lining up
By thinking in terms of a journey, brands can better understand how their consumers come to know and love or leave them.

However, the metaphor fails in one significant respect: "journey" still suggests a straight line, and these days the relationships between brands and consumers are anything but linear. Rather, they have evolved into a complex and multilayered cycle.

Ecommerce, social media and mobile technology have erased any clear order of operations in the customer experience. The modern luxury consumer encounters brands in a plethora of different ways, and uses dozens of different channels to engage with them.

Even the point of purchase is shifting.

While the physical store is still the preferred purchase location for a large majority of luxury consumers, and it is not simply a matter of buying online versus offline.

True, ecommerce is already an increasingly popular option for cash-rich, time-poor consumers, while in-app purchases are opening up the possibility for shoppers to buy luxury without ever leaving the closed ecosystem of their favorite social network. Both of these trends are slowly increasing the percentage of luxury consumers who buy digitally.

However, as mobile platforms evolve to deliver a more engaging luxury experience, consumers will view them as an important and even necessary complement to the bricks-and-mortar boutique.

The store no longer will stand alone as an experience consumers will expect it to harmonize with their devices.

In this landscape, brands must understand that consumers no longer think in terms of online and offline, but rather "noline," seeing all touch points as a holistic part of the brand world.

All brands must be prepared engage with consumers with every kind of need at every touch point, and many already are.

However, creating a memorable experience requires more creativity.

The most successful brands will be those who are not merely present across all channels, but who actively participate in the omnichannel world in the same way their consumers do.

Ring of truth
Consider the example of Tiffany's Ring Finder application.

Unlike many brand attempts at creating their own mobile app, this is not simply a glorified ecommerce platform or a copy of the brand's Web site. It uses the unique features of a mobile device to engage and educate the consumer.

Not only does it introduce various styles and materials and allow consumers to narrow searches according to their preference, but it eases the shopping experience by using the touchscreen to allow users to find their ring-size using any ring they already have.

Thus, the customer can use the app to learn about the styles available, figure out what sort of ring they want, share and discuss options with friends, and contact a sales advisor to make a personal in-store appointment.

These features are particularly thoughtful considering that people buy wedding and engagement rings in a variety of ways. In some cases, a couple works together to select the perfect rings, in others one partner may want to surprise the other.

Whatever the couple's approach, Tiffany's platform makes the ring-shopping process more convenient than ever before, with all its features contributing to an overall positive, engaging branded experience.

Love it
Another excellent case study is Mulberry's "Qi Xi" campaign.

Qi Xi is a romantic holiday often called "Chinese Valentine's Day."

In 2015, Mulberry offered its WeChat followers worldwide the opportunity to write a special message to a loved one in advance.

On the holiday, the message was delivered in an e-card along with a coupon that could be redeemed for a personalized leather bracelet in participating stores not only in China, but in London, Paris, New York and Toronto.

This initiative is a perfect example not only of omnichannel engagement, but also of emotional engagement, as it induced a meaningful, relevant conversation with its target consumers.

In one campaign, Mulberry simultaneously connected its social media presence to its in-store experience and played an important part in thousands of couples' celebrations of love.

One can hardly imagine a better way for a brand to be remembered.

AS BEFITS most luxury brands, both of these efforts still aim to drive foot traffic to the store.

However, they go beyond sales by facilitating conversations, both between the brand and the consumer and between consumers about the brand through mobile technology.

The experience through the phone, whether on a social networking app or proprietary brand app, is integrated with the store experience. They are part of the same dialogue and the same engagement process.

This is what omnichannel really means: in a world where the luxury consumer journey has evolved into a cycle and consumers increasingly think "noline."

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