

MULTICHANNEL

How branded personalities add oomph to the label

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By RACHEL LAMB

Creative directors and founders from brands such as Dolce & Gabbana, Gucci, Marc Jacobs, Donna Karan, Ralph Lauren and Tory Burch incorporate blogs, Twitter accounts, personal photos and sections in mobile applications to showcase their unique personalities with luxury consumers interested in brands.

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Luxury Daily

These media outlets can provide a forum for brand executives to ask questions, share their personal views on culture and upload behind-the-scenes pictures and images for viewers to see. They also allow consumers to see a personality instead of just a blank, corporate persona.

“In an age where people want more from a brand, this is achieved through genuine behavior and being able to go behind the scenes,” said Kimmie Smith, designer, style expert and founder/editor in chief of Kitten Lounge, New York.

“When the brand leader provides personal insights in terms of inspirations for a brand, showing a dinner party he or she threw for friends or even something as personal as a book that they picked up and want you to know about, it provides more depth about the brand and adds a personal touch,” she said.

“The added value is that this leader is not removed from leading a life that is full of people and interactions. In fact, some of the random snippets that are shared can provide enrichment within the brand that they are associated [with] and they are seen as people who happen to be icons.”

Blogs

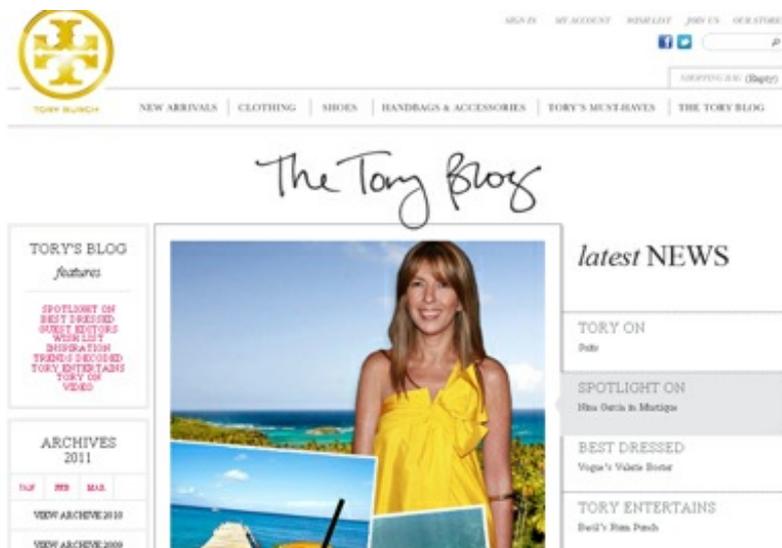
Whether it is a Tumblr or a section on a Web site, some brand leaders use blogs to connect with their core customer base.

“To make your company famous, you also need to make your CEO famous,” said Al Ries, president of marketing strategy consultancy Ries & Ries, Roswell, GA. “Consumers like to feel they are dealing with a person, not an anonymous corporation.”

For example, Donna Karan has an entire section on its ecommerce site dedicated to the brand’s founder called “Donna’s Journal.”

Donna’s Journal has updated journal entries, things Donna loves, women that inspire her, personal interviews with celebrities, the brand’s design process, Ms. Karan’s philanthropical work and a section where consumers can ask her questions. The blog is accessed at <http://www.donnakaran.com/donnas-journal>.

Apparel and accessories designer Tory Burch has article clippings, her personal thoughts on style and offers music and entertainment choices for the brand’s customers to view on her personal blog.



Tory Burch's blog

Ms. Burch often mentions the brand’s merchandise in her blogs. She shows how she pairs Tory Burch items together and how the apparel and accessories are matching up with the current trends.

Indeed, **Ms. Burch’s blog** serves as a platform for consumers to get to know her as a person as well as introduce articles of clothing on the brand’s ecommerce site.

Other branded blogs have their own separate Web sites.

For example, Stefano Gabbana, cofounder and creative director of Dolce & Gabbana, recently launched his own Tumblr account.



Stefano Gabbana's Tumblr

The blog at <http://stefanogabbana.tumblr.com> has Mr. Gabbana's personal pictures, videos and a list of his Tweets. The pictures are colorfully captioned and add insight into Mr. Gabbana's personality, allowing consumers to see him as a person and adding a personal touch to the brand.

Ralph Lauren also has a media section on its site, [RL TV](#), where chief marketing officer David Lauren interviews celebrities and gives snippets into the Ralph Lauren lifestyle.

Social media

According to Kitten Lounge's Ms. Smith, social media is the best way for a brand to engage with its customers.

Luxury brands' creative directors are using social as a medium to share their personal thoughts and spark conversations with customers, while also creating a forum for questions.

For example, Marc Jacobs publishes personal pictures from the designer's trips around the world. In addition, cofounder Robert Duffy frequently posts family videos and pictures.



Marc Jacobs and Robert Duffy have personal videos and pictures on the brand's Facebook page

Twitter is also a platform for consumers to get to know luxury brand executives.

Mr. Gabbana has his own Twitter account. In fact, he has more followers than the official brand Twitter handle: 88,215 followers on his account versus 83,566 on the corporate Twitter handle.

Mr. Gabbana Tweets at fellow executives in the fashion industry, talks to consumers and provides anecdotes and thoughts as he goes about his daily activities. He also includes behind-the-scenes images and videos of important fashion events such as the New York Fashion Week.

“Relationships are about people,” said Chris Ramey, president of Affluent Insights, Miami. “In our celebrity-driven world, knowing from whence the brands come is important in creating apostles for the brand.

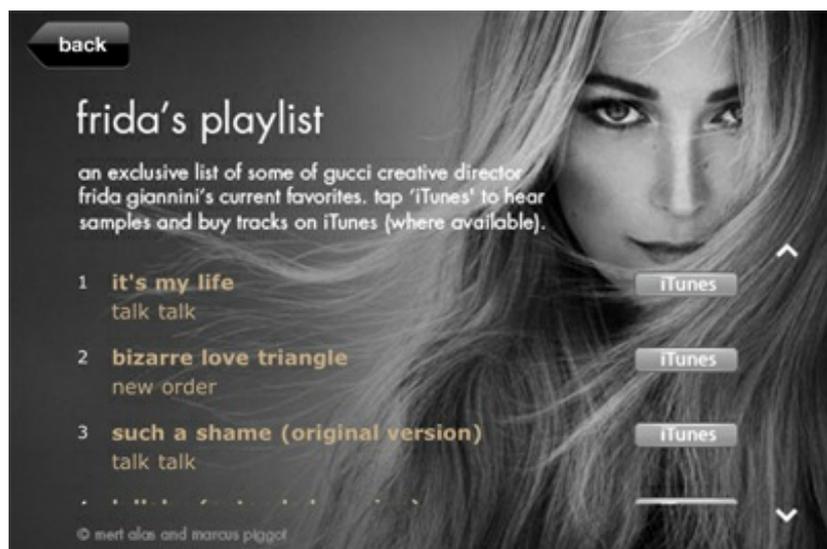
“This is particularly so in the luxury segment where the brand is about the eye and taste of the creator,” he said. “Seeing personal pictures [and] knowing their likes and dislikes all help understand who they are and how their values fit with your own followers’ values.”

In addition, insight into a brand’s personal lives introduces customers to peek into the exclusive world of the luxury industry.

Most customers will not have a chance to go to Fashion Week, but they can see what is going on from a brand’s perspective if a well-known celebrity Tweets about it.

Some luxury brands find ways to connect using mobile applications.

For instance, Gucci's iPad app provides exclusive content including creative director Frida Giannini's current music playlists.



Gucci's iPhone app featuring Frida Giannini's personal playlist

Furthermore, Donna Karan's mobile app has many of the features that consumers can find on the Web site version of Donna's Journal right on their smartphones.

What can go wrong?

That said, there are disadvantages in letting a person be the face of a company.

An obvious example is Dior former creative director John Galliano's indiscretions during Paris Fashion Week (see story). If the face of the company is accused of unsavory or illegal activities, it could harm the brand's reputation.

This tactic can also be damaging if consumers become confused.

"The Dolce & Gabbana situation illustrates one of the pitfalls," Mr. Ries said. "Every company or brand should have a single spokesperson.

"It's confusing when there are multiple people speaking on behalf of a company," he said.

If that is not enough, the Dolce & Gabbana founders are being accused of tax evasion by the Italian authorities.

And while social media outlets such as Twitter and Facebook are great channels to engage with customers, brand management should still be careful when using them.

"When people have more access to someone there is always the issue of privacy as well as maintaining the legacy of a brand," Kitten Lounge's Ms. Smith said. "A random tweet can be a liability to a brand if the leader sends out a rant, is aligned with a view that is counter to a company's standpoint or simply takes images that could be questionable.

"As a member of the brand, the question becomes how genuine can a person be as these moments of shared access are held at a higher level of scrutiny," she said.

"In essence, those who are able to have positive accounts may find that they have to hold

back at certain moments in their communication as a means to maintain the integrity over the brand as opposed to sharing what they feel.”

Final Take

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