

JEWELRY

Re-establishing the identity of the real Swiss watch

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The Swiss watch industry is no longer the Swiss watch industry.

Or so says veteran watch industry reporter and author Michael Clerizo.

Mr. Clerizo paints a picture of an industry ruled by corporations: imposters and frauds to the proud history of this national craft, crowding out authentic rivals with their unfettered budgets.

For Mr. Clerizo, the Swiss watch industry reflects the corporate domination of the German car industry.

Volkswagen owns Audi, Porsche, Bentley, Bugatti, Lamborghini, SEAT and Skoda.

In the same way, the big fashion houses have bought into Swiss watches.

Five conglomerates together control over half of the retail market for watches. LVMH alone owns Tag Heuer, Zenith, Hublot, Bulgari, Dior and Louis Vuitton.

Mr. Clerizo's argument throws up a very interesting point for luxury marketers: defining identity.

Everyone involved has at least a tenuous claim to Swiss authenticity, so how do niche Swiss watchmakers reclaim their identity from "group luxury"? We have some suggestions:

Turning a whisper into a shout

Traditionally, niche luxury has prided itself on "whispering." But in a world where big brands are digitally galvanizing themselves for louder communications, the niche approach needs updating.

Niche watches remain barely audible in the hope that it creates mystery, allure and secrecy.

In the wake of Brexit and the collapse in the value of the pound, serious collectors are gravitating to London. This offers bespoke and niche brands the perfect audience and environment in which to make their first introduction. But unless they increase the volume, they risk getting drowned out.

Re-educate

There is no real understanding amongst consumers of the difference between "group luxury" and "niche luxury." This is our challenge as marketers.

Stories need to be crafted, history needs to be evoked, and emotion needs to be viscerally felt.

Aesthetic alone is not enough. Audiences must understand the unique nature and particularities of each iconic creation.

Perhaps Burberry's new campaign offers a path to this desired destination. Its cinematic rendition of the life of Thomas Burberry achieves a perfect balance, demonstrating the provenance of the brand in trench warfare and Antarctic expeditions, but also alluding to a more salacious and secretive life than a stiff trench coat at first brings to mind.

With some of the most idiosyncratic and intricate histories in the world, independent Swiss watch houses have tales just as fascinating to tell.

Focus on the real

To make any marketing effective and resonant, a brand must make sure that any output is a reflection of the real world.

Niche watchmakers need to champion who wears their watches, enjoys their watches, and delve into these real peoples' lives and experiences. By embedding this minutiae into the fabric of their activity, their brand communications can become more meaningful and penetrating.

Reclaim selfhood

The Swiss-made brand has been devalued. It is time to find something new to say, or something more pared back.

Niche Swiss selfhood is characterized by its ability to differentiate itself from the mass market. This will not change.

It is also imperative, when thinking about self, to reflect on why people valued the Swiss-made brand to start with, or why they would choose "niche" luxury over "group" luxury.

Arguably, it is the desire for personalized experiences that drives niche-hunters.

Drawing out the notion of self, for example via provenance and history, is also a way to attract tourist collectors, especially from the Chinese and American markets.

WE HAVE no doubt that the Swiss-made watch still has a strong appeal, but the Brexit-fueled boom risks commoditizing the concept. Commodity detracts from art, from charm, from eternity.

For niche Swiss watchmakers, it is a good moment to have a stronger voice than ever.

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1 thought on "Re-establishing the identity of the real Swiss watch"

1. costa papa says:

November 29, 2016 at 9:44 am

i think the challenge has little to do with Brexit and more to do with Switzerland and watch production. Famous for its perfect train schedules, clean cities and roads, attention to details and most famously for its banks, meticulously managing accounts, keeping secrets. with the various financial crises the country has most likely lost its luster. whereas the Hayek family changed the production system from consortium and the idea of Swiss made was lost to brands

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