

MARKETING

Luxury must take ownership of brand story, or someone else will

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Saint Laurent's negatively received fall 2017 changed the brand's story

By DANNY PARISI

NEW YORK The perception of what constitutes a luxury lifestyle is evolving, and both retailers and brands need to take hold of how their narrative is conveyed before they are left behind by the changing times.

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During a April 27 session at the 7th annual International Gold Conference, hosted by Initiatives in Art & Culture, two industry experts with deep knowledge of the luxury sector, LuxeIntelligence's Andrea Hansen and Hedda Schupak, editor of **Centurion**, spoke about the transforming nature of high-end retail. The consensus of the talk was that as things are constantly changing, brands need to own their contextual vision before another story is told for them by unaffiliated parties.

"Everything about retail today is centered on the evolving perceptions of luxury," said Ms. Hansen, founder of **LuxeIntelligence**, NY. "What the consumers sees as luxury is different than what we are trained to market.

"We all have to understand that," she said. "We have to apply a different set of values."

Owning the story

In the modern market, perceptions of luxury are constantly changing. Consumers demographics are becoming more fragmented and consumers themselves are increasingly particular about personalized content and products.

This is especially true for the jewelry world, where consumers desire something that has some special meaning attached to it, something one-of-a-kind. The thing that makes luxury luxury, according to the panelists, is that when you buy a luxury product, you know it is unique and rare, it is something that not just anybody has the opportunity to own.

Consumers forge personal connections with their luxury products, and by extension with the brands themselves.

This ties into one of the most important aspects of modern luxury marketing: owning your story.

Brands need to be in control of the narrative around their image. Things move so fast now that if brands are not telling their own story, someone else will and it will likely be less than ideal.

Additionally, consumers are beginning to think of luxury as more experiential. This is exemplified by what LuxeIntelligence's Ms. Hansen calls "the rental lifestyle."

Where before, customers would have to make huge investments to experience a luxury lifestyle, now it is possible to rent it in pieces, borrowing clothes from Rent the Runway, riding in Ubers and staying in Airbnbs instead of buying clothing, owning cars and staying in high-end hotels.

"You can live a life of luxury without owning it," LuxeIntelligence's Ms. Hansen said. "I just went to this great wine bar, they use a needle to extract a sip of a \$50,000 dollar bottle.

"You can sip but you do not have to buy," she said.

Brand control

This last note about how brands need to be in control of their own message is an important one and examples of this going wrong abound in the luxury world.

Most recently, Dolce & Gabbana came under fire for an insensitively designed shoe and had to deal with their "story" being turned into one of negativity and snobbery rather than of refinement or light heartedness.

For fall 2017, Dolce & Gabbana decorated a pair of tennis-style sneakers with studs, sequins and phrases written in marker and pen. But, one of the marker-written phrases says, "I'm thin & gorgeous" in capital letters.

One half of Dolce & Gabbana, designer Stefano Gabbana, shared an illustration of the shoe on his personal Instagram account. From there, his followers and news outlets voiced concern over the message Dolce & Gabbana's design was sending to its female consumer base ([see story](#)).

Similarly, Saint Laurent found itself in hot water over a campaign featuring women in degrading poses.



Stefano Gabbana shared an illustration of this D&G sneaker, sparking backlash

The Kering-owned fashion house Saint Laurent Paris found itself under fire from advertising watchdogs due to the perception of its campaign.

France's Autorite de Regulation Professionnelle de la Publicite (ARPP) has receive upwards of 70 complaints regarding advertisements for Saint Laurent's latest campaign. Critics of the ads feel that the imagery is "degrading" to the featured model and has undercurrents of sexism and overt sexualization ([see story](#)).

While Saint Laurent was clearly going for something titillating, its campaign ended up associated with unsavory notions of exploitation.

To that point, brands need to tell a compelling story that speaks to their consumers without alienating or leaving too much room for others to tell their story for them.

"The first thing to remember is that if you don't grab and own your narrative, someone else will tell your story and they wont do it right," [Centurion's](#) Ms. Schupak said. "First and foremost you have to take control of that."