

COLUMNS

## How luxury brands use subtle signals to speak with an increasingly savvy clientele

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Brands build their luxury status and earn international recognition through brand storytelling that builds the links between their different products and gives an idea of a complete lifestyle. These stories are communicated through a complex system of codes or signals: present in almost every product, these signals give the impression of a complete environment.

Throughout much of the 20th century, many of the strongest luxury brands relied on what we call "loud signals" including monograms such as the Louis Vuitton LV, logos such as Prada or even recognizable prints including the Burberry plaid.

More recently, the democratization of luxury brands and the rise of accessible luxury mean that these loud signals are becoming increasingly visible and losing their luxury cachet. At the same time, luxury consumers are evolving and looking for more discreet ways of expressing themselves.

Of course, signals are still important to consumers after all, if you are going to spend a substantial amount of money on a product, you want that purchase to be recognized. The difference today is that luxury consumers are looking to convey this to a smaller, initiated inner circle. Subtlety and discretion are key.

Many luxury brands are taking these new types of behavior into consideration as they look to reduce their use of loud signals, and focus on what we call subtle signals.

A subtle signal can take many forms:

It could be a color: such as Tiffany blue, or Herms orange

An emblem: such Cartier's recurring panther motif, or the Chanel camellia flower

A specific material: Balenciaga studs primarily seen on its bags

Or a way of using that material: Bottega Veneta's interlinking leather intrecciato is one of the primary markers for a brand that has never used a logo. Their motto is: "when your own initials are enough."

These signals can also change over time: a brand might chose to focus on one code more than the others, drop a code that is not relevant any more, or develop a new one. Identifying the right codes to develop often involves looking through the archives and choosing a reference that best suits attitudes of contemporary customers.

Many brands have multiple codes. Take the Dior brand, for example: Christian Dior grew up in Granville, Normandy, where the dominant colors were grey and pink. His home there was surrounded by a beautiful garden, was furnished in the Napoleon III-style and frequently decorated with vases of lilies.

These historical references explain why the dominant colors in Dior stores today are grey and pink and feature Napoleon III-style furnishings and why one of the most recognizable of Dior's subtle signal is the lily.

Indeed, the most successful "subtle signals" have two common characteristics:

They are unique: the Red sole of the Louboutin shoe is so unique a feature that many consumers can recognize the product without seeing a logo.

And they reflect the brand's heritage: Christian Dior also liked the stitching used on the chairs at his very first fashion show in 1947. This Cannage stitching has since become a powerful subtle signal by drawing from the life of the brand's creator.

Today, even those brands with really strong loud signals are actively trying to downplay them. But brands need to familiarize their customers with subtle signals by exposing them in a variety of ways.

For example, after choosing the Serpenti a snake shape as a subtle signal, Bulgari slowly began to create the link between the brand and the emblem: customers might have noticed an actress wearing a serpenti-shaped bracelet at a red carpet event, or subconsciously taken note of the serpenti-shaped Christmas light installation put on the flagship store.

Christian Dior again is yet again a great example of this. Dior store interiors are decorated in such a way as to reflect the style, art and elegance that he appreciated in his personal life. Store exteriors gently remind consumers of the brand's subtle signals some feature a cannage motif, and others, images of the brand's signature products such as the tailleur bar.

Louis Vuitton is another striking example of a brand with a powerful monogram that is making a transition to focus on more subtle signals.

In its more recent shows, it is clear that Louis Vuitton is trying to reduce its use of the traditional LV monogram and damier prints and focus on subtle signals. It has chosen a more subtle muse in Michelle Williams and everything about its more recent marketing campaigns point to this trend: its more subtle tone, color palate and the modern reinterpretation of the LV monogram and logo.

Louis Vuitton's retail concepts are focusing more on travel, which is a very important part of its DNA, by featuring another important subtle signal: the Louis Vuitton trunk.

LUXURY IS GOING back to its roots inconspicuous consumption and these subtle signals are going to be an increasingly big part of this.

*Subtle signals in the luxury business*

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