

MARKETING

Consumers pulled toward brands that take a stand

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Chlo was founded on the principles of freedom, lightness and femininity. Image credit: Chlo

By JEN KING

BRUSSELS Luxury brands are in the business of selling dreams and aspirations, but should they also be responsible for standing up for societal issues?

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During "The Politics of Luxury" session at The New York Times' International Luxury Conference Nov. 13, panelists from three luxury houses discussed if it is best for a brand to remain neutral on hot-button issues. While it may be easier to not take a public stance on or against certain issues, millennials' consciousness is likely to cause brands to make their position known or risk losing a key demographic's business.

"When I first read the topic, it was so easy to say, We're a brand, we want to sell dreams and aspirations, and it's not our jobs to go into politics," said Jonathan Akeroyd, CEO of [Versace](#).

"But the more you think about it, and more you study it, there's definitely an expectation now, even more than ever, that our customers expect us to have some kind of political statement about who we are," he said. "Looking through the history of our brand, over the years, we've made some political statements."

Be bold

In light of so many issues being on consumers' minds, Vanessa Friedman, fashion director and chief fashion critic at The New York Times, kicked off the conversation by asking if it is possible for a brand to take a neutral stance.

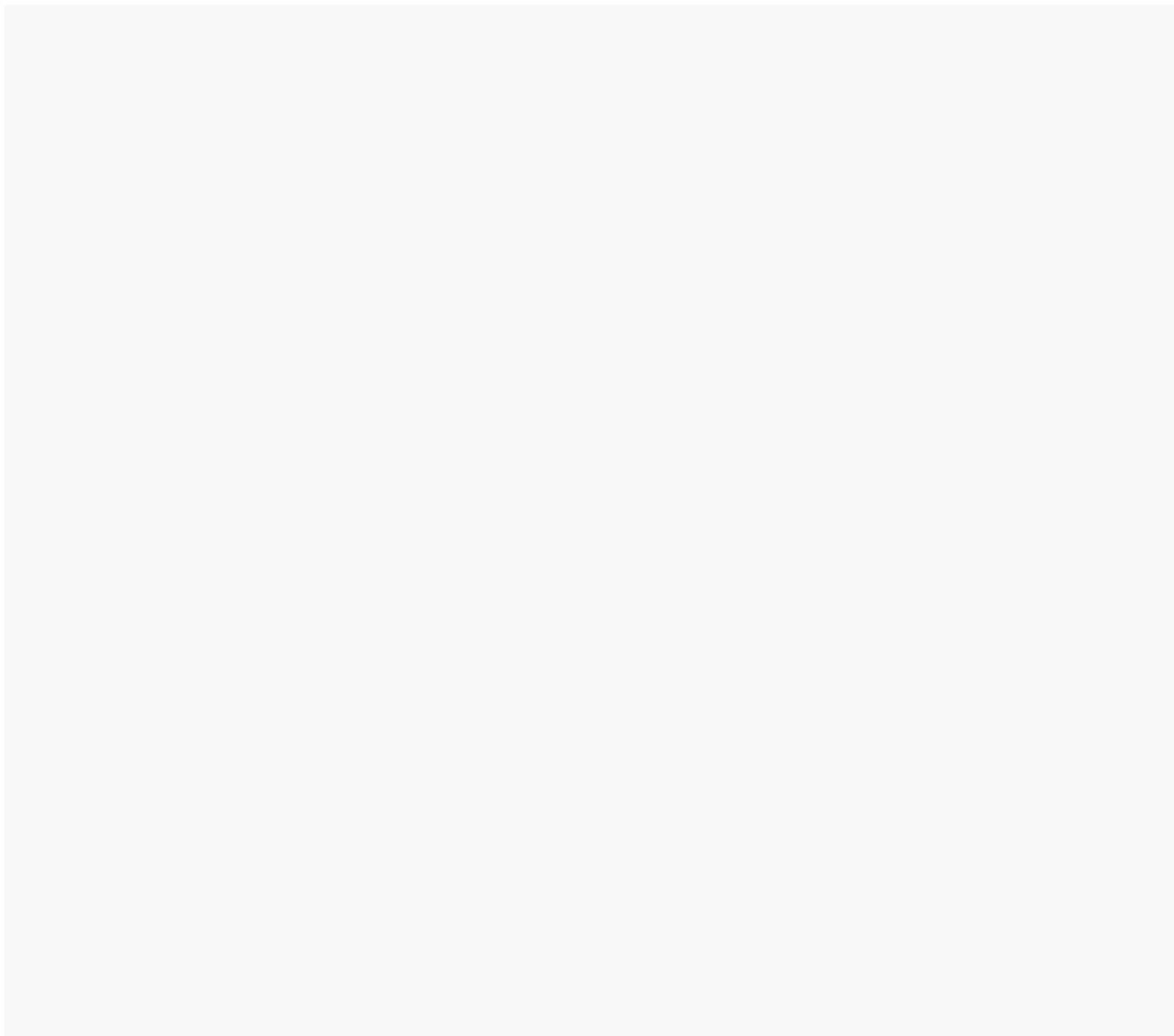
The panel agreed that, while partially political, sustainability is a much easier position to take as a brand, but the panelists were divided if luxury should be active and vocal in discussions of politics.

Versace's Mr. Akeroyd explained that his brand has made political statements over the years because it was a response to and resonated with the message put in motion by Gianni Versace.

As recently as January, Donatella Versace has embraced social media to tell her journey because the fashion community has not always taken her seriously after Mr. Versace's death ([see story](#)).

Through telling her narrative, Ms. Versace's journey resonates with the brand, thus strengthening its ability to

empower and speak to similarly strong, bold female consumers ([see story](#)).



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A post shared by Donatella Versace (@donatella_versace) on Nov 1, 2017 at 9:47am PDT

At the most basic level, a brand represents a values set, but those sentiments must not jeopardize probability because it is not a brand's responsibility to make political statements.

Jean-Marc Loubier, president and CEO, First Heritage Brands and executive chairman of [Delvaux](#), stressed that while it is easy to react, a brand has a responsibility, not only to consumers but also to its employees.

Chlo's CEO Geoffroy de la Bourdonnaye agreed with Mr. Loubier that a safer business strategy is to remain neutral on polarizing issues.

"[It is] just like not taking a stance on religion, it's not our role," he said. Instead, Chlo's brand values aligns closely with that of Versace, by running on a platform that encourages women to be free and be themselves.

Mr. de la Bourdonnaye stressed that this is an important promise for women around the world, regardless of being left or right, and no matter the country from which they originate. The "Chlo Girl" mantra speaks to human values and society, not necessarily politics.

Consistent vision

As millennials mature to become the largest consumer segment to buy luxury goods, brands will need to take

political stances to ensure relevancy and to be an active part of society's conversations.

During the 2016 election for United States president, fashion designer Marc Jacobs publicly announced his support of then-presidential candidate Hillary Clinton by designing a T-shirt for the former secretary of state's campaign.

Celebrities are often candid regarding who they plan to endorse for presidential elections, understanding that their influence may help sway enthusiasts in the direction of their preferred candidate. Marc Jacobs was just one of three designers, which included Tory Burch and Public School, to use fashion to speak to whom they wanted to see in the White House ([see story](#)).

Also, in May 2017, jeweler Tiffany & Co. called on President Donald Trump to keep the U.S. in the Paris Climate Agreement through a social media campaign.

In its message, the jeweler wrote, "We're still in for bold climate action. Please keep the U.S. in the Paris Climate Agreement. The disaster of climate change is too real, and the threat to our planet and to our children is too great." The U.S. is now the only country in the world not included in the climate agreement ([see story](#)).

The New York Times' Ms. Friedman explained that brands, especially those in the luxury category, may be able to sway consumer opinion if a stance is taken on a particular political topic.

Outerwear brands such as The NorthFace and REI, for instance, have seen this through their environmental commitments. These brands stand for a clear agenda, one that has proven to pull consumers toward them because their opinions and values align.

Essentially, there needs to be a consistent vision for the brand and how it sees the world, which does not have to be political, but it plays into a brand's long-term value as perceived by consumers.

"The United Kingdom, France and Italy are not givens," said First Heritage Brands and Delvaux's Mr. Loubier. "They are a vision with strengths and weaknesses and brands are the same.

"Brands are responsible, insist on value and a relevant brand vision, and vision of the world," he said. "It is not political, it is about long-term value."