

COLUMNS

Hard sell will not sell: Brands need new approach for luxury consumers

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Modern consumers have less mental capacity to absorb marketing messages, as they are constantly being inundated with them. Yet they know when they are being marketed to.

It is increasingly difficult to get consumers' attention, and even harder to hold it. Nowhere is this truer than in the luxury sector. Yet so much luxury advertising continues to take an out-of-date tone in relation to the audiences it is trying to reach.

Face it

Despite how they are typically portrayed, luxury consumers are not patronizingly discerning, but their interest is hard to win and easy to lose.

Luxury purchases might be a snap decision, or they might involve a long period of advance deliberation, but either way it is likely the end point will only be arrived at after a long-term build up of affinity with the brand in question.

Establishing trust takes time, which is often what stops luxury brands from taking risks with their advertising, or stops them from advertising at all.

The problem then is, how do you launch a new product? Stay relevant? Keep up with the competition? Establishing genuine connections is the answer.

Whatever the nature of the interaction taking place, it is crucial your audience walks away feeling something as a result of the experience. They need to have a deep relationship with your brand, having truly engaged with it, whether they have just left the car showroom after making a purchase, or merely browsed your Web site for a short time.

Advertising understandably has a historic obsession with the call to action, but in this space, focusing on demonstrating a cultural connection is more likely to generate the desired response. That means advertising that links to your brand story in an authentic way.

It is not about proactively driving a purchase decision, but providing consumers with additional, useful information

at an appropriate moment. It might also be inspiring, either connecting viewers with the brand in a deeply emotive way, or simply conveying a feel-good factor.

New, exciting interactive technology is developing at a fantastic rate, and brands are naturally keen to use it. "Useful" and "appropriate" are the key words here, and if it is not both you can end up doing more harm than good. In-your-face messages are a big turn-off to modern consumers, whether you are talking about luxury or another sector entirely.

When it comes to interactivity in this space, it is important to take a soft-sell approach, one that allows consumers to decide for themselves how much additional information they want. You cannot make accurate assumptions about what that will be, what matters is enabling them to decide for themselves and demonstrating respect for whatever their decision may be. That is what luxury audiences are looking for, and they appreciate it when they find it.

Making it click

When the time comes to make a purchase, just like when it comes to looking for information, consumers need to feel they are making that decision for themselves.

In luxury, the common user journey is not to look it up, then click-to-buy.

We spend a lot of time mapping consumer journeys for brands, and there are countless considerations that come into play. Even decisions that feel linear, for example see a car ad, research, forecourt to buy actually contain multiple, less obvious, points along the way that might lead the consumer away from your brand.

In the world of cars that might be the point at which their petrol-head dad suggests an alternative they should consider, or the moment when a hard-sell forecourt salesman puts them off entirely.

That is why it is so important to map out all the possible considerations in detail.

Once that is done, it is possible to track back identifying key points along the journey, from when they first heard about the product to what led them from there to the all-important purchase moment. You can then make smarter marketing decisions, even if that means diverting your television spend towards retraining your forecourt staff.

Building a brand story has a vital role to play in helping consumers move along this path.

It is true that luxury consumers have higher expectations, but that is less about them as individuals and more about the high price point of the product they are buying, and the multitude of choices they have. That is why there are no easy shortcuts to getting it right.

In addition to this, luxury goods are more accessible than ever before, meaning the way you market a product can have as big an impact on whether it is considered a luxury item as the product itself.

It is no good just talking about luxury, you must demonstrate it. From how you talk about the product or service, to how you portray it visually, to everything in between.

In such a competitive landscape it is surprising how frequently you still see advertising gone wrong, via content that simply does not deliver.

Failing to look for, and secure, a space you can own within a consumer's head can be fatal. Glossy is not good enough your competitors are all doing that too.

Content can be beautiful, but still fail to secure that all-important space within your target consumers' minds.

It is the brands that are brave enough to be bold that win this battle.

A considered, discerning approach is not the way to go. There is nothing distinctive about it, and luxury consumers will spot that faster than anyone. It is a common trap, one into which clothing brands, in particular, are frequently guilty of falling.

GENERIC IS OVER. Brands do not have to play it safe, and they should not. But there is nowhere to hide with this.

It is impossible to be daring while cutting corners. High-quality content, with genuine cultural authority, is key. The hard sell will not sell, but that will.

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