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What struggling fashion houses can learn from DTC brands

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Building a fashion brand today requires more than just great product. It requires experimentation, personalization and leveraging the right kind of influence.

Most direct-to-consumer (DTC) brands innately understand the importance of these marketing tactics, and the success of these tactics has, inevitably, cut into the market share of some of our most storied brands.

But luxury brands and fashion houses can adopt some of their tricks while leaning into their legacy and keep DTCs from stealing their thunder or market share.

Behaving like a DTC can effectively engage audiences, build trust and personalize the customer experience.

Experiment with experiences

DTC brands do not automatically adopt traditional practices. Instead, they constantly experiment with touch points, paths to purchase and communications.

Let us look at DTC brand Glossier, a great example of an experimenter.

When faced with the natural barrier that prevents consumers from buying makeup online, which is the fact that women like to see what makeup looks like on their face before committing to a purchase, Glossier developed a digital tone matcher.

The tool allows customers to upload a photo of themselves and Glossier will match them with the correct shade product. This consumer-focused experimentation is a great example of one key DTC marketing mantra: empower the consumer.

But DTC brands are not the only ones experimenting with the customer in mind.

Take Galeries Lafayette, a billion-dollar Parisian brand born in 1895 that just opened a new store on the Champs-Elysées. The fashion brand calls this new location a "retail laboratory" where a lot of the experimentation taking place

will focus on hyper customization, such as stylist avatars that help visitors to the Web site find the best pieces to fit their distinct personal styles.

As a storied brand with a strong legacy and brand advocacy, Galeries Lafayette is also practicing new tricks it learned from the ever-growing DTC market.

Designing for "The New Protagonist"

DTCs are the ultimate when it comes to customer service. This is mainly because they figured out how to make the consumer the star of all of their efforts and campaigns, whether featuring their consumers on social such as Glossier did, or reimagining the shopping experience in the way Warby Parker did.

The consumer is "the new protagonist" in all DTC brand stories and now expect to be the star of their show. And there is no greater example of "the new protagonist" than the luxury space.

This is a person that can have everything because she has the means. More than the average customer, she expects to be catered to because she does not have a price barrier between herself and the service she desires. She will lose interest in products and minimize brand allegiance if you are not treating her as the star of the show.

This might require letting go of some older ways of working and adopting practices that seem antithetical to a luxury brand's DNA.

Look at Michelin, a brand built on the idea of elite services intended for only a few. The 130-year-old brand recently moved from being the world's culinary judge and jury to becoming a digital consumer tool when it bought an online reservations system company and positioned itself to take on Yelp.

Influence the right way

In an interview on Kara Swisher's podcast, Emily Weiss said on the topic of Glossier's POV on influencers, "Every single person is an influencer." And while that certainly has to be the position of all brands in this age of "the new protagonist," DTC brands often also partner with influencers to leverage the power of word-of-mouth marketing.

Luxury consumers have the potential to be influenced by others, but using influencers to interact with luxury consumers must happen more discreetly.

Unlike any other customer, the luxury shopper relies on word-of-mouth marketing from peers, because she is looking for cues within her social class. So, if you are a luxury brand, how do you connect with these hard to connect with people? Through micro-influencers.

Luxury has its own stables of powerful and very selective influencers such as Giovanna Engelbert and Lauren Santa Domingo.

An influencer such as Aimee Song is not going to influence a luxury buyer, but Amanda Brooks might.

Reaching the luxury nano-influencer is a different challenge as well, since the people who connect with luxury consumers will not join your brand for the swag or the money.

Luxury influencers cannot be engaged in the same way as somebody working with a brand such as Away they do not need one-off samples, but that means they are even more likely to authentically support your brand if they want to promote it.

Beyond access to customer data, insights and speed to market, DTC brands have built brand loyalty by establishing consumer trust with a high share-of-voice.

By adopting these pillars of trust, transparency and personalization, legacy brands can now leverage the best of both worlds as storied brands that have melded their best practices with the new tricks learned from the ever-growing DTC market.

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