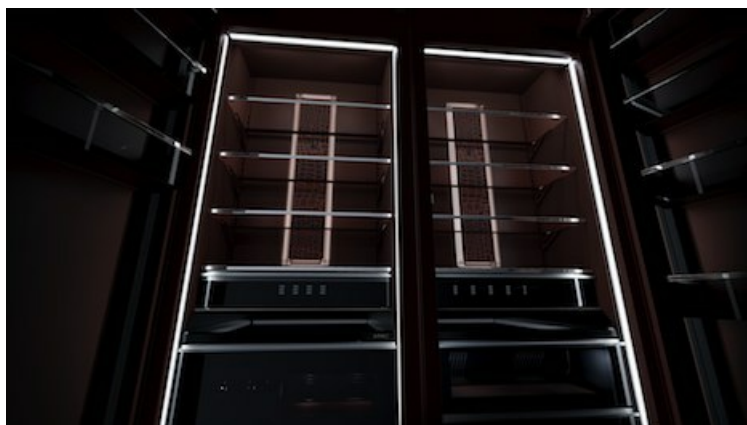


HOME FURNISHINGS

Home brands need to evolve to match consumers' customization cravings

August 23, 2019



JennAir Burlesque Refrigerator. Image credit: JennAir

By SARAH JONES

Function has become a given in luxury home goods, placing greater emphasis on brands who can differentiate themselves through design and flexibility.

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According to a webinar hosted by *Luxury Daily* on Aug. 21, customization is one of the most important aspects for buyers, as they prefer brands that can give them options to suit their personal tastes and express themselves. Technology and media are democratizing interior design and giving consumers more access to tools and services, but they are also fueling consumers' disinformation and confusion, calling for education and relationship building.

"We are [targeting] an emerging affluent modern luxury consumer and what we're seeing is that they expect an elevated experience," said Jon Hall, product and marketing director for **JennAir**. "They expect things that feel different.

"They expect this experience to surround them, be very immersive, and we can do that through customization and digital enhancements," he said.

Personal touch

One of the key themes today in home furnishings and design is customization.

JennAir's Mr. Hall pointed to a Deloitte study that showed that about half of consumers are looking for custom items. This research, coupled with Ipsos findings that showed that 80 percent of affluent consumers feel the definition of luxury is changing, is guiding the brand towards more personalization capabilities.

The appliance label's recent product launches have sought to give interior designers, architects and kitchen designers tools to create spaces that reflect who their clients are. This includes limited-edition pieces and design details such as leather refrigerator doors for more custom touches.

JennAir's "Mannequin" ad

The brand has also changed how its showrooms are configured, taking out cabinetry and stripping the displays

down to just its appliances to enable designers and their clients to imagine more style possibilities. Digital platforms within the showrooms display configuration options, further expanding on the breadth of what can be shown and serving as an educational tool.

As another example of customization, [Architectural Digest Pro](#) editor Katy Olson mentioned Samsung's line of bespoke refrigerators. With numerous materials, shapes and colors available, the appliances lead with flexibility and self-expression rather than function.

"Millennials want to share who they are via their homes or via their offices," Ms. Olson said. "They want spaces that reflect who they feel they are, and that's why something as simple as a refrigerator can be a method of communicating their inner self to the outside world."



Samsung's refrigerator line comes in a number of colors and style options. Image credit: Samsung

Beyond personalization in products, Ms. Olson noted that tailored customer service is also important, including for trade professionals. Interior designers want perks such as discounts, and building relationships with these individuals is important for home brands.

Another trait that affluents are seeking is quality. Chris Ramey, president of [The Home Trust](#), noted that what company a brand keeps can often impact consumer perception.

Not only does this impact a brand's positioning, but aspects such as what type of piano is in the living room or what make of appliances are in a kitchen can also change how potential buyers feel about a home's value.

Since home furnishings are not a category that is purchased frequently, Mr. Ramey said there is low brand awareness and passion for particular brands.

A recent case study by Mode argued that luxury home brands need to clarify their identities and positioning to successfully stand out in an increasingly competitive market. Many premium and luxury home brands have room to improve how they present themselves to consumers on- and offline ([see story](#)).

While its products often get into homes through interior designers' work, JennAir is building relationships with the end users through technology. Connected appliances allow consumers to ask specialists questions with the touch of a button or get recipe suggestions and tips on how to best use their appliances.

Making an impression on consumers themselves is even more important as interior design information becomes more accessible.

Mr. Ramey noted that consumers often go online to look themselves, putting pressure on brands to educate them on what separates a luxury product from a lower quality a less costly alternative.

Interior design services are also being democratized. Whereas only the elite used to be able to hire help in decorating, now social media stylists and design in a box services are giving a wider audience of consumers access to design tips.

Ms. Olson sees this trend as potentially priming younger consumers to work with a professional interior designer in the future once they have more funds.

"Designers as the whole are under attack, and it's clearly an industry that's being disrupted by technology," Mr.

Ramey said. "It's increasingly difficult for designers to run business as they normally have, because it's too easy for consumers to go online and get design services there.

"And what's happening is that the majority of designers are moving down-market looking for business, but it doesn't help the brand," he said. "And luxury is all about the brand."

Bridging technology and interior design, **Luxury Portfolio International** president Stephanie Anton brought up Homepolish, a digitally-based service that matches designers with clients. Homepolish handles aspects such as billing and product management, which helps keep the cost lower than it would otherwise be.

[View this post on Instagram](#)

If you invited us to a BYOB dinner party here, we might show up with binoculars instead of booze. The wallpaper is to blame. We just want to keep a close eye on that perfectly perched bluebird in case it has any potential plans for aviation. Consider it a new breed of birdwatching for the interior-inclined one we can definitely get behind. Design by @bnrinteriors / Photo by @seanlitchfield

A post shared by Homepolish (@homepolish) on Aug 18, 2019 at 4:03pm PDT

Instagram post from Homepolish

Millennials may not be splurging yet on home goods, but the appetite for design is there. AD's push to provide budget-friendly content boosted traffic from a millennial audience seven times over, leading it to launch an offshoot dubbed Clever ([see story](#)).

Real estate review

Ms. Anton noted that the property market is seeing an impact from a number of external factors, including the stock market and inventory availability.

Until about 2018, Chinese buyers were investing a lot in the United States, but this has seen a drop off amid the trade war between the two nations. Canada's tax law changes have also driven Chinese buyers to look elsewhere, such as Singapore, Vietnam and Australia.

In recent data from Knight Frank, Vancouver saw the steepest year-over-year decline in prices at 13.6 percent, and a drop of 2.4 percent during the last quarter ([see story](#)).

The political uprising in Hong Kong is also due to impact real estate. Ms. Anton said that there has been more interest in places such as Malaysia, which offer attractive visas.

Beyond geopolitical trends, globalization is impacting home design, as consumers get inspiration from travel and social media. This has created a phenomenon in which houses in different parts of the globe are beginning to look the same.

Ms. Anton is also seeing the high-end buyer be less willing to renovate, as they show a growing preference for turnkey properties.

Reality television has created unreal expectations for interior design and renovations, while also making the home selling process look simpler than it is in actuality.

"Even when the market is hot, it's not an easy process," Ms. Anton said. "And it takes someone who's sophisticated and has been through this process before to really provide great advice."