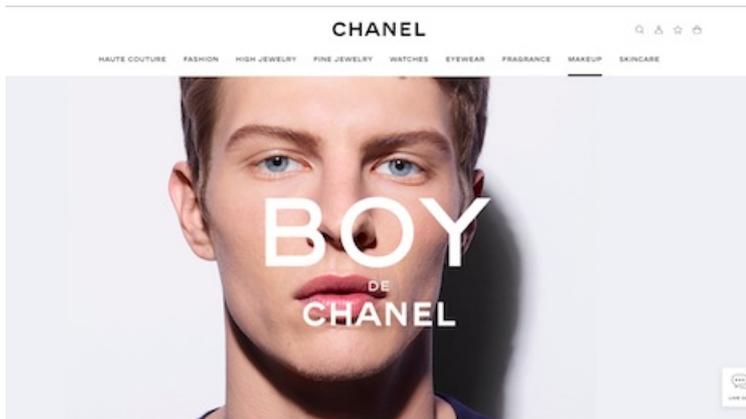


MARKETING

## Societal shifts precipitating a gender evolution for brands

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France's Chanel blazed a trail with the launch of Boy de Chanel, a new line of beauty products for men. Seen: Boy de Chanel page on Chanel.com. Image credit: Chanel

By MICKEY ALAM KHAN

Societal shifts are precipitating a gender evolution, forcing brands to re-evaluate how they approach customers and prospects.

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A new study from Forrester Research argues that marketers should create authentic, relevant experiences, commit and be credible, and craft a whole-brand approach.

"Gain a genuine understanding of this evolution to craft experiences that are relevant to your audience and authentic to your core," said **Forrester** analysts Dipanjan Chatterjee and Nick Monroe in their report.

"To embrace gender evolution, commit, prepare to weather blowback, and put your money where your intentions are," they said.

"This is very different from designing your Pride Month logo. Embracing gender evolution can have far-reaching implications for your product, pricing, supply chain, operations, technology, and much more."

Times certainly have changed.

When late entertainer Prince opened for the Rolling Stones in 1981 dressed in black bikini briefs and thigh-high stockings, he was met with a volley of bottles and homophobic slurs.

Fast-forward 35 years, Asia Kate Dillon's character on Showtime's television show "Billions" announced, "My pronouns are they, theirs, and them."

Today, a majority of consumers reject the gender binary, the report said, citing third-party research. Fifty-two percent of millennials believe that gender is a spectrum, and 12 percent identify as trans or nonconforming.

It is not just about Asia Kate Dillon, who personally identifies as nonbinary, and their character in "Billions": 56 percent of 13-to-30-year-olds know someone who prefers gender-neutral pronouns, the report pointed out.

## Brands face cultural irrelevance

Where the market goes, brands follow, and quickly, Forrester said.

For example, Coca-Cola's 2018 Super Bowl ad showed an androgynous face paired with a gender-neutral pronoun.

Equally groundbreaking, MasterCard earlier this year commissioned a series of rainbow-colored street signs with identifiers such as nonbinary and pansexual.

"As business models become ruthlessly agile, no brand can afford cultural irrelevance," the Forrester analysts said in their report.

The report identified three trends that required marketers to act swiftly.

First, consumption patterns are shifting. The men's personal care category, once thought to be an oxymoron unto itself, is set to hit \$166 billion in 2022: 56 percent of U.S. male respondents in a survey used a facial cosmetic at least once in 2018.

The report said that not only are males now cosmetics buyers they do not relate product to gender but about 40 percent of adults ages 18-22 are interested in gender-neutral beauty products.

On the other hand, women now account for 45 percent of new car purchases, pushing dealerships to a tipping point past which their extant gender-skewed selling may not work, the report said.

Next, dated campaigns are faltering. Many brands are tweaking their experiences to shed gender biases. But the most striking examples come from those that execute an about-face, the report pointed out.

Dr Pepper Ten brought manliness to diet drinks in a market that it described as "kinda girly" and launched a national campaign in 2011, proudly hailing itself as "not for women."

The brand has subsequently retreated from that position when it found out that 40 percent of its consumers were actually women.

Finally, internal values are championing change. Smart chief marketing officers build brands for and with employees and internal participants as much as they do for customers and prospects, the report said.

Case in point: Birchbox changed its site navigation from "women's" and "men's" to "beauty" and "grooming."

Amanda Tolleson, chief customer officer of Birchbox, told Forrester's Messrs. Chatterjee and Munroe that this change arose from "organic conversations with the employees, as these types of changes are about the internal company culture and values as much as they are about the external audience."

## Complexity of gender growing

While it is quite obvious, navigating gender is not easy.

Over the past decades, marketing and society found a false, but cozy binary to manage that complexity, the report said.

But to build a gender-relevant brand today, marketers need to understand three realities.

First, gender is not sex.

"Sex refers to the meaning that society gives to the biological markers like chromosomes and genitalia a person has at birth," the report said. "Gender is the cultural correlate of sex."

Citing their work on gender, the report highlighted Candace West and Don Zimmerman's comment that with gender human beings create "differences between boys and girls and women and men, differences that are not natural, essential, or biological."

"There's nothing inherently female about wearing a dress or essentially male about driving a pickup truck, but these actions become gendered when society determines what's appropriate for men and women," the report said.

Next, gender is not binary to many.

"Marketers who reduce people to labels like 'male' and 'female' do so at their peril," the report said. "People of all social and political backgrounds exhibit behaviors that contravene gendered expectations at one time or another."

In fact, 76 percent of female consumers and 71 percent of male consumers believe that the way they are portrayed in

advertising is completely out of touch, according to findings from a Kantar study.

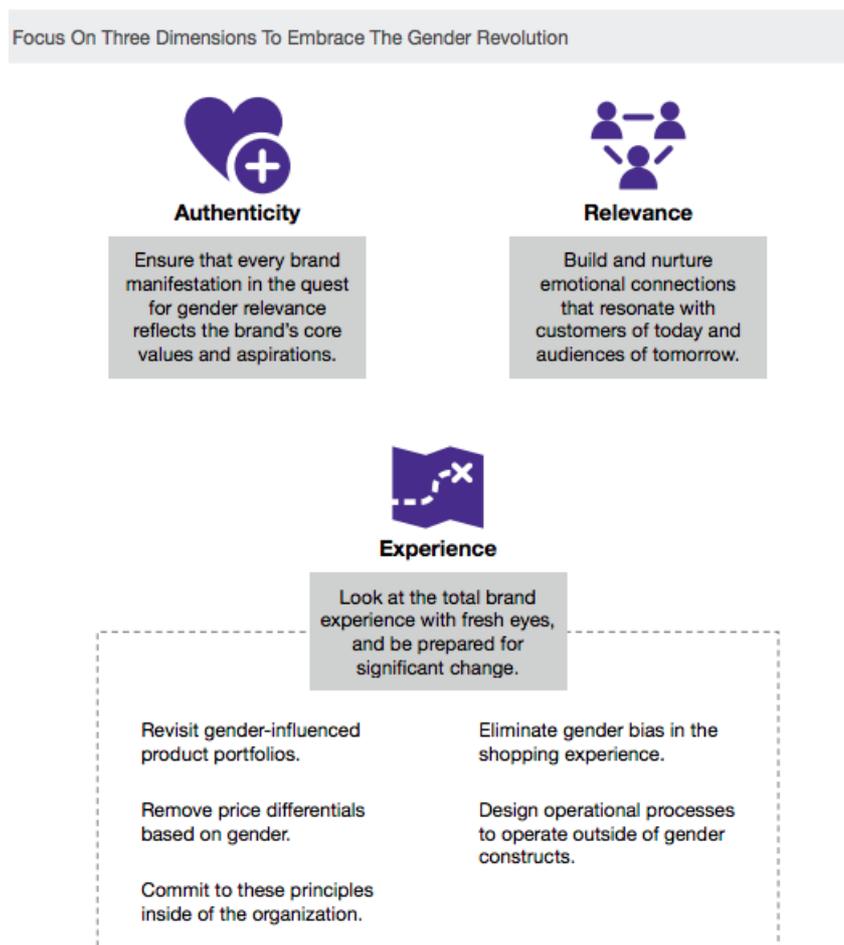
Guido Palau, who works with designer Marc Jacobs, said there is no compelling need for "being a woman or a man when you can be everything and anything in between," according to a *New York Times* article.

Finally, gender and sexuality are interrelated. Conversations about gender and sexuality, in the workplace and in the world of brand communication, are often connected.

"Just as we've witnessed the evolution of gender perceptions, we've seen a shift in social expectations regarding sexual preference along gender lines," the Forrester report said.

"The short version, for the brand marketer, is that sexuality and gender are complex and interconnected themes. You don't need to tease them apart, but you do need to know that LGBTQ+ issues will be front and center in gender-related brand conversations."

Forrester recommended that marketers should build on three dimensions to sustain their brand in the face of shifting gender perceptions.



Focus on three dimensions to embrace the gender revolution. Source: Forrester Research

**Authenticity:** Connect gender to core values and aspirations

At the heart of the movement toward gender relevance lies the sincerity and authenticity of a brand, the report said.

"This alignment must consistently ensure that every brand manifestation in the quest for gender relevance reflects the brand's core values and aspirations," the report said.

Forrester cited German automaker Mercedes-Benz's actions, which drew on history.

Indeed, in a category with a pronounced masculine tilt, women have been part of the Mercedes-Benz brand since its inception.

In 1888, Bertha Benz, whose husband was cofounder Karl Benz, took the world's first 60-mile-long road trip.

In 1962, Ewy Rosqvist drove a Mercedes to a first Grand Prix win for a woman.

Mercedes-Benz proudly points out Bertha Benz's contributions in various marketing initiatives and has teamed up

with Mattel to give Matchbox replicas of Ewy Rosqvist's 220SE to girls who, research suggests, trade in toy cars for tea sets, the report said.

Diageo in the spirits category is another candidate that is serious with training.

Unlike Mercedes-Benz, brands such as Diageo may not have a founding ethos to latch onto can still purposefully build a foundation. So Diageo created a framework to consider the way marketing characterizes gender and is training its marketers and agencies accordingly.

"We just hope people will put their heads above the parapet and see that the risks are mostly in their heads," Syl Saller, chief marketing officer of Diageo, told *The Wall Street Journal*.

Relevance: Connect emotionally and resolutely

As astutely pointed out in the Forrester report, even the strongest of intentions and values cannot safeguard market share if a brand fails to remain relevant not only through product offerings but also in its ability to emotionally connect.

"Smart brands will work to ensure that they resonate with their customer bases today and their audiences of tomorrow," the report said.

Three marketers stand out in their recognition of this reality.

For example, self-described "female-first" shaving brand Billie's brutally honest take on body hair as little or as much as your heart desires fits well with its younger audience, which is more likely to reject traditional gender norms.

Nike is also standing firm by its Instagram post of model and singer AnnaHstasia Enuke showing underarm hair, despite searing vitriol on social media, such as wishing her "good luck finding a man accepting [her] with it," according to a BBC news story.

Then there is Procter & Gamble Co.'s Ariel detergent brand. In India, where consumers tend to have a more traditional outlook, Ariel is running the "Share the Load" campaign, which shows men sharing what many consider traditional women's activities.

Experience: Craft end-to-end brand experiences to nurture authenticity and relevance

The effects of gender show up everywhere in brand offerings, some catering to legitimately sex-related differences but most linking to the cultural norms associated with gender, as pointed by the report.

Marketers need to reexamine the total brand experience in this light and take five actions.

First, revisit gender-influenced product portfolios. The product shift in gender-neutral clothing has happened not only with niche progressive brands such as Radimo LA and Rebirth Garments but also with mainstream apparel labels including H&M, Ralph Lauren and Zara, many of which are available at department stores such as Macy's.

Luxury also took a cue. In 2017, Chanel launched a unisex handbag, following it up with **Boy de Chanel men's makeup** in 2018 because "beauty knows no gender."

Second, marketers should remove price differentials based on gender.

The Forrester report alluded to the notorious "pink tax" reflecting different pricing for men and women. A New York report pegged it at 13 percent for some consumer goods, per a *NPR* news report.

Boxed, an online wholesale retailer, took up the challenge to undo gendered pricing, and by March 2019, "it reached a total of \$1 million in offset discounts redistributed among customers," according to *Fast Company*.

Fast-food giant Burger King's witty take on the pink tax involved a candid-camera rendition of offering "chick fries" for \$3.09 in a pretty pink box where the chicken had a bow and eyelashes to appalled customers expecting the regular \$1.69 chicken fries, per an article in *Inc.* magazine.

Third, marketers must eliminate gender bias in the shopping experience.

Stockmann, Finland's largest department store, has an entire floor dedicated to gender-neutral fashion so customers can "forget the rules and shop unbiasedly, Anna Salmi, the retailer's chief operating officer, told *Vox*."

For its part, U.S. discounter Target is phasing out all gender-based signage, such as for kids' bedding and toys, including gender-indicating colored paper at the back of the shelves.

Fourth, marketers should design operational processes to operate outside of gender constructs.

When booking a flight on United Airlines, customers now have the option to select "U" (undisclosed) or "X" (unspecified) as the gender of choice, and the brand is working with advocacy groups to train staff on preferred pronouns and inclusive workplace competencies, according to *The Guardian* newspaper.

The Forrester report said the same is true in Europe for Air Italy, which now offers an "X" nonbinary gender option.

An *AdAge* article in June pointed out that MasterCard allows each customer to choose the name that appears on their card, which may be different from their legal name. This helps remove a common hassle experienced by transgender customers.

Finally, marketers must commit to these principles inside the organization.

Management and tech consultancy Accenture has made a commitment to inclusive hiring practices that do not include consideration for factors such as gender identity or expression.

The company said that rather than paying lip service to consumer sentiment, this benefits the company and its clients, as "a culture of equality creates trust, innovation and therefore business growth."

So what does this all mean for marketers, luxury and non-luxury?

Intelligence and brand integrity lead the way

As the winds of change blow in, all signs point to an evolution in how brands and marketers incorporate gender, the Forrester report said.

Being uniquely intelligent helps.

"Gender has often served as a proxy function in marketing, prescribing certain characteristics to groups of individuals," the report said.

"In a world with copious data on individual preferences and behavior, having to rely on gender is just terrible marketing. Direct brands, like Birchbox, that are exceptionally positioned to capture and act upon customer data can make the move away from gender categorization because the demographic variable adds no significant value to them.

"Linguistic analysis by BAV Group of 33 million gender-related posts over eight years shows that individuality' has been the fastest-growing conversation theme at the intersection of brand and gender.

"Which would you rather do build a brand on guesswork or on a data-driven, insight-rich platform of preferences and behavior?"

Holding steadfast in the face of blowback which is inevitable, given the early stage of gender evolution is key.

"As brands shift their gender perspective, they risk running afoul of an incumbent customer base," the Forrester report cautioned. "When one gender uses objects meant' for the other, a phenomenon that Jill Avery calls gender contamination,' the social media response can be scathing."

For example, the Porsche Cayenne SUV was deemed to have abandoned its hyper-masculine base with a vehicle that brand loyalists described as "an expensive strap-on for soccer moms and effeminate stockbrokers," according to *Slate*.

"As gender lines are blurring, we need our things to send clearer signals," Ms. Avery said.

Target's policy of allowing transgender consumers to use the bathroom of their choice generated a boycott and an evangelical backlash, with some saying that those who made the brand strong were "fathers, mothers, boys, girls not gender-neutral," according to *The Washington Times*.

Finally, marketers and brands should be anchored in their brand values.

"Authentic brand experiences stem from brand beliefs, and these will fashion a North Star," the Forrester report said. "Lock in and hold firm.

"Nike exemplifies commitment to its beliefs as it weathers the storms connected with its Kaepernick, Enuke, and hijab promotions.

"Patagonia grounds its strategy firmly in environment consciousness and shuns the temptation to gender-tune its

marketing, despite academic research suggesting feminine connotations to being green.

"Faced with massive backlash and a boycott, Target, rather than reverse course on its transgender bathroom policy, spent \$20 million to expand its bathroom options."

*Tips for applying Boy de Chanel makeup for men*

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