

MARKETING

How brands must change for a new world order

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Olivier Rousteing, creative director of Balmain, is a pioneer in using Instagram as a marketing platform, thus creating an entire tribe, community, conversation, engagement and campaign with his hashtag, #BalmainArmy. Image credit: Shutterstock

By [Daniel Langer](#)

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We are living in unprecedented times.

Even before the COVID-19 crisis, our world was full of massive disruption. I wrote about it many times last year for *Jing Daily* in my weekly Future of Luxury column as well in my articles and features in *The Economist*, *Forbes*, and *Bloomberg*.

Most of my luxury classes over the past months discussed the new world order and how to successfully master disruption, which was already putting pressure on brands to change before the virus crisis hit.

My consistent message has been this: "Yesterday was the only easy day."

In other words, change is here to stay.

Disruption from technology shifts, digitization, young **millennials** and Gen Zers, as well as shifting consumer preferences will not go away.

I can see in my day-to-day work how difficult it has been for brands from cars to fashion, managers, innovation teams and designers to adapt to the "new normal."

Two sides of the world

The current crisis makes the need for change even more obvious.

As head of a global strategy firm that serves customers all over the world, I have been helping my European and American clients to successfully deal with the COVID-19 crisis from wherever they are locked down.

Yet, at the same time, my Chinese and Asian clients are returning to normal and moving toward compensating for Q1 losses with an eye on future growth.

One side of the world is in darkness, while the other sees light at the end of the tunnel.

We will get through this crisis, but companies need to stay focused and make the right decisions now so they can be ready when markets reopen, consumers become more optimistic, and consumption bounces back. It will happen, but the questions are: When will it happen and will you be prepared?

Crisis: danger and opportunity

The COVID-19 crisis is creating significant change, but it can also offer significant opportunities. This is in line with the Chinese word for crisis, which means "danger and opportunity."

Digital players such as JD.com and [Alibaba](#) became dominant players when China was hit with the SARS virus, to put this into perspective. Social shopping became the norm, and digitally savvy key opinion leaders ([KOLs](#)) became leading forces in shaping consumer preferences. Behavior changes during these times, and the impacts last.

The current crisis will accelerate the move to digital in all aspects.

People will get even more used to working remotely, browsing and shopping online.

Digital is already the number-one purchase decision channel, and its importance will grow exponentially as a result of current events.

Fashion designers and brands also must change

Fashion designers and brand innovation teams need to reinvent themselves, as they are the driving forces behind the brands' creative output.

In the digital realm, consumers need something tangible. They need to identify. This means that the role of the designer has to offer deep customer connection, not just artistry.

Fashion designers have to become listeners and influencers.

I asked Jane Dee, cofounder and chief marketing officer of the consultancy, Beyond Beauty Global, about her views on how fashion designers must evolve now that many are reaching celebrity status.

To her, Olivier Rousteing of [Balmain](#) stands out as someone who is "mastering the art of social media and using it to cater to the digital generation."

Ms. Dee explained further, saying, "He's a pioneer in utilizing Instagram as a marketing platform thus creating an entire tribe, community, conversation, engagement, and campaign with his hashtag, #BalmainArmy. Moreover, he speaks his mind, authentically shows his true self, and consistently updates his consumers on his Instagram page, making him seem accessible to his target audience."

Contextual sensitivity means real-time digital and cultural sensitivity

This highlights an important aspect: authenticity. [Gen Z consumers](#) have a particularly fine antenna for digital content, and anything that feels inauthentic can put them off.

Therefore, designers will have to evolve further, as they cannot be detached from the digital reality and be successful.

Instead, they need to know what is going on in the world and the correct tone to use in real-time.

To understand these rapid shifts in consumer sentiment, they will need sophisticated digital tools that use artificial intelligence.

These tools will be indispensable to designers of the future and will take cultural sensitivity to a new level.

Many people think it is still important to regularly visit and pay attention to a handful of countries to show sensitivity.

However, the current crisis is proving that cultural sensitivity has evolved into contextual sensitivity.

We need to understand in real-time, all over the world, and even in different parts of countries what is driving people.

Real-time social media tools allow us to find exactly the right tone, message, and products.

PR disasters such as the [Dolce & Gabbana](#) "chopsticks" campaign could have easily been avoided if fashion designers and other key personnel in the company had access to real-time information about sentiment shifts.

In the new normal both during and after COVID-19 this will be crucial.

To influence, we need to listen constantly and make sense of social sentiments. I call it social intelligence, and it is

the new game-changer.

Fashion designers, innovation teams, brands and companies need to move fast to stay relevant.

The current crisis will lead to a new world order where digital platforms will be dramatically more important far beyond what we see today. This tectonic shift calls for immediate action.

A new world order calls for rapid change

Fashion and business schools all over the world will have to adjust their curriculums to teach future leaders to use tools that go far beyond the old techniques of marketing and design.

This spring, in my luxury strategy class at [Pepperdine University](#), I taught a module on contextual sensitivity and social intelligence using [artificial intelligence](#). It was beyond eyeopening for my MBA students.

Brands, fashion designers, and innovation teams all need to audit their current capabilities and ask themselves if they are prepared for a world in which contextual sensitivity-driven agility will be the key to survival. This will be the light at the end of the tunnel not just in China, but all over the world and brands will need to prepare.

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