

MARKETING

4 post-COVID-19 marketing tips that will save luxury brands in China

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Both Delvaux and Balenciaga's limited-edition handbags launched for this month's Qixi Festival received polarized comments from Chinese netizens. Image credit: Delvaux, Balenciaga

By [Wenzhuo Wu](#)

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Delvaux's Mahjong handbag versus Balenciaga's "too cool" style Chinese graffiti: Which one would a typical Chinese luxury shopper choose? According to angry Weibo user responses, the answer is neither.

Then, a week after the controversial Balenciaga came out, Dolce & Gabbana's open-screen advertisement released Aug. 19 on Weibo put the brand under the spotlight once again. Though it has been almost two years since the brand rolled out its cultural appropriation campaign in 2018, netizens remembered the mistake and again called for a boycott of the brand.

While global brands are more aware than ever about the dangers of engaging in cultural appropriation in China, the country's aesthetics are apparently more sophisticated and challenging than brands realized.

Part of that is due to Chinese nationals' rising pride in their cultural heritage and structures. But since millennials and Gen-Zers have been shaped by a blend of Eurocentrism and patriotism, the values behind their aesthetic standards have become a mix of deconstruction and re-creation. This is why Chinese netizens get accused of being "too sensitive" about Western brands' missteps.

To further reach this lucrative market, luxury brands try to tick all the right boxes, from incorporating Chinese elements in their product designs to hosting significant local events in China.

However, trends during this year's Qixi Festival have indicated that there is no quick remedy to achieving growth in China's market.

For Chinese consumers, a dedication to learning the history and culture of the country ranks higher than a campaign hoping to ride a particular consumer groups' trend.

Challenged by cultural differences and the digital environment, brands should keep learning from both previous mistakes and successful initiatives from industry leaders to start achieving post-pandemic growth. Below, *Jing Daily* outlines four marketing tips that will help luxury players communicate with local consumers more effectively.

Partner with local creative talents and agencies

With traditional publishing companies facing extreme challenges in the digital age, local fashion media outlets have pivoted to explore new roles in the industry as a way to offset shrinking ad revenue and print circulations.

By leveraging their social followings and digital literacy, they have deepened collaboration with brands, while also launching online alternatives that align with China's new digital ecology.

Established titles under the umbrella of media powerhouse Cond Nast such as *Vogue China* and *GQ China* have experimented with creative and consultancy roles for Valentino's 520 campaign and Louis Vuitton's Shanghai runway show, respectively.

Elsewhere, *SuperELLE*, the multimedia sister publication of *Elle China*, partnered with Dolce & Gabbana to roll out its **Qixi Festival campaign**, which starred its virtual idols, Liz and Sam.

With their expertise in creative directing and ready-made celebrity connections, the local editorial teams of fashion media outlets can act as think tanks for global brands looking to reach precisely targeted audiences.



On Aug. 19, Dolce & Gabbana launched its first ad on Weibo to promote the brand's pop-up store for Chinese Valentine's Day. Image courtesy of Dolce & Gabbana

Resume offline activities in conjunction with online initiatives

Social campaigns and livestreams dominated the worldwide retail sector during a time of store closures and lockdowns.

However, they have hardly been a replacement for offline product launches, events and presentations thus far not only because of technological limitations but also because immersive experiences and human touch cannot be realized via mobile screens.

For example, **Dior** and Fendi, which are both owned by the luxury conglomerate **LVMH** Group, opened pop-up shops, cafs, and hosted launch parties in flagship stores to celebrate this year's **Chinese Valentine's Day**.

In addition to campaigns, luxury brand-launched cultural affairs such as exhibitions and art projects have resumed in China, particularly in cities where the pandemic has been effectively curbed.

The ongoing blockbuster exhibition, "**Christian Dior, Designer Of Dreams**" at the Long Museum and the upcoming Prada Mode at the Rong Zhai House, have excited local fashion enthusiasts and art-thirsty youngsters alike.

These offline activities along with their well-planned social presence cannot only drive organic online-to-offline traffic to improve sales but, more importantly, they can build up brand images and improve customer retention rates over the long term.

Get rid of superficial appropriations of Chinese elements

And while woke culture and patriotism have spread throughout the country allowing any incorrectness to be scrutinized and exaggerated in the social arena opinions about the way a campaign should appropriately deal with cultural differences are rarely unified.

Even native perspectives often vary and polarize around certain controversies, so how can brand executives who are not familiar with the culture origins possibly know the answer?

As such, brands need to trust their local teams during the process of decision-making to avoid any possible cultural

stereotypes.

Nevertheless, many brands learn from previous mistakes, opting for "safer" approaches to Chinese culture, including representations of the zodiac, Chinese calligraphy, or the color red.

However, without a thorough command of current Chinese beauty standards and a knowledge of Chinese history, the creative talents of global brands will not be able to win over local consumers with superficially adopted Chinese elements.

The constant backlash against luxury brands leveraging Chinese fonts exemplifies how crucial dedication to understanding China's culture is for brands in this market.

Unlike English words that are all built from the same 26 letters, the Chinese vocabulary has many more variations, complicating designs and making it harder to find consistency between visuals and meanings.

Balance mainstream and subculture

Balenciaga has been exploring socio-cultural discourse with its edgy runway presentations and seasonal campaigns ever since Demna Gvasalia took the brand's creative helm.

Unlike traditional luxury houses that showcase well-curated campaigns, Balenciaga frequently posts quirky and wacky visuals on its social channels. This year's Qixi campaign was no exception, and the fashion house kept its consistent social strategy, this time by incorporating the highly-localized "too cool" culture that has emerged from within China's younger generations.

However, a backlash to the campaign in China was not necessarily attributed to appropriating indigenous subculture, but rather the subject itself, since local brand campaigns have successfully played with the idea of tacky taste in their branding.

The fact is, the majority of the local consumers are not ready for deconstruction that comes from the hierarchical fashion system. Therefore, fashion powerhouses that attempt to challenge the typical brand image in China run a real risk.

Despite having the ability to define or shape trends, luxury brands must find a balance between mainstream and subculture styles, making sure not to go too far in pursuing homegrown niche or novel trends.

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