

COLUMNS

## Chanel taught me everything I need to know about luxury

September 23, 2020



*Chanel is in a class of its own. Image credit: Chanel*

By **Nadia Tuma-Weldon**

Subscribe to **Luxury Daily**  
Plus: Just released  
State of Luxury 2019 **Save \$246 ▶**

Many years ago, upon receiving my first real bonus check, I almost immediately marched uptown to Madison Avenue above 59<sup>th</sup> street. I knew precisely what I wanted to do with that windfall: my first grown-up check to buy my first grown-up purchases all on my own.

The two items I had in mind, and etched in my subconscious from youth as *le nec plus ultra* of style, were the classic Chanel two-tone ballet flats and a simple Herms silk scarf. Little did I know that the difference of experience with the two brands would be the beginning of a lifelong education in true luxury.

I visited the Chanel store first, timidly asking the saleswoman about the shoes and whether they might have my size in stock. This woman, whom I will never forget, took so kindly to me. She understood that this was not only a significant purchase for me, it was a significant *moment* a young woman buying her first Chanel with hard-earned money. She spent time with me, gave me her experienced opinion of color and shape, and ensured I had space to make an informed decision. She wrapped the shoes beautifully, placing them in the signature black shopping bag with the white camellia, and a few days later, I received a hand-written note from her, wishing me the best and including her contact information. Eleven years later, I still wear and cherish these shoes.

Sadly, my experience at Herms was not to be as elevated. I was ignored for a full 15 minutes before asking an employee whether he might be able to assist me. As if I were inconveniencing him, he deigned to help me, with the enthusiasm of a convenience store clerk. I quickly, rather thoughtlessly, selected a scarf within my budget, embarrassed and wanting desperately to leave the store. I owned that scarf for a few years, telling myself I should because of a nebulous sense that it was "an essential," but I never loved it, and ultimately sold it on the second hand luxury market.

This experience has stayed with me as I have grown up, and one I return to often. Today, as an adult who can certainly handle her own beware, Herms sales staff I still find that Chanel exemplifies the best qualities of the luxury world, and displays lessons from which any brand could learn. Of course, the products themselves from the couture to the beauty creams to the infamous tweed jacket are exquisitely made, but there are intangible elements that

continue to define Chanel as the most luxury of luxury brands. Herein are three lessons from Chanel:

**Elevated universe:** Despite creating some of the world's most expensive pieces of clothing and jewelry, everyone is invited to participate in Chanel's universe, no matter who you are or where you live. The brand opens its world in surprisingly fresh ways, from showing how couture shows [come to life on Netflix](#), to beautifully-produced content on its [exquisite Instagram account](#) (the [beauty account WeLoveCoco](#) even provides make-up tutorials) and allowing videographer [Loic Prigent behind the scenes on his charming YouTube channel](#). All points in this universe are joined up and consistent, allowing the world of Chanel to be seen in a cohesive way no matter the platform.

*Implication for all brands:* Many different channels and partnerships allow for people to gain an intimate understanding of a brand universe, as well as gain access to elements beyond the product such as inspiration, tips and brand mythology. Brands that allow people behind the curtain will create a more enduring emotional relationship with them well into the future.

**Elevated Service:** One of the more heartening experiences this past year has been spending time at the delightful [Chanel Atelier Beaute in SoHo](#). The staff are not only passionate experts in their field (makeup, skin health or fragrance), they receive no sales commission and therefore do not sell, sell, sell. In fact, they treat everyone who walks into the atelier as an expert with taste, coming in to elevate their own life. I imagine my younger self, and the way I was treated with dignity and respect all those years ago. Perhaps that young woman will one day grow up and make real luxury purchases. Which brand is she going to go to? The one who treated her warmly and well.

When the pandemic hit New York and the atelier shut its doors, it immediately pivoted to digital, offering affordable makeup and skincare sessions via FaceTime. Ingenuity and speed is also part of providing elevated service.

*Implication for all brands:* Gone are the days of brands being the sole authority on taste and expertise. Successful brands treat their customers as experts with taste, and work with them in a personalized way to elevate their experience with the brand or category.

**Elevated culture:** In the "before times," pre-pandemic, I had the privilege of presenting my thought leadership to teams at Chanel HQ in New York. This was a huge deal for me and it would be an understatement to say that I was nervous. However, upon entering the offices which are beautiful and tasteful at every turn every person with whom I spoke was as polite, refined and warm as one might imagine Coco Chanel would expect. Indeed, in the Chanel ateliers and offices, the specter of *Mademoiselle Chanel* is often evoked: What would she think? What would she say? I commented to one of the senior members of the team that her employees seemed lovely. Her reply was that this is intentional: they of course recruit for skill and expertise, but culturally, hires need to exhibit the dignified values long upheld in the storied hallways of Chanel. Another piece of the puzzle that fits so seamlessly and extends into everything the brand does.

*Implication for all brands:* A brand is only as strong as its internal culture. Brands can no longer simply *say*, they must *do*, and that begins with its own people. Those people should reflect the values of the company mission, vision and values to create enduring relationships with customers which transcend time.



Nadia Tuma-Weldon

Nadia Tuma-Weldon is New York-based senior vice president and director of McCann Worldgroup Truth Central and leads the agency's global luxury practice. She writes about lifestyle, luxury, culture and the pursuit of aspiration at [nadiatumaweldon.substack.com](http://nadiatumaweldon.substack.com).

---

© 2020 Napean LLC. All rights reserved.

Luxury Daily is published each business day. Thank you for reading us. Your **feedback** is welcome.