

COLUMNS

Building a digital temple worthy of worship

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When Italian fashion house Bottega Veneta turned off its social media in early January, it sent waves through marketing departments across the luxury industry.

As GQ said, in a moment where **brands** "have become more reliant than ever on social media to promote and circulate their new collections, advertising campaigns and other marketing initiatives," it is hard to wrap your head around leaving 2.5 million followers in the dark.

But Bottega Veneta's exodus from social media is not as crazy as it seems, and, as luxury retail moves further online, we predict other brands will follow.

Socially distant

Emotions are the most important factor for building brand affinity and driving lasting profitable relationships with consumers. And luxury brands have historically poured tremendous time and resources into creating transcendent physical experiences erecting buildings that more closely resemble museums or sacred spaces than stores, such as **Louis Vuitton's** Frank Gehry-designed location in Seoul, and immersing guests in history and brand lore, similar to Hermès's **Carr Club** or the **Cartier Mansion** in New York.

Now, the coronavirus pandemic has made in-store shopping a fraught experience.

While brands across the board have responded to the moment with a massive investment in social media, social media is limited as a medium for creating emotional connections.

When consumers experience your brand in their Facebook or Instagram feed, they engage with it the same way they would engage with an ad in the front of a fashion magazine: superficially, and in the context of dozens of competing brands. And, in the same context as news, posts from friends and relatives, and toxic political content.

When it comes to building emotional connections with their customers, brands would be better served building Web sites that are temples to their brands digital spaces that immerse guests in their craftsmanship, their artistry, their histories, and their mythologies. And as competition continues to increase for consumers' attention online, brands have to create experiences worthy of their time. Experiences that not only tell a story about the brand, but that help

consumers tell a story about themselves.

Nothing is accidental

In his book, *Imagining Religion*, Jonathan Smith describes a temple as a dedicated space in which nothing is accidental and everything is of significance a place in which things "become sacred by having our attention directed to it in a special way."

The architecture of medieval cathedrals is designed to draw your eyes toward the tabernacle. The low doorways of 10th-century Japanese teahouses were designed to force entrants into a humble posture. Every detail of these spaces was designed to help visitors transcend the concerns and social structures of the world.

Likewise, every detail of a luxury Web site can significantly affect the consumer's perception, emotion, and experience. Transitions and interactions must match the brand's heartbeat. Elements such as side menus, form fields and buttons must match the brand's level of sophistication.

Last year, Rolls-Royce **unveiled a new visual identity** with the same attention to detail the brand has been putting into its handcrafted luxury automobiles for over 100 years.

The redesign included, among other things, an updated interpretation of its Spirit of Ecstasy icon and a computer-generated pattern based on the iconic hood ornament that Rolls-Royce used to create visual continuity across its website, social media properties, and physical printed materials.

Immersed in myth

Beyond their physical construction, temples are places where we immerse ourselves in history and myth.

Storytelling is an incredibly powerful tool for creating emotional connections, and Web sites are an incredibly powerful tool to tell stories.

Founded in 1837, Herms is one of the world's oldest luxury brands. It was also one of the first luxury brands to launch a Web site, in 2001. Since its relatively early entry into the digital space, Herms has mastered the art of digital storytelling, producing stunning interactive content that blends the digital and physical realms and conveys the history of craftsmanship behind its **leather goods** or the stunning artistry of its **silk scarves**.

The counterintuitive key to Herms's success is that while it was one of the first luxury brands to embrace online sales, its Web site has never been about selling. To wit, its content has never been built by a marketing department, but rather by its artisans.

Other heritage luxury brands are following suit.

Burberry released late last year a gorgeous campaign espousing the 1856-founded brand's commitment to **youth, creativity and the future**.

Chanel, likewise, has built a massive digital experience centered around the history and myth of its founder, Coco Chanel, the stories behind its products, and the influence that the Chanel brand has exerted throughout history.

Ripe opportunity

Luxury brands have ahead of them a tremendous opportunity.

If the last decade was dedicated to digitizing customers, transactions and activity, the next decade will be about luxury companies **infusing that information and infrastructure with digital craftsmanship** to offer authentic personalization, proactivity, esteemed customer service and all of the other qualities that elevate the in-person luxury shopping experience.

Right now, if you were to remove their logos, you might be hard-pressed to distinguish between the white grid-based Web sites of most luxury fashion houses, or between the Web sites of **luxury automakers** and mass-market manufacturers such as Ford.

But by infusing their Web sites with the same artistry and craftsmanship as their products, luxury brands are perfectly positioned to build digital temples to their brands that create powerful emotional connections with their customers, both current and future.

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