

COLUMNS

Seize the moment: How sustainability storytelling can reignite luxury's spark

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*Amy Nelson-Bennett is CEO of Positive Luxury*

By A LUXURY DAILY COLUMNISTBy **Amy Nelson-Bennett**

2025 is proving to be an annus horribilis for business a year I'd happily strike from my Christmas card list.

No brand, retailer, or supplier needs to add fuel to the fire of forces already making life brutally difficult across the luxury industry. The resilience of leaders and teams who stay focused on what they can control making hard but thoughtful choices, uncovering opportunity in adversity, holding fast to their values is something to be applauded, admired, and emulated.

And yet, external pressures continue to test every leader's mettle.

Spinning wheels

A divisive, demoralizing media landscape drains confidence. Too many luxury businesses are missing a trick well within reach: a branding masterstroke for which many already hold the raw ingredients.

Here's the paradox: luxury brands have invested heavily in sustainability environmental and social in the post-pandemic years (and even before). They've hired new talent, upskilled teams, driven progress and reduced impacts.

They've collected data, set targets, measured, reported and complied. Some are already reaping rewards: profitable decarbonization, reduced packaging and logistics costs and preferential access to capital.

But the golden ticket remains unclaimed: brands are not connecting their most powerful stakeholder the consumer to the progress they've already made.

Sustainability professionals warn of the reputational risks of opaque supply chains. Operations teams, particularly in fashion, scramble to comply with eco-design and EPR legislation. C-suite turnover at the major houses is so frenetic, it's hard to tell whether brands are playing Freeze Tag or Frogger in their elusive hunt for consumer resonance.

There is a lot happening. But little of it seems to dent luxury's biggest challenge: the value gap.

Mind the gap

Remember those headlines early in the year? Consumers falling out of love with luxury.

Doubting whether soaring prices are justified. Questioning whether creativity, craftsmanship, and quality are truly being upheld.

Turning away from shiny storytelling, jaded by yet another collab, disillusioned by values exposed as hypocrisy. Every negative headline about cavalier supply chain practices chips away at trust, widens the value gap and weakens performance across the industry.

But it doesn't have to be this way.

The answer is in plain sight. Beyond price reductions, the most persuasive lever a brand can pull is to prove that consumers are buying something better made, more responsibly designed and ethically produced.

For today's largest luxury consumer cohort the very group driving all recent growth sustainability is synonymous with quality. It is the modern proof of craftsmanship and a social contract across the value chain: from soil or mine, to factory and office, to warehouse and shop floor, all the way to the consumer.

Success lies not just in the strength of a brand's actions, but in its ability to communicate them convincingly, honestly, simply.

A new luxury language

Luxury marketing has always been about more than eyeballs. Today, it's about rebuilding trust with consumers who are overloaded with information, spoiled with options, and who increasingly prefer experiences to products.

If they want a quick fix, there's a dupe "good enough" for that. To rise above, brands must show depth.

Glib sustainability messages no longer suffice. A tagline, a token post, a day of volunteering, or a single tree planted these are seen for what they are: virtue signalling.

Luxury consumers want proof. They want provenance, transparency and community. They want evidence of unique quality, care and standards, and they do their homework.

Make it easy for me to buy, they say but equally prove you're worth it. This is what it takes to be truly aspirational.

Break the silos

That proof already exists inside many luxury businesses. Years of investment in sustainability have created it.

The opportunity lies in unlocking it in translating the dense language of impact reports, disclosures, and audits into stories that resonate with consumers.

But this cannot be done by marketing teams alone. The evidence sits across many functions in a business, and with suppliers and partners adjacent to it.

Closing the value gap demands bridges, not siloes, within departments and across organisations. It demands innovation not only in materials or technology, but also in ways of working.

This is luxury's creative opportunity. It won't cost more.

The talent is already in place. The only risk is the cost of not building those bridges and of failing to reconnect with consumers.

A path forward

Only a few brands have spotted the opportunity.

Across multiple luxury sectors, we've recently helped some audit and benchmark across their competitors, and it's clear: the field is wide open. What's needed is not reinvention, but better leverage of what's already there.

Start small: build a cross-functional team of employees eager for change. Pilot with an existing range or an upcoming launch.

Weave your sustainability efforts into authentic human stories. Set simple KPIs. Execute. Measure. Refine. Secure wins. Gain buy-in. Expand.

Luxury marketing's role has always been to invite consumers inside the emotional heartbeat of a brand. That heartbeat is not just designers and craftspeople, but farms and factories, retail staff and HR managers, procurement officers and finance clerks.

It takes all of them to create true luxury and it will take all of them to tell its story.

The bottom line

This is not fluff. It is near-term and long-term value creation. It is a licence to be creative.

It is an opportunity to unite teams through a difficult cycle around a tangible, collaborative initiative that drives both impact and commercial success.

Done well, it will surprise and delight jaded consumers, winning back trust and with it, share of wallet. The ripple effects will reduce risks and costs, strengthen supplier relationships, and boost employee loyalty and productivity.

Together, these shifts lead to renewed brand relevance, competitive advantage, and sustainable growth.

So seize the day because trust is no longer a nice-to-have. It is the foundation of luxury's future, proof of the values that make luxury matter.

When it comes to sustainability storytelling, luxury can no longer afford to be quiet. It is the road to recovery and the new bottom line.

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