

COLUMNS

Luxury on trial: what will stand up in 2026

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Luxury is no longer operating in a world of storytelling alone.

It is operating in a world of investigation. Forged by disruption, regulation and rising expectations, the industry has entered a phase where every claim is interrogated, every narrative is tested and every promise must withstand scrutiny.

The era of mystique is giving way to the era of evidence.

The current climate: where 2025 has left us

Traditional and generative AI are transforming luxury consumers from passive admirers into proactive, skilled investigators.

Amid global uncertainty, above inflation price increases and headline grabbing scandals, they are not waiting to be persuaded they are actively building cases.

They compare, cross reference and challenge. The language of luxury has shifted: mystery is no longer seductive, and ambiguity no longer survives cross examination.

For luxury brands, sustainability is no longer a matter of intent or ambition. It is a matter of proof.

Quality and craft, care and detail, rarity and refinement must be demonstrated with clarity and consistency. Trust, loyalty and value are now earned through evidence, not aura.

Sustainability itself is also coming of age. It must withstand AI driven scrutiny and forensic analysis, moving beyond specialist teams and glossy but opaque impact reports into the operational core of how luxury brands design, source, price and communicate.

Sustainability is becoming the corroborating evidence in a luxury brand's case the difference between a credible story and a collapsed defence.

It is therefore no surprise that in 2025, as greenhushing increased, luxury's appeal faltered. Consumers grew suspicious, while too many brands presented alibis that were thin, inconsistent or riddled with gaps.

Armed with powerful investigative tools, consumers delivered their verdict. In 2026, the brands that thrive will not be those that

remain silent or overwhelm with impenetrable data, but those that can prove their value clearly, calmly and confidently.

The past year has been a reality check and a revealing one. Margins are under pressure across categories.

Rising energy prices, logistics disruption, geopolitical instability and higher input costs have made growth harder to sustain. At the same time, consumers are interrogating value more rigorously not just price, but quality, meaning and integrity.

Trust has become fragile. Supply chain scandals, greenwashing accusations and regulatory scrutiny have eroded confidence, particularly around sustainability claims. While regulation continues to tighten, political signals remain inconsistent, creating uncertainty rather than clarity.

In response, many brands have retreated. Fear of greenwashing has driven greenhushing. Sustainability communications have been muted or sanitised.

Internally, sustainability teams are under pressure to justify investment in a low growth environment. Yet this caution carries significant reputational and commercial risk.

In a sector built on confidence and credibility, silence increasingly reads as evasion. At best, avoidance. At worst, guilt.

Consumer insights: expectations haven't disappeared they've sharpened

Despite economic anxiety and information overload, consumers have not disengaged from sustainability. Instead, they have become more proactive, more analytical and less forgiving.

Tolerance for abstract narratives is low. Consumers are less interested in lofty ambition and glossy rhetoric, and more interested in specifics: where something comes from, how it was made, how long it will last, and what justifies its price.

Simplicity and clarity now signal confidence and credibility. Technology is accelerating this shift.

AI powered search and comparison tools increasingly shape purchase decisions, meaning brands are no longer speaking only to people, but to algorithms conducting consumers' detective work. Transparency, consistency and third party verification have become a brand's evidentiary backbone commercial imperatives to prove real luxury rather than optional extras.

At the same time, consumers are prioritizing experience, wellbeing and meaning over accumulation. Craft, heritage, longevity and care are gaining renewed relevance as counterpoints to fast consumption and digital saturation. Luxury's emotional power remains intact but only when supported by verifiable credibility.

Three themes shaping luxury's next chapter

1. Trust has become the new currency of luxury

Trust is no longer built on promise. It is earned through proof.

In 2026, brands will be judged less on what they say they intend to do, and more on what they can demonstrate they are already doing. Transparency, verification and evidence-based communication are becoming the foundations of desirability.

Importantly, trust does not require perfection. Honesty, openness and measurable progress matter more than flawless narratives. Brands willing to acknowledge challenges, alongside successes, are increasingly perceived as the most credible voices in the witness box.

2. Sustainability is being redefined as a value engine

Sustainability is no longer a side narrative. It is the core line of argument for any true luxury brand.

In a high cost, low growth environment, sustainability must prove its contribution to resilience, efficiency, loyalty and long term value. Across sectors, leaders are shifting from ESG as reporting to sustainability as performance.

This is visible in the move away from volume led growth towards quality, longevity and service. Aftersales, repair, refill, resale and care are becoming commercial strategies that extend product life and deepen relationships.

In this context, sustainability is not a cost or constraint; it is the mechanism through which modern luxury proves its worth and builds durable value.

3. Transparency is moving upstream and becoming operational

Transparency is no longer theoretical; it is becoming forensic.

From site level sourcing data to Digital Product Passports, luxury brands are being pushed closer to origin by consumers as detectives and tightening legislation. For many, the challenge is not intent but infrastructure: fragmented data, complex supply chains and systems never designed to evidence impact.

Yet tolerance for opacity is fading. Brands unable to access, manage and communicate reliable brand- and product level information risk falling behind commercially as well as compliantly. Simplification fewer suppliers, clearer data and stronger upstream relationships is emerging as a strategic advantage.

Core actions: building a compelling case in 2026

The implications for luxury leaders are clear. Success in 2026 will look quieter, stronger and more disciplined: build upstream transparency to earn downstream trust.

Simplify priority value chains, strengthen supplier relationships and invest in product-level data that is audit-ready and meaningful.

Make trust visible through evidence and verification. Substantiate every claim, align internal teams and use credible third-party frameworks to reduce risk and increase confidence.

Communicate with confidence grounded in proof. Replace jargon with algorithm-friendly clarity, connect sustainability to consumer values and luxury's core tenants, and say only what can be proven.

Treat sustainability as a performance engine. Link sustainability to resilience, efficiency, loyalty and long-term value creation embedding it into decision-making rather than bolting it one.

Luxury is on trial. The question is whether it is prepared to act and deliver its defence strategy decisively, transparently and at scale.

In 2026 and beyond, luxury will not be defined by the stories brands tell, but by the cases they can prove. Ambiguity will be exposed.

Silence will be interpreted. Evidence will be rewarded.

At this crossroads, brands face a clear choice: remain hidden behind myth, or step forward with proof.

Those that build credibility into every decision, every product and every message will not merely survive scrutiny they will shape the future of luxury. The rest will be left to defend an alibi no one believes.

Read Positive Luxury's latest report, "[Luxury at a Crossroads](#) a guide to engaging consumers and driving growth in 2026," for more detail.