

ADVERTISING

## How luxury marketers can retain exclusivity with a humanized brand approach

August 20, 2012



By TRICIA CARR

The need for instant information in the digital age has caused quite a few luxury marketers to offer transparency and mass appeal in their marketing efforts, but do affluent consumers prefer brands that seem out-of-reach to the general public?

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**Luxury Daily**

It used to be that prestigious brands kept up their image with the affluent audience through exclusive runway presentations, trunk shows and product showcases. However, with the prevalence of massive global campaigns and the instant gratification offered from digital media, brands that are humanized and transparent in their efforts can get an edge over competitors.

“A strong brand image is so important for luxury brands because at the end of the day, an affluent customer is not only buying their product, they are buying into that lifestyle that they portray,” said Brittany Mills, director of client services for [B Culture Media](#), Atlanta.

“That lifestyle needs to be consistent and representative through everything that they do so they not only attract customers that love their products, but those that strive to live that lifestyle,” she said.

## Getting in their heads

With more brands trying to get on the radar of affluent consumers, there is no question that luxury marketers need to relate their brand story, values and design aesthetic in new ways.

“Badge value is as alive as ever,” said Steve Zaroff, chief strategy officer of [McCann Erickson](#), New York. “Brand image remains an important shortcut that people use to broadcast to others their tastes, aspirations and values.

“With more brands in more categories rushing to define themselves as luxury or aspirational, the right image is a differentiator as well as equity in itself,” he said.

Luxury brands that have personalities behind them will give all consumers – but more importantly affluent consumers – a reason to follow the brand story day-to-day.

When consumers continue to care what a brand says and does, the brand will create loyalty in a new sense beyond the need for its products.

“Increasingly, affluent consumers are seeking out humanized brands,” said David Doze, president/CEO of [Pilot PMR](#), Toronto. “In a hyper-social world, consumers want to be able to share the values held by the brands they wear and consume.”

“Successful humanized brands demand attention,” he said. “We care about what they have to say and we pay attention to what they do.”

However, luxury brands can usually be described as exclusive or inclusive. Exclusive brands are those that keep their luxury status because, in general, they tend to be less available to the public, per Rob Frankel, branding expert at [Frankel & Anderson](#), Los Angeles.

Exclusive brands have a high price-point and have less supply to cause product demand, while inclusive luxury brands are perceived to be the best in a specific sector because many consumers want and own them.

“Exclusive brands enjoy their status among few, so they tend to be less human,” Mr. Frankel said. “They tend to objectify their products as trophies of material and social success, so humanity actually detracts from that effort.

“These include jewelry, cars, homes and hotels – brands that differentiate the owner from the masses,” he said.

“The inclusive luxury brand thrives not because so few people own it, but because so many people agree on it as the best brand in its class.”

## Selective marketing

Brands that want to increase awareness, loyalty and demand among the affluent audience should consider a few approaches on various marketing channels, but not switch-up the exclusivity of their products or services.

Consumers want to experience the lifestyle of a brand when they purchase something, so luxury marketers must find a balance of portraying that brand image and exclusivity.

An effective channel on which to do so is digital and, more specifically, social media, per B Culture Media's Ms. Mills.

Social media lets brands build a relationship by offering insider information and gratitude to fans. Also, other users will see that the brand appreciates its customers.

"Affluent customers want to live the lifestyle that is associated with the luxury brands that they are purchasing from and want to build a relationship with those brands," Ms Mills.

"They want to be recognized by and rewarded just like any other customer.

"Luxury brands that understand how to humanize their brand enough to connect with their customers, but also uphold the pristine image, are the ones that will dominate the digital space," she said.

Marketers that show their humanity are becoming more important in the luxury space, per McCann's Mr. Zaroff said.

Experiential marketing is an effective way to spread this type of message without diluting brand image or supply and demand.

"Do more than just say," Mr. Zaroff said. "Talk is cheap, especially in the luxury space.

"Brands that connect emotionally do so in experiential ways, be it the in-store experience, offering opportunities to engage with influencers and designers, or championing causes that the brand owners authentically care about," he said.

Lastly, a transparent brand story can take a luxury marketer far.

Deep brand stories will be remembered and shared and social media can help leverage these efforts to the affluent audience, per Pilot PMR's Mr. Doze.

"Brands humanize their image by taking a point of view and getting involved in issues and ideas that are meaningful to their audiences," Mr. Doze said. "Great brands have a story to tell – one that consumers are anxious to share."

Final Take

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