
Icon Brands and Style Icons

By Stefania Saviolo and Antonio Marazza

Within the universe of symbolic brands, Icon Brands become the carriers of universal values and stories that they express through a range of products characterized by instantly recognizable and iconic codes.

Adopting these brands is a statement that generates emotional hetero-directed benefits for the consumer (“when I buy or use this brand, I am …”).

Icons are timeless: even those born as phenomena of fashion, once gaining the status of icon, avoid the fashion cliché. This happened for the French luxury brands (such as Chanel and Hermès) or for globally admired jewelers such as Bulgari, Cartier and Tiffany: fashion brands become iconic when they are able to move beyond fashion by offering the iconic elements that have made them successful over time in products, communication and in-store.

Since the 1950s, Bulgari has been identified by the ornamental “parenthesis” design that, when applied in jewelry and glasses, recalls ancient Roman roads; for Cartier the
“animalier” motif that was so liked by maharajahs and princesses speaks of and recalls a luxury that no longer exists but many still aspire to.

Besides fashion, Armani has become an icon of Italian style and understated elegance that is found in the wide range of products, from clothing to perfumes, linked to the first line of the designer.

From authority to lifestyle
As mentioned, Icon Brands often come from a position of "authority" or "cult," extending the range of products and their popularity outside a more or less restricted circle of followers.

At the height of their success, they become well-known brands, both loved and desired, and success is mainly determined by their ability to be in tune with the deep values that people share, often going beyond age and geographical boundaries.

These values generally evolve slowly but, as noted by Holt, when deep cultural changes occur the mythology of Icon Brands loses relevance and people go in search of a new myth.

But, at the same time, Icon Brands cannot betray the core values that brought them success to pursue business opportunities that do not belong to them.

In the late 1990s clothing brand Gap was an icon of American casual style, namely “an American classic with a twist.” After fast fashion chains entered the market, Gap decided to follow in their footsteps, quickly losing its iconic status and for some years also its economic success.

While European luxury brands can be excellent authorities (e.g. Berluti shoes), cults (Riva motorboats) or icons (Hermès), the fashion houses such as Dior, Gucci or Dolce & Gabbana are brand typologies that are harder to classify.

By often founding their authority on a style expression rather than on product features they were able to offer, often from the very beginning, a wide range of products.

Strictly speaking they are not Icon Brands because they follow the changes in fashion; and they are not Lifestyle Brands because they don’t necessarily offer a perspective on the world and a call to action. They aren’t a Solution Brand, given they offer hetero-directed benefits.
We refer to these types of brands as “Style Icons.” They require constant evolution while maintaining their characteristic expressive codes intact.

Brands such as Prada or Stella McCartney are always ahead of the fashion – in fact, they must create the fashion that subsequently others will follow, even if in the end the products that ultimately sell are the most recognizable in materials, details, forms and, in fact, style.

In fashion, we can identify Style Icons. Style Icons are different from Icon Brands because:

- They refer to values of elegance, status and clothing styles that have higher volatility and sensitivity to changes in customs and tastes;

- They are particularly influenced by the processes of “viral” diffusion – they have cycles of adoption, development, success and decline that are much faster than for other types of brands, especially the Icons.

When their leader (typically a fashion designer) leaves the company or passes away, these brands tend to lose the ability to anticipate or influence clothing market trends, or gradually disappear becoming less relevant, or are repositioned starting a new cycle based on iconic elements of the past, as has happened in the case of Moschino, Gucci, Dior and Versace.

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