

COLUMNS

## Convergence of 3D printing and luxury fashion

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By [Bob McKee](#)

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As 3D print technology continues to mature and become an affordable reality, it will have the potential to change the luxury fashion market as we know it.

But the impact of this technology will be determined by how, where, and by whom it is used. Will it be something that consumers use to make their own products at home? Or will our interaction with luxury brands become an experience of customizing their intellectual property with our desires or designs at the brand location?

Also, will bricks-and-mortar become electronic catalogs with product configuration capabilities connected to 3D printers? “I’d really rather have that in platinum,” would become just a matter of adjusting the printer.

### Printing impress

At some point in the future we will be able to print literally anything we need or want, when we want it, or where we need it – then crunch it up and return it to its molecular state – and turn it into something else as our desires change. It is certainly no longer an issue of “if” but “when,” and that “when” is coming sooner rather than later.

3D printing will enable luxury products to be customized for each consumer. But for most

of the luxury companies around the world, this poses a new threat to their brands as well as to sales and profits.

When we consider that today some luxury brands are unwilling to embrace the ecommerce, multichannel or omnichannel explosion – the transition to using 3D printing technology could completely upset their business model.

However, presuming that producing almost anything from a 3D printer is coming whether we like it or not, let us consider some of the more positive possibilities.

We can already print on textiles with such detail that it is impossible to discern a printed fabric from a yarn dyed fabric with the naked eye.

We can use 3D printing today to create the mold used for the creation of fine jewelry and the next step will be the 3D printing of the ring or pendant directly in the precious metal desired by the end consumer.

On the horizon will be the ability to print using bioengineered leather with the same characteristics as the product made from die cut parts of an animal hide.

What about protecting intellectual property?

Copy that

If any product can now be printed at the touch of a button, does that not just open the door for more and easier counterfeiting?

Since the product will be printed line by line or bit by bit, might it now be possible to actually embed anti-counterfeiting technology into the product?

To protect themselves, the really forward-looking luxury companies will create their own applications that enable the 3D printing of their products, and with that they protect their brand identity, copyright and trademark.

Imagine opening an application on your laptop, tablet or smartphone, then from that application, picking a base product and customizing it within the limits set by the brand.

This can be done using a cloud-based application fully under the control of the brand that would guard against any trademark infringement or copyright violations. Everything down to the proper use, placement and authenticity of any brand identity or logo can be controlled by the brand.

To protect themselves, the questions that luxury fashion brands will have to ask are:

- Can I better control the use of this technology as a participant or as a bystander?
- Can I better protect my brand, my image or my intellectual property by embracing the use of technology and its interaction with my products?
- Is it better to try holding them exclusively away from the tech invasion?

GIVEN THE eventual certainty of 3D scanning and 3D printing of nearly anything, anywhere, using any material, it is likely that we have a small window of opportunity.

We should use this window to determine branding, licensing and use strategies.

If we choose to sit idly by, the repercussions of intellectual property theft could be endless.

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