

Beauty *in* Virtue

The hideous debt hangover of the gimme-gimme credit recession was a sobering wake-up call to many. Goodbye luxury, hello H&M. But the truly wealthy responded differently. Afflicted by survivor's guilt, they paused momentarily, looked to their favorite luxury brands for guidance, and kept purchasing.

While the world was in a state of shock, smart CEOs of luxury brands busily augmented the purchasing experience by adding a dimension of social good, simultaneously removing buyers' guilt and building brand equity.

Luxury brands and their celebrity muses started embracing their inner goodness by investing time and money in philanthropic causes and charity work. Whether it is the Grey Goose Character & Cocktails bar for Elton John's AIDS Foundation, the Rolex Institute or Cartier's LOVE Charity (*see sidebar*), these A-list brands would have us believe that giving is the new receiving.

Luxury brands can make us look (and feel) truly good.

Wealthy non-celebrities have taken note, as have the aspirational masses. Western luxury shoppers are now demanding more than a beautiful design and a non-disposable, fast-fashion item.

Their desire is for feeling virtuous as well as for looking good. Luxury consumers expect their brands to fulfil more than the temporary happiness of retail therapy, or the self-expressive benefit of keeping up.

CONSCIENTIOUS CONSUMPTION

This trend has wider implications than just making people feel good about spending money. We've moved from conspicuous consumption to conscientious consumption and we want to be associated with beauty—of both object and behavior.

The luxury brands that can best tie their products and heritage to a philanthropic cause that allows customers to express their "goodness" publicly are the ones that will be rewarded with loyalty.

As Milton Pedraza, chief executive officer of The Luxury Institute, a U.S. think-tank, told *Qantas Magazine*, "If wealthy consumers know a luxury brand is socially responsible, they will give that brand greater purchase consideration over a brand with similar quality and service."

Celebrities and wealthy consumers are spreading the belief that it is their personal duty to give time and money to causes. It is an updating of old social orders, as traditional buyers of luxury were the upper classes. Upper-class women did not work; they donated time to causes.

The old money believed that it was *noblesse oblige* to donate both time and money. Giving was not a choice; it was a duty. Today's "upper classes" are considered by many to be luxury brands and celebrities, and are treated as such.

In this way there is a return to duty. Jane Shepherdson, the former principal designer for Topshop, responsible for turning it into the multi-million dollar business it is today, departed to become the head creative for Oxfam.

Both Bill Gates and Warren Buffett are giving their billions away via charitable foundations. Bono has been busy innovating the giving model by helping to create Product (Red) to raise money for AIDS medications in Africa.

These brands and celebrities are setting the standards and they're demonstrating this behaviour in a public forum.

This group wants their luxury brands to donate as well, and so they should. Luxury status is not given or demanded; it is earned through expertise, craftsmanship, design-led leadership and heritage that money cannot buy.

Louis Vuitton was once a trunk maker to royalty, and would have no doubt seen and understood the concept of *noblesse oblige*. Today, the company links its heritage of making bags and trunks for travel with

Cartier's LOVE Charity

Customers can purchase a Cartier bracelet and choose a corresponding silk cord aligned with a specific charity.

- ★ Ashanti with Boys & Girls Clubs of America, blue bracelet
- ★ Common with Common Ground Foundation, khaki bracelet
- ★ Hilary Duff with Blessings in a Backpack, purple bracelet
- ★ Eve with Women in Transition, peach bracelet
- ★ Fergie with The Peapod Foundation, orange bracelet
- ★ Good Charlotte with The Richie-Madden Children's Foundation, green bracelet
- ★ Janet Jackson with Ovarian Cancer National Alliance, grey bracelet
- ★ Emmy Rossum with Susan G. Komen for the Cure, pink bracelet

advertising stories featuring astronauts Buzz Aldrin and Sally Ride.

Louis Vuitton is now a multi-million dollar company and it is only appropriate that it donate time and money to worthy causes that are in line with its modern customers' expectations and tastes.

The old notion that companies are in business for their stakeholders is still accurate, but to continue to be competitive they must be in business for their human interests as well as their financial interests.

A NEW DUTY

However, a paradox remains: Due to the very nature of charity and sustainability, the opposite of consumption is required. The tricky part is that abstinence tends to be harder than consumption.

Similarly, it is hard to give up the habit of

purchasing beautiful, yet superfluous, objects of desire when you are used to getting high from the experience.

Luxury brands need to be mindful of balancing the individual's need for recognition with the needs of the world collective. The screamingly obvious line of "you deserve it now!" is on its way out. Subtly, grace and taste are making a comeback.

Combine that with a refreshed and modern definition of "duty," and luxury brands can help customers publicly express virtue by simply letting them purchase their wares, knowing that the foundation, money or time that the brand is aligned with will reflect on the buyer.

Many luxury brands and the media vehicles that promote them already care deeply.

Brendan Monaghan, executive director of International Fashion for Condé Nast's *GQ* states, "Green is a global concern and *GQ* takes brands very seriously that are taking steps in helping the environment...It's the most modern approach to looking at their future as a worldwide business, and world issues. This is how fashion translates trends into global causes. Being responsible is chic."

Ironically, despite the economic slowdown, this could be the best time for luxury brands. An educational campaign targeting those who are not millionaires should explain why buying one luxury item is better than buying five cheapish things.

The benefits are cutting down on unsustainable, disposable fashion and re-educating consumers as to the joyful anticipation of waiting and saving for the truly exquisite.

To create this kind of desire, artisan and luxury brands need to create beautiful, design-led creations and philanthropic collaborations that allow consumers to badge their goodness credentials.

They must be captivating and extraordinary, not just a retrofit of a previously released model. They must be something bold and audacious that invites and seduces consumers to make the leap. ■



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