

COLUMNS

Luxury branding for today's woman: What has to change

April 11, 2016



Mihaela Sarova is strategic director of Added Value

By **Mihaela Sarova**

Subscribe to **Luxury Daily**
Plus: Just released
State of Luxury 2019 **Save \$246 ▶**

Luxury fashion needs a refresh: it has become a short-lived thrill that never delivers on its perfect promise. It is an expensive illusion that fewer women aspire to nowadays and, increasingly, fewer are willing to spend their money on.

Luxury goods are considered luxury for a reason. The average person even the average high-earner does not have the financial bandwidth to truly afford luxury items, which is part of what imbues them with so much meaning.

Luxury fashion, in particular, is mesmerizing: the beauty, the art, the lifestyle and the glamour mashed perfectly together in a perfect world.

But what happens when you enter the world of luxury fashion from the ground-up, as a sales associate, as I did? You get a rare insight into what compels a woman to spend, say, \$3,000 on a leather skirt.

Dress down

What makes that luxury item so desirable?

I can assure you that few women walk into a store to drop \$3,000 on a leather skirt. What they pay for is the feeling of importance, comfort, reassurance and support that comes along with the experience of the skirt purchase. And that experience starts long before the customer walks through the store doors.

The experience begins with a brand image projecting a perfect quality of life. It is then sold by the skilled consultant who can make our woman believe that she belongs to that world, although neither she nor the consultant really do.

And finally, shortly after the sale, almost half of what is sold is returned. Half.

Outside of that store, away from the magazine, once that skirt is off the rack, it loses its meaning and value. It is doomed to collect dust in a jam-packed closet.

It is no wonder that fast-fashion apparel retailers such as Zara and H&M have grown in importance over the past 10 years and luxury retail sales dropped.

Part of the reason for the rise of fast fashion brands such as H&M, Topshop and Zara is that savvy consumers realize there is ultimately little difference between the experience offered.

From H&M to Saks Fifth Avenue, every clothing item is produced in China and advertised on the same hundred-pound models, few of which campaigns ever portray the real lives of women or their true aspirations.

While previously, the luxury fashion world has relied strictly on brand image and exclusivity to set it apart, culture has shifted, and now people have higher expectations around what brands should stand for and do in the world.

The search for the perfect fantasy has been replaced with the idealization of what is natural, which calls for brands to search for a higher purpose.

So what is luxury fashion to do?

No skirting this issue

Luxury brands should recognize these cultural shifts and leverage their powerful communications to empower women to make decisions in the pursuit of real luxury.

What if luxury did not just signify status, elitism and exclusivity, but instead it stood for a different kind of power? The kind of power found in achieving a goal, overcoming an obstacle, creating and supporting a life, being in a meaningful relationship, caring and giving back to the world, making sound financial decisions and exuding confidence regardless of social stigmas?

What if luxury stood for something that actually matters, makes a difference in people's lives, and connects with their core values and humanity?

We have not seen it happen broadly yet, but there is a cultural headwind prevailing that is urging brands to consider the world beyond their own products and profits. And thankfully there are a few companies that have begun to offer what the new generation is looking for in a thoughtful and sustainable way.

The leading examples of this practice come not from the ranks of luxury fashion, but from mass brands that have to fight harder to justify their place in the market. Luxury fashion would do well to take some cues from Main Street not just in style, but in substance.

Dove, a personal care brand owned by Unilever, was among the first brands to really set the stage of "Real Beauty," speaking to women's struggles with self-image and promoting beauty from the inside out.

On Dove's Pinterest page, "Love YOURSELF," one can find tools to meditate, overcome problems, and connect to others. "Dove's social mission is to make beauty a source of confidence, instead of anxiety, for every woman. Use these tools to boost your self-esteem and inspire future generations."

Patagonia Inc., an American clothing company that focuses mainly on high-end outdoor clothing, launched a sustainable ad campaign with the slogan, "Do Not Buy This Jacket," during Cyber Monday in 2011 to promote sustainable business and reduce waste.

The campaign reminds the consumer that, "to make [a jacket] it required 135 liters of water, enough to meet the daily needs (three glasses a day) of 45 people. Its journey from its origin as 60% recycled polyester to the warehouse generated [] carbon dioxide, 24 times [its] weight [] This jacket left two-thirds its weight in waste [...] this jacket comes with an environmental cost higher than its price Don't buy what you don't need."

If you follow that campaign online, you will land on a site which urges you to take a pledge to "Think twice before you buy anything, fix what's broke; sell or pass on what you no longer need, return any gear that is worn out; REIMAGINE a world where we take only what nature can replace."

Nike and Adidas have been researching ways to dye fabrics with no waste, using waterless technology which "results in up to 90% less water, 75% less energy and 95% less chemicals, and zero toxic discharge [] The most significant problem [] is consumer expectations for inexpensive clothing [] Unless customers are willing to pay more for products made with waterless dye technology, the industry isn't going to adopt it."

If the luxury fashion industry can inspire people to pay \$3,000 for a leather skirt, why cannot it inspire people to invest in something beyond their own appearance? Something that will truly deliver a return?

IN PURSUIT of the perfect image and higher sales, the luxury fashion industry is the original offender, convincing consumers that "she is what she wears, which is perfection."

But changing consumer attitudes requires brands to imbue a higher purpose beyond the superficial beautiful faade.

It is time to consider that today's female consumer is looking for substance. And it is time for luxury brands to redefine luxury around more substantial core values.

Luxury today can be and can inspire to something that truly matters to women. Dress us with humanity.

*Mihaela Sarova is strategic director of **Added Value**, New York. Reach her at mihaela.sarova@added-value.com.*

© 2020 Napean LLC. All rights reserved.

Luxury Daily is published each business day. Thank you for reading us. Your **feedback** is welcome.