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How to engage luxury consumers through experiential marketing

November 6, 2017



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Consumers used to let brands do the driving. They would get into the backseat, so to speak, and let the labels lead the way.

Each brand had a story to tell, and by choosing one over another, consumers were effectively buying into one brand's narrative and letting it speak on their behalf. A purchase was a form of self-expression. One might say you were what you bought.

Today's consumers, on the other hand, want to take the wheel.

With a wealth of knowledge at their fingertips and the world at their feet, they are telling brands where they want to go and how they want to get there.

Of course, luxury consumers are still looking for craftsmanship, functionality and design. But, more than ever before, they are also looking for a shared experience with their favorite brands.

This shift, as consumers spend less money on things and more on having experiences, represents a critical challenge for luxury brands. Their consumers are expecting more than just the best quality, so luxury brands will need to give them the experience they are looking for, whether online or in stores.

In other words, what we call experiential marketing has become a must.

Here are the three keys to engaging luxury consumers through experiential marketing.

Speak to their hearts. Delight them

People used to experience the world in superficial ways.

Travel was about seeing many countries for short stays and getting snapshots of the top attractions. Luxury travelers tended to stay in five-star hotels that offered rather uniform, European-style service, regardless of the location.

Shopping abroad often meant going into the same European boutiques found in most major metropolises around the

globe.

Now, however, millennials are driving major changes in the travel and retail arenas. They are searching for authenticity: a local, in-depth experience outside the beaten path.

Millennials are more likely to stay at an Airbnb to experience the city like a local and search out foods, wines and unique products made by local artisans. They want to be immersed in an experience that they will carry in their hearts for a lifetime.

The DFS Department Store in Venice, Italy, offers us a striking example of experiential marketing that helps brands speak to the heart of consumers.

In the restored and revitalized Fondaco dei Tedeschi, one of the largest buildings in Venice, architects Rem Koolhaas and Jamie Fobert have meticulously respected Venice's unique heritage while integrating touches of modernity.

With an entire floor dedicated to exhibitions and events open to the public, they have created a new cultural hub for Venetians and tourists alike. You do not just go to shop, you go to be immersed in an experience.

Art speaks to observers on an emotional level and offers a powerful vector through which to speak to the hearts of consumers. In fact, studies have found that exposure to art can even reduce stress.

Some brands have launched dedicated museums, such as the Louis Vuitton Foundation in Paris, for example, to make art an integral of their brand experience.

Bernard Arnault, CEO of LVMH, explains that with the Louis Vuitton Foundation, "we wanted to present Paris with an extraordinary space for art and culture."

In other words, the objective is really to immerse current and future clients in an emotional experience.

The Christian Dior Exhibit at the Muse des arts dcoratifs offers another striking example of art taking a central place in a brand's ecosystem. This exhibit also helps legitimize the founder as an artist in his own right, and reinforces the idea that art and fashion go hand-in-hand.

Speak to their minds. Entertain them

Storytelling is one of the best ways to engage consumers.

Today's consumers are hungry to learn about the history of each brand, their creative processes, and their artistic inspirations. They want to be engaged on an intellectual level, both in-stores and online. This growing desire translates to a burgeoning "content craze."

Content is indeed key, but it also needs to be credible, authentic, and unique.

Visual storytelling is particularly powerful.

Images, for example, offer a kind of shortcut to the brain: images are processed by the human brain 60,000 faster than words and are more readily memorized.

Videos can be even more effective: people tend to spend five times more time looking at videos than static images. Plus, when you show a video, studies show that there is much better recall of the brand.

Even very short video content such as those shared using applications including Boomerang can be incredibly effective.

Storytelling, whether through relayed anecdotes, historical images or bite-size video, takes consumers on a journey of discovery, even if that journey was only a few seconds long.

This immersive experience can also be created in bricks-and-mortar stores.

Christian Dior, for example, used VR headsets to offer its clients a behind-the-scenes and front-row peek at the house's latest fashion shows and collections.

Following the same standards of excellence met by the Dior workshops, what they call "Dior Eyes" is an ultra-immersive virtual reality headset that uses the latest technology.

Featuring high-definition picture quality and holophonic sound, it allows a three-dimensional dive behind the scenes of the House with a 360-degree view that allows you to move around the virtual world.

Speak to their senses. Immerse them

Finally, engaging luxury consumers means stimulating all five of their senses.

During a shopping experience, consumers should, of course, be invited to see the intricate detailing and feel the textures of fabrics, but smells and sounds are equally, if not more, important.

In fact, with all the other senses people tend to think before they respond.

With scent, on the other hand, our brain tends to respond automatically, on a subconscious level.

A hint of Chanel Number 5 can bring the entire Chanel brand identity to mind, and the effect is even more powerful when combined with a visual cue such as a logo or signature, iconic handbag.

Brands such as Johnnie Walker are using this phenomenon to their advantage.

The Johnnie Walker Sensorium, for example, immerses clients in an experience that engages their five senses as they discover the three Singleton scotch whiskeys flavors. As visitors move through the space, a red room highlights the berry flavors in the red label scotch, for example.

Elaborated as part of a marketing experiment at Oxford University, the sensorium has since become a full-time marketing strategy for Johnnie Walker.

According to Professor Charles Spence, head of Crossmodal Research in the Department of Experimental Psychology at the University of Oxford, "the results signal that multi-sensory environments affect the nose, taste/flavor and after-taste of whisky, despite the fact that participants were aware they were drinking exactly the same drink throughout the experiment. Furthermore, results indicate that our feelings about the environment in which we happen to be tasting/drinking whisky impact on our feelings about the drink itself."

This type of sensory marketing should take its place within a seamless, omnichannel experience: in physical stores, within online ecosystems, using a mobile application, or browsing through a catalog or on social media, clients should feel engaged with the brand identity on multiple levels.

The Sephora Flash store on rue de Rivoli in Paris, for example, offers a smaller physical space, but with easy unlimited access to the entire catalog via digital and can order products missing from the store for delivery in stores or at home.

SO MANY ASPECTS of the retail experience, both online and offline, have been programmed and streamlined and systematized.

Luxury retailers need, therefore, to focus on bringing spontaneity back into the equation by encouraging their consumers to explore and inviting them on a journey of discovery.

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