

COLUMNS

How digital media is reshaping luxury fashion retail's most important job

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By **Duke Greenhill**

The advent of digital and social media turned the business of luxury fashion on its ear.

Luxury retailers have been trying to catch up ever since. Naturally, most turned their attention to the media itself, and many have made great progress.

Burberry, for example, mastered consumer interaction with "Art of the Trench." Tiffany broke ground by cleverly integrating retail and mobile media with the "Engagement Ring Finder" application.

The problem is, internally and operationally, the business of luxury fashion retail is still stuck in an analog mindset.

New breed

The marketing and ecommerce crews are propelling the fashion fleet toward digital realization, but the captains of the ships may not know how to navigate the new space once they get there.

Perhaps more than any other position at a luxury fashion retailer, the fashion director or fashion coordinator is responsible for navigating the space between three key objects: creative and market trends, fashion marketing and branding, and the luxury retail experience.

Indeed, the fashion director is responsible for honing in on these three bodies, which are perpetually on an imminent collision course, and is tasked with safely guiding the ship through the tiny hole between them, beyond which profit and brand equity lie.

Dangerously, however, most luxury fashion directors today rose through the ranks as buyers, forecasters or merchandisers.

If luxury fashion retail wants to maintain the digital momentum its marketing departments are generating, it is going to have to consider a new breed of fashion director.

This will be a breed of fashion director who still has credible knowledge of and passion for the art and history of luxury fashion.

It will be a fashion director who is still skillful with public appearances and fashion thought-leading. But a fashion director who comes from a completely different professional background.

Here is why:

Creative and market trends: It is a small world after all

The arrival of digital media restructured the "outgoing" process of luxury fashion retail the way brands communicate with and sell to consumers.

...and then to consumers.

But many retailers have failed to see that digital media also demands a restructuring of their internal process the way retailers specifically, fashion directors forecast and gamble on the market.

In the analog age, the model of successful fashion retail was linear. That is, it followed a clearly defined chronological path.

First, designers strove to break creative ground while remaining commercially viable.

Second, researchers and forecasters predicted what would be popular.

Third, fashion directors bet on what items to carry based on that research.

Finally, consumers purchased what they wanted, left the rest on the racks, and fashion directors did their best to manage inventories and learn for the future.

In the digital today, however, the world is much smaller. Information, like fashion trends, moves spontaneously. What designers are working on leaks to the public. What a celebrity or other influencer wears reaches millions of consumers overnight via Facebook or Twitter.

Trends now change at a moment's notice, and predicting popularity becomes an impossible race against time.

Therefore, the once-linear fashion direction model becomes a point of singularity, where the chronological steps collide and now occur simultaneously.

In short, to be successful, fashion direction can no longer be approached as a systematic or statistical endeavor. And yet, most fashion directors today came up through the buying ranks, which is a largely statistical, systematic discipline.

The successful fashion directors of the near future will have to have a hair-trigger, broad view of our much smaller world.

Indeed, they will have likely cut their teeth in digital fashion branding and marketing, where they learned to sense the ever-changing rhythms of creative and market trends, and where they learned to react quickly and flexibly to them.

These fashion directors will not be former buyers or forecasters at all, but luxury fashion digital media veterans who understand how the 2.0 world creates and destroys trends instantaneously, and who know where to look to find them.

Fashion marketing and branding: Between bricks and pixels

Luxury fashion ecommerce sales are up, bricks-and-mortar sales are down. That ecommerce is an essential component of successful luxury fashion retail is a no-brainer.

And, obviously, a fashion director with experience in luxury digital marketing and commerce is better suited for this online retailing world.

But, ironically, a fashion director with a luxury digital background is also likely to be better for in-store sales, too.

In addition to forecasting and buying, a primary responsibility of the fashion director is to assist in developing a brand's marketing creative and strategy.

A traditional fashion director, born of the buying and forecasting worlds, will have very limited knowledge as to what makes for effective digital marketing.

A fashion director who is a digital native will be intimate with this new aspect of the job, and will likely be able to easily apply it to traditional channels as well.

At a time when 75 percent of affluent shoppers report that digital advertising ultimately influenced their purchase decision, the value of a fashion director with luxury digital marketing prowess is inestimable.

Retail experience: The importance of the digital story

The final and perhaps most compelling reason that future luxury fashion directors will come from digital branding and marketing backgrounds hinges on the concept of brand experience, or "story."

Today, more than ever, it is not the products that luxury consumers want, but the experiences and emotions that buying the products conjures.

These experiences and emotions are derived from one thing story and beyond forecasting and marketing a

These experiences and emotions are derived from one thing: story and beyond forecasting and marketing, a successful fashion director must know how to leverage the seasonal lines to best tell the brand's story.

Traditional fashion directors, reared on forecasts and spreadsheets, may know well how certain items fit in inventories and product offering diversification. They are unlikely, however, to have the ability to see how the lines fit into the overall brand narrative.

To a traditional fashion director, the litmus test for deciding to carry an item is whether or not the analysis of trend and market data suggests the item will sell.

In today's retail world, where the brand story may begin on a mobile phone or Facebook page, other considerations become paramount.

How does this item or line reflect our brand values and narrative? What does it say about us? What medium is best suited for its message? Where do we want our consumers to "meet" it?

In the context of our brand image, what does carrying this item or line mean? Like words in a great novel, each item must have a purpose that is neither superfluous nor out of context, and it is up to the fashion director to "edit" those words. It is up to the fashion director to help tell that story, and today, the frontier of storytelling is in digital media.

Only a fashion director with experience in luxury digital branding can leverage the imperative power of storytelling to the greatest effect, and to enhance the brand's value and grow the brand's profit.

William Duke Greenhill is founder/CEO of [Greenhill Partners](#), a luxury fashion brand consultancy in New York. Reach him at duke@greenhill-partners.com.

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