

COLUMNS

5 keys for luxury brands to build transmedia campaigns

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If you spend any time on the digital marketing blogs or attend industry pundit-fests, you are sure to come across the unfortunately worded new concept of transmedia.

I say unfortunate because the term sounds equal parts Marshall McLuhan and P.T. Barnum. Something you would expect to throw out a lot at VC mixers.

It is also unfortunate because the concept is actually more simple and valuable than its buzz name.

Unsung hero

Transmedia is essentially telling one story across multiple media platforms. Its potential power has more to do with the vitality and flexibility of a good story than with the breadth of media platforms involved.

Transmedia was first coined by entertainment franchises looking to deepen stories and build viewership beyond their primary points of presentation.

Tim Kring, creator of the hit show "Heroes" was one of the first to practically realize the potential of transmedia.

"Heroes" was more than a television show. It was a giant storyline with a mysterious cast of characters that took place in episodic bits in television, comics, Web and social media.

If one media element was dormant, other elements picked up the story.

Characters introduced in comics during the summer appeared later on the show in the fall.

Fans had a field day connecting the dots and postulating what was next on forums and Facebook.

As Mr. Kring said in Fast Company magazine, "You have to take the concept and put it at the center of the paradigm. Part of it can live on television, but part of it isn't designed to be a television show. It might be designed for a mobile device, say, taking advantage of a GPS-enabled application."

Tuning in

But beyond entertainment, what is the benefit of transmedia to marketers? And, specifically, luxury marketers? It is the relevance, depth and persistence of the audience engagement that gets created.

Relevance because multiple platforms such as an iPad immersive catalog, a mobile shopping application or a 3D Web video allow aficionados to get closer to luxury goods that might otherwise be difficult to handle in person.

Think of it as orchestrating a brand story like a symphony.

First there is the grand overture let us say a TV anthem spot or luxe spread in a fashion magazine. This sets the overall tone of what is to come.

Then, possibly with a URL, QR code or other digital breadcrumb, we are encouraged to explore different themes.

Perhaps the first movement is a continuation of the initial themes: a series of Web videos that play out the mythic story behind the creation of that new fragrance or handbag.

But the best part about a transmedia symphony is that the audience is encouraged to get involved.

Think of a camera tool that allows a viewer to virtually try on the item. Or an opportunity to share a picture of owners involved with the product, such as the Burberry trench campaign.

The point is, luxury marketing is no longer about standing aloof from the audience but inviting them into the story, offering multiple levels of immersion.

Just like a great factory tour ala Willy Wonka we enter the experience as tourists and depart as brand tour guides able to excite others.

Medium and the message

Luxury brands with strong storylines benefit from the depth of engagement offered by transmedia campaigns.

For example, a complex product offering such as a cruise requires multiple levels of engagement to communicate the ship, the destinations, the cabin offerings and the price packages.

Novel engagement tactics including 360-degree Web videos or augmented reality allow potential travelers to virtually experience high-end features that would be impossible without actually getting on board the ship.

What unites these features in a transmedia campaign is a single storyline.

Just like a good show, consistent use of characters and plot points keeps these tactical applications united. Each offers the next chapter in a continuing story that makes it all the more compelling for the audience to continue through your message.

Transmedia campaigns also deliver a persistent experience, thanks to the whenever-whenever nature of mobile devices.

Like that shoe in the store window after hours? Look it up online, read about the designer, see it made it Milan and watch the runway show all from your phone. And if there is a code, snap it with your camera to find out how much they are.

The beauty of this kind of campaigning is the brand/product story can begin at any point the user engages.

No piece of the story is a dead-end as long as the audience is kept curious and knows where to go for more.

Famous five

In considering building a transmedia campaign, there are five aspects the luxury marketer should keep in mind.

1. Have a big enough story: Consistent colors, key visuals and a tagline are not enough.

An effective transmedia campaign has elements that keep the audience involved such as character, plot and resolution.

We are not talking TV's "Lost" here. Think more along the lines of the Old Spice Guy. What is so engaging and consistent about this character that makes us want to know what he would do next?

2. Make each element work best for its purpose/platform: A transmedia campaign does not need every trick in the book.

But ask yourself, if you were to do an effective live presentation, what would you do? How can that be recreated compellingly with today's media tools?

Would you move from a very provocative print ad to the intimacy and tactile world of an iPad to the GPS-enabled world of a smartphone? What would each step reveal about the product and the story?

3. Do not force the audience's path: We cannot know exactly how people find out about our products, so we need to be prepared to engage them at every likely touch point.

Think less about building a funnel and more about a decision tree.

Where are people likely to go next if they want to know more? What element of the story would entice a next step? What is in place at that next step? Is it obvious what to do next?

4. Surprise do not connect all the dots: People are curious, love a mystery and, even better, love being smart enough to solve it. Leave some room for the audience to wonder what is next and even allow them to talk about it.

5. Allow your audience to participate: The luxury market has been somewhat reticent to engage in user-generated content, but this should end.

There are smart ways to allow your audience to demonstrate their wit, style and brand love without denigrating the brand's character. Curate submissions. Offer clear examples of winning ideas. Reach out to enthusiast communities that embrace and illustrate your brand ethic.

CLEARLY, TRANSMEDIA IS nothing new in the world of storytelling.

Any good comic book understands how to serialize content and keep us hooked.

The difference is that we are moving across media platforms that allow different expressions and greater audience participation.

The most challenging aspect to transmedia is building a strong enough story to begin with.

If the story is compelling, the ads, platforms and product demos will unite into an engagement deeper, stronger and more effective than the media dollars could possibly buy.

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