

COLUMNS

Authenticity spotting: Eye for authentic designer handbags

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By AN AMERICAN MARKETER COLUMNIST

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With the speed and ease of online shopping, we have the ability to order anything and everything from takeout to designer handbags. Unfortunately, the same ease of shopping and accessibility that online buying and selling provides has also introduced a world of fraud and counterfeit items brought to market.

To the untrained eye, counterfeit items may appear authentic, especially on a computer screen. We have all been fooled at least once, and the confluence of mistaking these faulty items for the authentic merchandise and the growing number of portals selling the merchandise including counterfeit luxury accessories has fueled a multibillion-dollar market.

Out of the bag

According to the Department of Commerce, losses to United States businesses from the counterfeiting of trademarked consumer products are estimated at \$250 billion a year.

In terms of luxury accessories, the Department of Homeland Security reported that more than 500 million counterfeit handbags, belts and wallets worth \$1 billion dollars were confiscated last year.

In short, counterfeit producers are honing their skill and prowess in both crafting and selling luxury handbags by the minute, driven by a never-before-seen rate of online purchases.

What is more, major online retailers with crowd-sourced merchandise are not consistently successful in preventing counterfeit items from being sold on their platforms. This is a real problem.

One of the largest Internet retailers in the world, for some reason beyond my comprehension, is unable to prevent counterfeit handbags from the submission process.

I have seen multiple registrations using the same images, registered in different locations attempting to sell counterfeit luxury handbags. It may be that there is not a consistent vetting process in place.

Are designer sales teams the end-all when it comes to authenticity?

There have been instances in my experience where even a designer's showroom sales team has not been able to identify items that are, in fact, authentic. The reason for this is that some items are sold primarily in the European market, and they are trained and well versed on styles sold in U.S. showrooms.

Developing an eye for high-quality and high-value designer handbags in today's market comes down to attention to detail.

Retail detail

Focusing on the essentials, individuals can learn to discriminate between an authentic luxury handbag and its counterfeit. These elements include:

Details of construction and linings

Placement of logos

Impeccable stitching

Quality of leathers

Below are a few examples specific to some of the world's most iconic, sought-after designer handbags:

Chanel: Chanel handbags are marked with stickers noting the number and the year the item was produced.

Knowing where to look for these stickers on each of the bags as well as the quality of the stitching is key for authenticity of the iconic brand.

Herms: Herms bags are handmade and known for their impeccable quality. The bags have the distinctive maker's mark, which is a craftsman's mark on the inside strap and inside tab.

The stamp on the strap has either a square or a circle and a letter that represents the year it was crafted. Herms features a chart on its Web site correlating to the letter. If you can tell the differences in the leathers from authentic, high quality, you will be able to spot the fake.

Louis Vuitton: Shoppers and collectors can determine authenticity immediately by taking into consideration the quality of the leather.

In addition, the monogram must be aligned according to the lines of the bag. Seasoned collectors will be able to determine authentic versus counterfeit based on the look and feel of the brand stamps and lining.

HOW DO YOU combat potential blindness to counterfeit merchandise?

In addition to knowing what to look for, you have to read between the lines and know your source.

Always buy from a trusted reseller unless buying directly from the designer.

If you learn the business, learn how to develop an eye for detail. You can learn how to shop and buy from respected dealers and you will never have a problem.

Adrienne Astrologo, owner of Lady Bag International, is an Auctionata vintage handbag expert with more than 25 years' experience in the trade. Based in Philadelphia, Adrienne specializes in vintage handbags from the 1950s to current high-end designer bags and is the author of a reference book, High Fashion Handbags. Reach her at brandedluxury@aol.com.

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