

Introduction

Armani at Guggenheim, the Italian Cinema at the Bon Marche, Silent Writing at Espace Culturel at Louis Vuitton and The Chanel Contemporary Art Container are only some of the examples of luxury firms engaging in cultural activities. It seems as if luxury brands are gradually taking over the role of societal mentors, promoting artistic issues to a wider audience. The concept of mentoring is not new to



the luxury industry, but with the loss of faith in companies, the turbulent economic environment and the turn to more ethical consumption, mentoring needed to be reinvented. The question remains: in which direction?

Luxury firms have been connected to culture from their very beginning¹ so their role of guiding individuals to their personal cultural development seems only natural. It is only recently though, that luxury firms have actively and consistently engaged in such activities, hence there is no integrated guidance framework for practitioners. We need to ask what were the driving forces in the existing context that led to the emergence of this trend? What benefits can come from its adoption? Above all, what are the basic parameters to consider when opting for such an approach?

Forces paving the way for societal mentoring

The luxury industry has been struck by fundamental changes lately. With falls in consumers' disposable income, can luxury brands afford to stay the same? Making luxury accessible to everyone was at the heart of conversations between practitioners and academics a few years ago;² is that still the case? And how did the societal mentoring trend emerge in this context?

Luxury brands have based a significant part of their success on lifestyle branding.³ This means that when consumers purchase such an item, they are not merely buying the product. What they are buying is the whole universe of symbolic attributes and values it is endowed with.⁴ Through such purchases and the subjective intangible benefits provided, consumers attempt to build their ideal selves.⁵ In marketing campaigns you are not simply invited to have a peek at your desirable lifestyle; you get to be an active part of it. That is where the issue of personal development comes in, and builds the way for the societal mentor role.

Is this lifestyle branding approach enough to spur an entire trend? The truth is that this is only the tip of the iceberg. Luxury's relation to art goes back a long way. In its roots, a certain degree of cultural cultivation and *savoir vivre* were considered as prerequisites for the full appraisal of luxury products.⁶ This cultural cultivation is still seen

as essential when referring to the old luxury as opposed to the *nouveau riche*. But isn't it exactly this part of the clientele who are loyal to a brand and also have the disposable income to support their choices? In such turbulent economic times, going back to the traditional roots of luxury is crucial, as a means of survival. Hence, re-establishing the relationship to cultural cultivation is emerging as a key element of contemporary luxury marketing strategies.

Parallel to that is the fact that the mentoring trend has gained ground in the business world.⁷ Initially oriented only towards employees and associates, it gradually spread to customers. Despite the fact that various firms have engaged in cultural promotion over time, it is from luxury firms that such a role is increasingly well received. And why is that? First of all, it is the parent-child relationship that luxury brands share with their customers that boosts the effectiveness of such an approach. Customers are more willing to be advised by a brand they respect and look up to, and with such a close connection to art. At the same time, the very nature of luxury brands is based on the satisfaction of psychological values. Hence, the cultivation of one's cultural side can be seen as a natural extension of the relationship to the brand.

Despite the fact that such activities have been conducted sporadically, it is only lately that they have increased both in number and in type. What urged this shift towards a more integrated approach? It is consumers who are different today, and they demand value from their purchases, now more than ever before. Let us look a bit deeper into how this shift emerged. Up until the beginning of this century contemporary reality was highly influenced by the basic concepts of postmodernism,⁸ hyper-reality, symbols and less human-centric societies. However, with the transition to meta-modernism the mere observation of such universes was not enough anymore: consumers needed more than that. Individuals in the meta-modern era are fulfilling a series of roles through their consumption, whether related to themselves or to others.⁹ It is the value they seek through their consumption that makes the societal mentor role so relevant today. For all these reasons, an integrated and holistic approach to societal mentoring can no longer be neglected.

Pillars of cultural cultivation

So what is it that a person should know, to be considered cultivated? Without answering this question, one cannot proceed to the development of a societal mentor framework. Culture has been characterized as the greatest human invention,¹⁰ which is oriented towards one's development in the fields of art and aesthetics; knowledge and academic excellence; and *savoir faire* and good taste.¹¹

As a luxury manager, why not take advantage of the context described above and leverage the opportunity to adopt the societal mentoring role? We argue that luxury brands act as personal mentors on their customers' route to personal elevation. The activities boosting each cultural pillar are shown below.

Art and aesthetics

A fundamental parameter of culture is that of art and aesthetics. The range is wide: from fine arts such as painting, sculpture, music and architecture to applied arts such as advertising, illustration or packaging. By their nature, luxury brands are created as artistic objects of superior design, whether referring to their display or their promotion. Think of the delicacy of Dior jewellery, the texture of a Chanel bag or the Hermès store window installation by Satoru Eguchi. Luxury brands are innately related to arts and that is why their involvement in artistic activities is seen as a natural extension of their mere existence. In an attempt to guide customers in their artistic cultivation the following can be implemented.

The creation of art centres

Fine arts and their cultivation are promoted by luxury brands through the establishment of art centres, housed either in separate buildings or as an identifiable unit within the luxury boutique. The Chanel Contemporary Art Container and the Louis Vuitton Espace Cultural are two representative cases. Exhibitions of acknowledged or emerging artists from all over the world are frequently held. With a visit to such a centre, consumers both refresh their acquired knowledge of artistic movements and trends and learn about new ones.

The benefits are numerous. The community's artistic awareness is elevated, and this is positively linked to the luxury brand. This makes sense, when regarding these activities through a corporate social responsibility angle.¹² Moreover, cooperation with a local artist facilitates entrance into a new or emerging market, due to the positive associations created. The publicity gained from Bottega Veneta's exhibition in Shanghai named 'Facing Faces', by Chinese artists, significantly boosted its brand image. But the advantages also concern mature markets such as Europe. The brand's role as a facilitator to reconnect to the old values of luxury and culture both within and outside Europe is established, promoted and positively perceived.¹³ Finally, relationships can be created and maintained with artists for future cooperation in product design, advertising and other fields. An indicative case was Louis Vuitton's collaboration with Stephen Sprouse: following the success of the graffiti logo line in 2001, two other graffiti leopard lines followed in 2006 and 2008.

The sponsoring of renowned organizations' cultural activities

Even when turning down the option of an arts centre, for budgetary or strategic reasons, there are other options to support artistic movements. Through the sponsorship of an event created by another organization, its positive connotations are transferred to the brand itself. When the Cité de la Mode et du Design in Paris decided to host an exhibition on Cristóbal Balenciaga in April 2012, it was the conglomerate PPR and the House of Balenciaga that provided the funding. Through such cooperation the brand is established as a true art mentor, without the obligation of running one's own arts centre. Furthermore, it is a way to reach a variety of audiences at the same time. When Mulberry wanted to reach young, hipster consumers and sophisticated artistic ones, it sponsored two cultural activities. To satisfy the first target group a musical weekend was organized at the Parker Palm Spring during the Coachella Valley Music and Arts Festival in California. To reach the other target audience, New York's first Freize Art Fair Festival was sponsored by the brand. As a result, two different types of consumers were satisfied through sponsoring the appropriate event.

The investment in architecture

The third technique is the company's buildings and architecture. Luxury brands' appreciation of beauty in the living space has been gradually established over the years. And who can argue that a refined living space does not increase the individual's personal taste and sense of aesthetics? The most prominent architects have been contracted for the design or renovation of their boutiques in premium locations around the world. With such retail spaces, brands have the chance to create their ideal environment, fully representative of their worlds. In every single point of interaction with the brand, the consumer feels like diving into the brand universe and this feeling is fully explored in the brand's boutique through all the senses. Even those who do not shop from Prada have probably heard of the flagship store that the 'starchitect' Rem Koolhaas designed for the brand in New York. Many enter the store just to have a look around and admire the building. Hence, consumers are exposed to state-of-the-art architecture and neighbourhoods are enriched with breath-taking buildings. These retail stores tend to become landmarks and points of attraction for a variety of people, other than possible consumers, increasing the brand's popularity with a wider audience. Another step in this direction is giving financial help to public bodies; for instance the Italian luxury group Tod's decided to pledge \$34 million towards the restoration of the Coliseum in Rome. It is crucial not to over-exploit such sponsorship commercially. In this case, the brand was positively seen as offering to help its home country and was also given the right to use the image of the Coliseum in its advertisements for two years.

The exposure to art at many points of interaction

Luxury brands expose their consumers to art at various points of interaction throughout the pure consumption process. Whether it is the design of the packaging, a special edition of the product, the artist and photographer who shot the advertisement, or even an art installation in a window in a boutique or in a store, there are a variety of opportunities to use artistic elements throughout the commercial process. Luxury brands can bring a level of artistic inspiration even to pure commercial processes, emphasizing their leading



role in the brand world. Consumers are often tempted to make a purchase due to the brand's artistic and unique elements. The positive side of such activities is that a wide range of consumers, both traditional and modern, young and old, can be reached through the artistic elements and it is through these activities, both commercial and non-commercial, that consumers are coached in their aesthetic development via luxury brands.