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Social Media Off The Rack

Tailoring Social Media Strategy for High-End Fashion

Over the past few years, social media hubs, such as Facebook and Twitter, have rapidly emerged as an essential tool for businesses looking to bolster their brand image and build a relationship with their target market. However, the rush to capitalize on this unprecedented opportunity has resulted in many businesses failing to create an effective social media strategy. Furthermore, many of the companies that originally viewed social media as a competitive necessity are now concerned that their online campaigns might inadvertently damage their brand image.

The high-end fashion industry is no stranger to this conundrum. Larry Rosen, CEO of Harry Rosen, acknowledges the need to engage social media, but has yet to discover an appropriate tactical and strategic balance. "We consider ourselves to be in the learning phase of using social media. We hope that over time it can become a very important communication channel for our younger demographic." This hopeful outlook has developed en masse among fashion retailers, highlighted by Facebook pages that range from less than one thousand "fans" to over a million. However, the social media race has left many companies with online strategies that do not match their brick-and-mortar goals and are almost entirely indistinguishable from one another. As a result, high-end fashion retailers and manufacturers are endangering their brands and defeating their in-store strategies.

Social Media for Luxury Brands

The need for social media in high-end fashion is increasing as Generation Ys begin to form the core of a retailer's client base. Businesses recognize the importance of satisfying the customers of today, as well as laying the foundations for the customers of tomorrow. In the past, this meant updating product lines and adjusting one's brand image. Today, however, building an intimate relationship through social media is essential for companies looking to keep pace with tomorrow's evolving customer base. Failing to recognize social media's importance or appeal will threaten the longevity of a business and leave room for other companies to fill the resulting void. Companies may, however, risk undermining their competitive advantages through frivolously entering social media without a defined strategy in place.

Iconic brands such as Gucci, Lacoste, and Chanel have all established Facebook and Twitter pages for the public to view and follow. However, these pages often conflict with the company's individual marketing and brand image strategies. Firstly, they are almost always undifferentiated due to the formatting standards or functional limitations of sites like Twitter or Facebook. Similarly, many companies only use these sites to inform their users of the latest sale, product introduction or event photos. As a result, the social media experiences these companies provide their users are often

indistinguishable from one another. This is surprising, given that the same brands spend hundreds of millions of dollars each year distinguishing themselves from their competitors. Luxury brands need to understand that their social media strategy should focus on reinforcing a distinct brand image and connecting with the consumer. As such, they must focus less on promotions, announcements and alerts, and more on reinforcing the company's unique identity or culture. Tweets should convey the brand's passion and style by commenting on major news, events or trends just as the company's "Follower" or "Fan" might expect to see from their friends online.

Traditionally, upscale brands have been able to carefully restrict their customers through high-prices and targeted distribution. However, the open nature of social media means that anyone can associate themselves with a luxury brand at the click of a button. This type of exposure can jeopardize a brand's "exclusive" or "premier" positioning, as their names appear alongside advertisements for student housing and Muscle Milk. The result can be the loss of control over their tremendously important brand image.

In the early 2000s, British "hooligans" began to wear Burberry's least expensive products in an attempt to avoid being watched by local police. Though the sales of these products temporarily skyrocketed, the brand eventually became closely associated with thugs, rather than typical upper-class patrons. In order to repair their image, Burberry discontinued many of their then best selling products and unveiled a comprehensive and tightly controlled advertising campaign in high-end magazines.

Twitter and Facebook pose a similar risk to companies. Whenever they "Become a Fan" of a brand, consumers have the ability to damage a luxury brand's meticulously crafted image. Seeing that every one of your friends are Facebook fans of Dolce & Gabbana, for example, would undoubtedly remove some of the mystique and exclusivity of owning one of their handbags. As such, brands that covet their "exclusive" position and customers should be wary of allowing such generic access to their brand and products – however attractive social media may seem at first.

Social media also allows the customer to form their initial or primary relationship with the brand online, rather than through a purchase. The connection made with a purchase is both authentic and personal; the product is the ambassador of the brand. In contrast, following the brand on Twitter provides the customer with a user experience that isn't exclusive, memorable or distinct. By permitting extensive and undifferentiated access to the company online, these iconic brands may be actively diluting the experience associated with purchasing and owning their products.

High-end fashion companies should re-evaluate their social media strategy to determine what they're trying to achieve and how sites like Twitter and Facebook may be endangering their image. While it is certainly important to attract the customers of tomorrow, the fashion industry lives and dies based on the strength of their brands. With the advent of mobile applications and other new technologies, opportunities to gain access to promising markets using social media are bound to arise. Until then, iconic brands must fundamentally change their social media strategies or strategically remove themselves from this marketplace and refocus on more traditional and intimate forms of marketing.

Finding Fit With Fashion Retailers

High-end fashion retailers typically brand themselves with the experience and service they offer to a customer. This decision is a result of the fact that they carry many of the same products as competing retailers and associate with a wide-variety of competing luxury brands. At Harry Rosen, for example, individual members of the sales staff look to build a long-term relationship with specific customers where they can act as their personal wardrobe consultant. The long-term value of a customer explains why retailers strive to create new connections with potential customers, and why they have reacted so strongly to social media trends.

For service-oriented fashion retailers, however, social media can easily conflict with their in-store strategy. On Twitter, for example, users typically form relationships with the corporation as whole, not individual members of a sales staff. As a result, customers can end up circumventing the sales agent experience entirely to take advantage of a sale or product arrival that had been posted by the company's corporate account. These types of purchases are not the type a company can build its foundation upon, and threaten their ability to build long-standing customer relationships and compete with other retailers.

A fashion retailer's social media strategy must reinforce the intimate relationship and high level of service that the com-

pany has branded itself behind. Furthermore, it must transcend the corporate image and become an extension of a customer's in-store sales experience. As such, fashion retailers should shy away from communicating by way of a corporate social media account, and instead encourage its sales staff to use their own company accounts to connect with their customers to build up the company's online presence. This creates a unique competitive advantage that would develop stronger customer ties and drive future sales. The sales agent would be able to use social media to send personal messages checking in with recent customers or to learn more about the client's interests and activities.

As an example, imagine that one of their regular customers "tweets" a message that their sister had become engaged. It would be invasive for the sales agent to reply saying that they have the perfect tuxedo in mind. However, if the customer comes into the store, the sales agent would be able to use this information to build their rapport and to check to see if they had everything they needed for the occasion or recommend any new items. Though most of this information will never be used, it will allow the agent to anticipate the needs of the customer to develop a deeper relationship and create an experience that would be extremely difficult for competitors to replicate or overcome.

In order to create a social media strategy that replicates their core competencies and is truly unique, retailers must train their employees to actively engage the web pages as part of their job function. Companies like Harry Rosen, Brooks Brothers, and Holt Renfrew already invest considerable amounts of time and money into training their employees. This training included how to reach out to customers periodically throughout the year by phone, email or with seasonal cards. This needs to be extended to the realm of social media—particularly when it comes to attracting the customers of tomorrow.

Winning with Social Media

Social media is an incredibly appealing marketplace for the luxury fashion industry, as it provides them with low cost access to millions of young consumers eager to affiliate themselves with iconic brands. However, the rush to capitalize on this new market has resulted in a number of social media strategies that risk damaging these companies' most important asset: their brand. Retailers and manufacturers alike must realize that Facebook and Twitter are not solely just marketing outlets to broadcast announcements of upcoming sales, new product arrivals or hot trends. This type of promotion is something that everyone in the industry can and will do and fails to understand the importance of building a genuine relationship in social media.

Industry players must use this medium to build a personalized relationship with a customer that embodies their unique image or service. In doing so, they can create a competitive advantage that is genuinely attractive to the customer and hard for their competitors to replicate. Maintaining such an intricate social media strategy does add costs, however, the benefits of personal online communication will commensurate. The fashion industry is built upon the ideas of differentiation and customer ties. Until companies with high-end brands are able to develop a social media strategy that allows them to maintain the factors that have been instrumental to their brands' success, they should remove themselves entirely from the social media platform. The risk of missing out on the latest media trend is far outweighed by the threat of becoming overly accessible and irrelevant.

Social Media Pressures Top Brands To Go Mass Market

