12 Luxury Brands in the Digital Age — the Trust Factor

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12.1   Introduction

Luxury brand marketing has been suggested as one of the fastest growing industries [49] with several research institutions routinely reporting on the market emphasising its considerable value. In a Verdict report, it is predicted that the global market for luxury branded goods will be worth £225bn by 2012 [14]. Until recently luxury brands were the preserve of affluent people from privileged backgrounds but with rising incomes and availability of credit, luxury brands have become more affordable to a wider range of consumers than previously [47], [48].

Luxury brands offer the purchaser a high-quality product coupled with the emotional benefits of prestige and exclusivity. However, when it comes to the purchase situation not all luxury brands are delivering the total product and service experience as there remains a gap between expectations and reality of service encounters for luxury purchases with salespeople being described as "unhelpful, intimidating and rude" [7]. Many young luxury brand purchasers have recently turned their back on the retail malls preferring to purchase via the Internet.

Somewhat belatedly, luxury brands are now acknowledging the benefits of the Internet as a communication media and as a means to increase sale volumes. Okonkwo emphasises the importance of incorporating an e-business into the luxury brand's strategy as this medium is likely to be more effective for the younger upwardly mobile generation [34]. With the global Internet population nearing two billion, having an online presence is one area that cannot be dismissed by retailers including those from the luxury sector [46].

Developing an online presence for any company, but especially with high value luxury products requires the brand manager to ensure there is a focus on establishing trust. Furthermore, for the luxury brand there is the additional complication of the abundance of luxury counterfeit products that could lead to consumers' suspicion of the authenticity of a website and its products. The question is how can trust be established in the online marketplace, especially for the luxury branded product with its high price tag? What strategies do luxury brands have to implement to gain trust from online browsers to turn them into purchasers?

12.2   Luxury Brands and E-Commerce

Seringhaus noted that "luxury brands have a myopic view of the virtual retail environment" [41]. Indeed it was suggested that "for luxury brands, the Internet is very likely to fulfil a communication and information role, but less likely to be used as a customer acquisition channel" [37]. More recently the online luxury market has been referred to as being in its infancy with examples of Versace and Prada waiting until 2005 and 2007 respectively to take advantage of this medium [33], [50]. Furthermore, an article in Business Week stressed that "many luxury brands still treat the Internet with caution, worrying an online presence will dilute a sense of exclusivity" [43].

For some luxury brands, their primary connection with online sales involves the strategy of selling last season's luxury goods over the Internet using authorised third party websites. Discount fashion websites such as the private online shopping club Vente-Privee, sell unsold inventory from luxury retailers, at savings of up to 70 per cent. A tightly controlled membership system results in the creation of an air of exclusivity counteracting any perception of second rate products [51]. For the luxury brand the strategy of using third party websites is an arm's length approach of disposing of last season's products without tarnishing the brand name.

In 2010 Bernstein Research noted a small number of luxury brands were increasing their online efforts with Burberry leading the way by allocating one quarter of their global advertising spend to digital media [4]. Burberry is also cited as one of the most active investors of social media among the luxury brands a strategy of importance when targeting the increasingly affluent 25-44 year old prospective customer with their runway shows streamed live to over 140 countries generating around £8 million of paid-for-media [4], [13], [36]. Other luxury brands, however, are not fully embracing the Internet both as a sales platform and as social media. A search of the UK websites reveal that a minority of the top ten luxury brands sell products on their sites preferring instead to use it as a promotional tool. The use of Facebook, youtube and Twitter is limited with some sites not incorporating a direct link to their social media page.

Over ten years ago in an article titled 'Online Luxury Has Limits', it was predicted that online marketing of luxury goods would meet with failure for two main reasons [32]. Firstly, it was suggested that the store atmosphere and the 'feeling special' element created by well trained sales assistants could not be replicated in the online environment. Luxury brands invest heavily in two main areas of retailing: 1) developing a store's atmosphere to induce a sense of exclusivity and 2) developing and training of sales personnel in the art of making each customer who walks through the door feel extra special. Whether the hedonic experience of the luxury store can be transferred to the Internet by the use of creative art and photography is a major challenge and has resulted in many luxury brands playing a wait and see game before fully committing all their product lines to e-commerce especially after witnessing the failure of the pioneering LVMH-owned e-commerce site eLUXURY after nearly a decade's online presence.

The second reason to limit the applicability of the Internet to luxury brands is the problem of 'trust' both in the form of internet security as well as trust in the process [32]. The development of trust in a website is crucial as it has been shown to be a mediator in the relationship between website attributes (privacy, security, information design and communication) and purchase intention [19]. In the luxury goods sector developing trust is more complicated as the Internet has "spawned a lucrative trade in counterfeit goods" [2]. Even as far back as 2001 companies were being indicted for selling counterfeit luxury goods over the Internet and more recently eBay was fined for failure to prevent sales through its website of counterfeit luxury products purporting to be original Louis Vuitton, Christian Dior and Hermès [35], [45]. Recognising that luxury brand owners require Intellectual Property specialists, Burberry has an active eBay monitoring policy that has resulted in exposing several prosecutions [2]. Other luxury brands such as Louis Vuitton are similarly aggressive in

their approach employing large numbers of lawyers full-time to take legal action globally [5]. Even though there have been several headline prosecutions there still remains an abundance of counterfeit luxury products and this "has brought many luxury brands to consider the Internet as a risk" [4]. Moreover, when confronted with various websites selling the same luxury product the consumer may also feel uncertain as to whether a site is in fact the genuine luxury brand's website. Incorporating cues that engender trust in the brand and its website are all important in such a difficult environment.

12.3   Developing Trust in a Luxury Brand Website

Trust plays an important role in many social and economical interactions involving uncertainty and dependency, and is one of the crucial factors that influence a successful e-commerce implementation.   Lack of trust has been repeatedly identified as one of the most formidable barriers for people to engage in e-commerce activities [8] and hence building and sustaining consumer trust in the virtual environment is vital for a company to succeed in the digital age. In the case of luxury brands with their high price tag, consumer uncertainty mainly revolves around financial risk. In particular whether the website is owned by the genuine brand and if so, if there is dissatisfaction with the expensive purchase is there an easy and reliable process to return the goods?

It is human nature for consumers to be suspicious while engaging in online shopping. This may be because, in "traditional" business transactions, buyers can interact with sellers and physically touch the products, whereas in most online shops consumers are unable to interact personally with the online retailers and can only rely on the photos and descriptions provided. Therefore, the nature of B2C e-commerce compared with the traditional face-to-face market leads to transaction risks relating to the uncertainty of the online retailer's identity and product quality. It is important to reduce the barriers to purchase, in other words; it is important for the online vendors to develop a trusting relationship in order to maintain consumer loyalty.

In order to create a strong trusting relationship between online luxury seller and consumers, the following factors should be considered [9]:

Table 12.1   Trust Developing Factors

Component	
Usability	Navigation Download speed Ease of use (User friendliness)
Information content	Privacy/Security policies Company information Product Information Company Policies Contact Details
Technological Professionalism	Professionalism Competence
Aesthetics	Overall attractiveness Consistency White space Readability (colour contrast, clear font, etc) Page length Colours Graphics
Safety	Payment system Privacy measures Security measures
e-CRM	Communication Channels After sales services
Order Fulfilment	Delivery time Tracking number

Source: Chen, 2009

12.3.1 Usability

The usability aspect of an online seller's website refers to certain features which make using the site effortless, fast and logical, thus either directly or indirectly creating an impression among the users that the seller is professional, capable and trustworthy [10], [38]. Studies into user Internet behaviour recommend clear, consistent navigation to improve both sales and site traffic [11]. Navigation communicates trustworthiness as it conveys respect for customers by showing that the company is committed to providing a clear, fast service for the "time-deprived" consumer [3]. To promote ease of use certain conventions are suggested such as ways of finding different types of information and accomplishing particular

tasks, e.g. groups of related items or in sequences of steps [30]. These conventions make the consumer feel comfortable by making the situation seem normal and familiar. Familiarity, in turn, through situational normality, increases trust [29].

12.3.2 Information Content

Luxury brands should ensure there is sufficient information on the company, products, terms and conditions, privacy and contact details, and that it is clearly written to put the consumer's mind at ease. The provision of comprehensive, current, personalised, and community-specific information, which is sufficient in both depth and width, is crucial in gaining trust [26]. Web design guidelines emphasise the importance of well-written information, and the absence of typographic errors, and more importantly jargon-free content to ensure users are not deterred from the site nor discouraged from bookmarking [17].

Expressed in bureaucratic and legalistic jargon, privacy policies are often buried deep in the website, not to be found and understood by the user [25].Yet, explaining why information is gathered and used, and whether consumers' anonymity is at risk, promotes trust [25], [15]. The importance of this is demonstrated in Keen's description of privacy policies as a "matter of dialog and explanation – shared understanding between your company and its customers" [25]. A complete, comprehensible privacy policy conveys to consumers that the seller conforms to a code of ethics and has nothing to hide, in turn increasing the likelihood of an exchange of personal information.

Whereas detailed, technical explanations of security decrease the level of consumer trust, a clear, concise explanation of the security measures promotes trust [10]. It is important to explain encryption methods and other techniques with which the users are familiar, perhaps through the use of metaphors and textual information, and provide clear visibility of the security techniques employed [15]. The emphasis is on providing convincing, non-technical descriptions of the technical security solutions, thereby showing consumers that security has been "taken care of" and assuring them that the site is trustworthy.

The existence of a "FAQ" section has similarly been claimed to promote trust [6], [27]. Firstly, this section is perceived as evidence that companies are taking an interest in assuring consumers' well-being [6]. Secondly, it is believed that some consumers use it as an indication of size, which, in turn, has been shown to be positively associated with perceived trustworthiness [6], [23].

Providing information about the company, its history, founders and employees has been suggested to promote credibility and trust [15], [27]. Not only does providing company information facilitate familiarisation with the company, but it also assures the consumer that the e-retailer is a real company as opposed to an unreliable firm, thereby enhancing the possibility of relationship building between the consumer and the retailer. A study of luxury brand websites revealed a disregard for the consumer and their information needs. Company information was available in only half of the websites while a help section was included in less than one fifth of sites [37] a situation that needs addressing to fully exploit the benefits of luxury brand e-commerce.

Complete, accurate product information also establishes credibility and trust in an e-retailer [27]. Descriptive, convincing information projects passion about, and interest and knowledge in, the seller's subject area, thereby communicating expertise. However, for product information to be "good" and trustworthy, it must be correct and up to date.

Finally, the provision of contact details encourages trust as it provides a link to the company thus showing the customer that the company is legitimate with a physical location [21]. Providing an e-mail address, toll-free help lines and a physical address may help to establish a relationship with the customer, which, in turn, promotes not only trust but also long-term retention [17].

12.3.3 Technological Professionalism

Professionalism is a compilation of several website features and, as the opposite of amateurism, promotes trust and credibility [17]. The factors that are regarded as having the greatest impact on perceived retailer trustworthiness are technological complexity and the importance of being up to date. Although ignorant of details, consumers are aware of the risks, and thus a trust-promoting website should exude a technical prowess. This is often communicated in two ways: first, through a good overall design, which then shows the consumer that the retailer has sufficient knowledge of and control over the underlying technology involved in the purchase process, and secondly, by assuring the consumer of the retailer's ability to safeguard his/her private information [9] particularly important in the case of wealthy luxury brand consumers.

Maintaining an up to date website has been recognised by retailers, who now advertise their date of last site modification. Simultaneously, the use of "what's new" and "coming soon" sections communicates dynamism and freshness. By encouraging consumers to return to the site, these sections also promote familiarity and, thereby, the formation of trust [21]. Secondly, the home page must be up to date in terms of the technology employed. Although web designers are justifiably wary of using the latest "gadgets" and rightly design pages for the masses, using outdated security techniques, which may/may not have been proven unsafe, indicates an inability to handle the transaction, and privacy and security aspects.

12.3.4 Aesthetics

Trust building is strongly affected by the users' first impressions of a website [15]. As the point of "first look" at the home page plays a pivotal role in gaining and holding the consumers' attention. A convincing website lures customers in, while messy, unorganised pages drive them away [21]. In addition, a sloppy site implies a disregard for potential customers. Following the "KISS" (Keep It Simple and Stupid) principle then the best web pages are "clean", "clear", "relatively simple" and "well laid-out" contributing to the development of trust.

As consumers gain experience in browsing, they become accustomed to certain features. Consistency is important in effective web design and refers to the consistent placing of logos, repeated text, buttons, graphics and navigation tools throughout the website. Consistency should also be employed in the product descriptions and in the chosen colour, and text font and size. It is also a sign of competence and consideration, as it enables users quickly to evaluate the usefulness of the site and match their expectations, while also giving them a sense of control and improving situational normality [10], [19], [39].

The use of colour can also improve page clarity, attract attention, highlight information and facilitate information structure [27]. As well as being part of the aesthetic experience of browsing [28], colours are used to convey the nature of the company behind the website: bright colours usually represent "a fun site", while more serious sites work in shades of blue, grey and brown. In user studies, it has been found that dark colours are unappreciated by users, preferring instead light background colours with high contrast [6].

Since consumers often visit a site after browsing several sites, and since reading from a screen is more difficult and slow than reading from the printed page, web pages should be "spacious". Users get frustrated by, and dislike crammed web pages that offer too much information on one page, or have too many graphics or banner ads [6]. Simultaneously, the use of space enables the user quickly and effortlessly to obtain an overview of the site's content, thereby facilitating navigation.

As the Internet is primarily information based, information should be displayed promptly and clearly. Following the KISS principle, the text should be available immediately, whilst waiting for the graphics to load. It should be clear, strong, and stand out distinctly from the background. For this reason, light colours are ill-suited as text colours. Professionals prefer fonts such as Arial, as these are available on almost all PCs. Although the impact of the text may be greatest in terms of satisfaction, illegible policies do not encourage information sharing or promote trust. Illegibility is also considered to be a sign of amateurism, which, in turn, has been claimed to reduce trustworthiness [21]. Going against the keeping it simple principle a number of luxury brands have employed Flash increasing the time it takes to load a page. This in turn increases the likelihood of frustrating the customer resulting in a quick exit.

12.3.5 Safety

Individual privacy issues have become a critical factor that greatly affects consumers. Privacy and security measures have both been widely adopted by online retailers to ensure the safety of their consumers. There are various tools and techniques which can be used to enhance privacy. In addition to certain techniques, such as passwords, users have the option of deactivating cookies—pieces of information that are sent back and forth between the server and the user and are used to track the consumer's activities. Simultaneously, PGP (US Encryption Software Corporation) is commonly used to encrypt files and e-mail to promote confidentiality, reliability and integrity [40]. Yet, consumers are at the mercy of the retailer in respect to the use and sale of secondary information, and the secure storage of

their personal details. As privacy policies are the only way for retailers to express to consumers that details will be kept private, the provision of these policies is vital.

The requirements for security have been recognised by practitioners, and there are already various techniques available that attempt to combat the issue of security threats by providing confidentiality, integrity, availability and non-repudiation. Secure Socket Layer (SSL) can be regarded as the most commonly used security protocol. The security protocol provides data encryption, server authentication, message integrity, and optional client authentication for a TCP/IP connection [18]. 3-D Secure is another common solution used in providing security during transactions. Developed by Visa and adopted by Mastercard, the authentication protocol was designed specifically with e-commerce in mind to provide another layer of security for both the retailer and consumer's peace of mind [1].

12.3.6 Consumer Relationship Management

Consumer relationship management, where users gain enough trust to engage in a commercial relationship with an online retailer, is one of the key areas that most companies are trying to improve. Customer relationship management can also be linked to interface effects by creating a channel for interactive direct communication in the virtual environment or in the real world for consumers. This is important for luxury brands as it is known that timely communication is a factor in generating trust [19]. The use of an online helpline introduces a one-to-one communication vehicle in a similar manner to the personalised experience in the store environment but with the superiority of being available 24 hours per day unlike the limited opening hours of the bricks and mortar store.

Interactivity is crucial in developing a relationship with the customer which in turn creates trust in the company. The CEO of Alexander McQueen was quoted in an article as stating "we've had to become more interactive with customers and have ramped up our activity since the launch of the site" [16]. Kurt Geiger has also invested in developing its interactive features in an attempt to recreate the experience in the retail store [42]. Live podcasts have been undertaken by several luxury companies including Gucci, Christian Dior and Karl Lagerfeld [44].

Developing online brand communities is an intuitive strategy for luxury brands as they have history and tradition that can bring members together and provide a "critical demarcation between users of their brand and users of other brands" [31] and this sense of being special and different to users of other brands can engender loyalty and trust. Cartier was the first in the luxury sector to embrace a brand community strategy by employing a music-focussed community on MySpace to promote brand interaction globally [22]. In 2009 Burberry launched its Art of the Trench social networking site to develop a sense of community within its followers. Drawing like-minded consumers together in such a manner facilitates the development of the community and can be an effective competitive strategy. "A brand related social networking site could be very useful for luxury customers who want recommendations from peers they trust" [24].

The use of social media, however, appears to be a confusing picture with various levels of commitment by luxury brands [36]. For some companies their websites are up front highlighting the social media platforms they employ whereas for others "it is like looking for needle in the hay to find out if they have something" [36].

12.3.7 Order Fulfilment

Order fulfilment is an important factor in developing trust as customers need to have their items delivered on time with complete accuracy in order to be satisfied and loyal. Companies should provide the facility to check the order status as well as informing customers when the purchased product has been dispatched. Should it be necessary to return the product the website should provide an easy to follow returns process as this is important in the development of trust.

12.4   Conclusions

The online purchase of luxury brands by virtue of their high prices might be perceived as a risky undertaking. Developing trust between the company and the customer is an important strategy as it overcomes the key obstacle to making an online purchase. The overall quality of a luxury brand's website and in particular characteristics such as warranties, website security and policies on privacy have been shown to contribute to the consumer's level of trust in purchasing from the site [12], [20]. However, a study of luxury online brands revealed that only a small percentage included term and privacy terms (23 percent and 18 percent respectively) and information on the company was only offered by one quarter of the luxury sites [41].

Having a well designed website that conforms to what the customer expects from such a website i.e. situational normality, contributes to trust [29]. This can be addressed by the inclusion of an uncomplicated, no questions asked product return procedure, overcoming the sense of vulnerability often attached to the online purchase of high value products. Ensuring the entire process of purchasing from the luxury website is easy and straightforward is also important not only for trust-building in the initial purchase stage but also for subsequent purchases as trust in a website has been shown to be a factor of the consumer's satisfaction level with a previous purchase i.e. experience-based trust [29].

Research has highlighted there is a strong association between brand name and trust in the website [39], and this suggests that luxury brands, with their high quality brand image are one step ahead of other brands in the quest for online sales. However, this is not the only factor in trust building and those luxury brands that do not commit to a focus on the four dimensions of usability, information content, technological professionalism and aesthetics might be detering customers. As luxury brands move to change their websites from merely a promotional tool to a sales platform, strategies that create a high level of confidence in purchasing is ever more important.

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