

Watch your Brand

An extravagance that defies logic...

Is there any other product quite as enigmatic as a luxury watch?

As the world gritted its teeth in the face of economic recession in 2009, demand for high-end luxury watches confounded the pessimists and remained defiantly robust. Admittedly fewer pieces were sold, but there was a marked shift towards the more illustrious and expensive prestige brand models. The desire to own a fine luxury watch not only continues undiminished but its purchase has become even more momentous - it might be even be justified as a secure investment in uncertain times. We should, however, be under no illusion that the real motivation is invariably emotional rather than rational, i.e. "rather than seeing my money as a figure in a deposit account earning very little return, I can see it as the exquisite timepiece that I have always dreamt of". So, when the heightened allure of a fine watch, as a luxurious escape from the grind of daily life, starts looking like an eminently sensible investment, the rational objections dissolve enabling the emotional desire to be consummated.



The fact is, an expensive watch is a personal indulgence by any reckoning, an exquisite object of desire that is often hard to justify. After all, for less than the cost of each of the regular services you're going to need on that new mechanical masterpiece you could buy yourself a new, top-of-the-range Apple iPod (think of it as a super-accurate quartz timepiece with a free music player attached). Perhaps it is its irrational extravagance that makes it such a delicious object of desire. There are, it seems, few possessions that can generate such emotional gratification and pride of ownership. "To be considered a success in life...", says French advertising guru, Jacques Séguéla, "...you must own your first Rolex by the age of fifty". The legendary brand name, or that of a similarly evocative brand possibly more to our taste, and the expectation that it signifies is a promise to which we aspire and which we know will be recognised.

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With a multitude of luxury watch brands to choose from, some more memorable than others, but each with its own particular style, heritage and personality, how do we choose the watch brand that is right for us?

First we need to recognise that a watch is, quite an intimate possession, it is, quite literally, attached to us and accompanies us practically everywhere we go. It becomes an extension of ourselves and, by implication, our personality. It communicates our taste, attitude and lifestyle, or more accurately, different 'phases' of our lifestyle: for example, a smart dress watch might express our social evening phase, a chunky sports watch for the leisure phase and, perhaps, something more businesslike for the professional phase of our life? Our choice of fine watch is as personally-expressive as our choice of scent, clothing or the car that we drive. In fact it is arguably a more authentic indication of our genuine personality than any of these because it is typically chosen with a lifetime in mind - rather than a season, or a few years at most.

So, given how personal an expression our choice of luxury watch is, what the criteria by which we judge which one is right for us? Research has shown that the various criteria (mostly subconscious) can be distilled into the following three decision-making themes:

Product design: "Do I like how it looks"

Brand image: "Do I like what it says about me"

Personal engagement: "Do I want to own it?"

"To be considered a success in life, you must own your first Rolex by the age of fifty..."

Ironically for watch manufacturers the most important of these three components is also the hardest to measure and the least well-understood - brand image. Brand image is the intangible promise that lives in the minds of everyone with any awareness of the brand. It encapsulates everything we know about the brand, its attributes personality and values as well as the people, events and things we associate with it. We are all influenced, perhaps more than we realise, by the emotional package of elements that make-up a given brand, as well as our impressions of others who choose it (many Audi drivers may be impressed by the design, comfort and performance of BMWs but they will not buy one because being a "BMW driver" does not match their self-image!). We also develop, in our subconscious, a sense of relative brand worth. As with all brand values this is dynamic and can rise and fall over time.

Although it is often slow to build it can be quick to fall, because while it might take many years to nurture and build a brand's reputation, this can be lost very quickly when something undermines the trust we place in it.

Criteria for choosing a watch:
"Do I like how it looks"
"Do I like what it says about me"
"Do I want to own it?"

The luxury watch consumer, like those of any other sector, is continually absorbing information and subconsciously using it to shape and refine the brand images that exist in their mind. Because brands are memorised and recalled in much the same way that we think about people, we

find ourselves attracted to some more than others. So, when we go about selecting the brand that best matches our own personal values it is rather like finding a partner and falling in love. The story begins with a growing awareness of the options available which leads to a heightened sense of those brands with which we feel a natural empathy and, more particularly, the products designs of those brands which best express our values. This can take time and will draw on a number of cues in the journey from 'awareness' through 'preference' to 'commitment'. It is a courtship that might begin with a repertoire of possible suitors which are steadily honed down until we settle on the one that best fits our self-image and then that is the only that one will do!

Start with the brand, the rest will follow...

With brand image being so important, it is easy to see why watch manufacturers spend such enormous sums on advertising and sports sponsorship. Unfortunately, too many Swiss watch manufacturers, for all their brilliance in creating, manufacturing and selling exquisite watches, have yet to truly master the discipline of strategic brand management. Consequently, most marketing programmes fall into the “just another watch campaign” category (i.e. a backdrop of some aspirational imagery with a yacht, powerboat, sports car, aircraft, etc., a bland English headline, intelligible to all international audiences, a standard ‘ten-to-two’ shot of the watch, some technical credentials and a line about how long we have been making watches...), alternatively, the brand logo might simply appear as the ‘official time keeper’ at some sports event (which, as everyone knows, amounts to little more than ‘name-drop’ publicity). With the greatest of respect to these esteemed firms



and their advertising agencies, how many watch advertisements can you recall and describe right now? Leaving aside the exceptional “You never actually own...” campaign from Patek Philippe, few of us can manage more than a couple of others at best. Now, how clearly could you describe the different watch brand personalities? Probably not very accurately - other than to highlight the prestige of big names.

Now try the same test with cars, drinks or clothing brands and notice the difference. In the luxury watch industry, it is as if marketing expenditure is regarded as a necessary ‘cost of entry’ to the luxury brand marketplace and, provided the anecdotal feedback from the trade and the retail distribution is satisfactory (corroborated, hopefully, by the eventual sales of the watches), that is enough. For the average consumer (as opposed to the avid watch geeks), the challenge of differentiating between the many alternative brands means that the most dominant, consistent brands stand-out even more strongly. The retailer can redress the balance somewhat by presenting the case for the others, but, by that stage in the process, many consumers’ minds will already have been made-up. A glance at the correlation between brand strength and sales trends across most markets will demonstrate this.

Effective brand management is also key to mastering the other two decision-making themes: ‘product design’ and ‘personal engagement’. First, with respect to product design, a clearly-articulated sense of the brand’s values, personality and vision will enable a well-defined creative brief to be prepared which can save time and eliminate confusion. All too often new designs rely on the instinct and imagination of the creative studio to anticipate and create what it believes customers will find attractive, within the context of their own personal interpretation of what the brand stands for. Any doubt will generally be resolved by erring on the side of caution rather than risk alarming distributors or end customers.

“...most marketing programmes fall into the ‘just another watch campaign’ category”

So, when a new consumer trend emerges (such as the demand for sports watches with black cases and rubber straps - as pioneered by brands such as Hublot and Bell&Ross), many high-end manufacturers will literally spend years trying to decide whether or not it is appropriate for them stick with the familiar or embrace the trend.

A clearly-defined and well-articulated brand, on the other hand, makes it quick and easy to determine whether such an approach was 'on' or 'off' brand.

The third theme, 'personal engagement', refers to the final process of actually bonding with the product by handling it, trying it on, evaluating its quality, determining the choice of finish or colour options then, ultimately, assessing its value for money and after sales support, before making the commitment. Once again, a well planned brand strategy will inform and direct each element at every stage in the customer journey so that all touch-points project the same consistent values - from quality of the bracelet (the clasp, like the car door handle, is the first tactile interaction with the product and needs to be "on brand") to the design of the presentation box, and from the working of the warranty to the price-point that clinches the deal.

There probably is no other product quite as enigmatic as a luxury watch. Nor is there a market quite as enigmatic, nor a strategic brand marketing challenge quite as ripe for change.

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