



Marketing

## Social Climbing: Luxury Fashion Brands Must Embrace Social Media

Dana Gers 10.14.09, 7:00 PM ET

Image is everything to luxury fashion companies. Preserving prestige is what sets brands such as Gucci and Hermes apart from Gap and H&M. But that same elitism is keeping certain luxury brands from engaging in social media, one of the most powerful forms of marketing at the moment.

Luxury fashion companies are known for setting trends when it comes to their products, but their media preferences are surprisingly dated. Most prefer to simply buy ad space in publications where they can present--and control--their image in glossy two-page spreads. While traditional media will remain an important advertising vehicle for high-end fashion companies, social media needs to be part of the marketing mix too.

Why is it time for these companies to "get social"? Let's start with the obvious and compelling numbers: About half of the U.S. adult population is actively using social media Web sites, according to a Travelers Enterprise market research study conducted in August. And, according to Facebook statistics, among the next generation of luxury consumers--Generation Y--96% are using social media. Twenty-seven percent of these folks also claim that their purchase decisions are influenced by information gleaned from these sites, according to a recent study by Hill & Knowlton.

Numbers aside, social media strikes at the heart of what luxury brands offer: passion. The ardent fashion fans who put their name on a waiting list for the latest Richard Prince bag from Louis Vuitton or pre-order their Chanel cocoon collection at the fall trunk show or stand in line to meet Miuccia Prada are the ones who are most engaged with the brand. They are also among the most loyal customers. Couldn't we all use more of those these days?

Finally, here's perhaps the biggest reason for luxury companies to jump into social media: Brand makers that don't create their own conversation with their most passionate customers through social networks risk having a passionate consumer create that presence instead. Facebook and Twitter are cluttered with brand sites that weren't created and aren't maintained by marketers. And, what happens when brand makers don't initiate the conversation? Two good examples can be found on @123dolcegabbana on Twitter and the Emporio Armani fan page on Facebook. Both feature fans boasting of their discount brand purchases and fashion critiques, but no voice from anyone who officially represents the brand.

Deciding to embark on a social media strategy isn't just as simple as setting up a Facebook account. Here are a few points to consider before jumping in:

1. Find the right brand "voice." For luxury fashion brands that pride themselves on elitism and inaccessibility, this may be the most difficult challenge in developing a social media strategy. Communication on Facebook, MySpace and Twitter must be inherently less formal, more personal and intimate than the boilerplate copy that appears on a brand Web site. Using a designer or a creative director is a good way to start. "At Saks in New Orleans with the girls from Mississippi! TB," tweets designer Tory Burch. And on Coach leatherwear's Facebook wall, the company promotes its affiliation with the Breast Cancer Research Foundation, noting this is "truly a collection with a cause!" Both are good examples of speaking in the brand's voice with content designed to connect with their audience.
2. Commit to consistent communication. Determine how frequently a brand can communicate and do it consistently.

Communication on social networks Facebook and MySpace should happen a few times a week. Communicating through Twitter, given the shorter, more staccato nature of the medium, should be more frequent than that.

3. Make it easy for customers to find your brand on social media. An invitation to "Follow us on Facebook/Twitter/MySpace" should be included on a marketer's Web page. Luxury companies that don't want to clutter a pure brand environment with these links should place them in the "About Us," "News," "E-mail registration" and "Purchase confirmation" sections. Fans should be allowed to update their own status with news of a recent purchase on your e-commerce site, as in "just scored the new YSL Roudy bag online!!" Finally, a brand's official site pops up when folks search for it on social media sites.

4. Expect a conversation--and criticism. In social media, companies aren't simply pushing information out there; they must expect to receive information back, and be prepared to manage the good with the bad. For marketers, this kind of immediate and direct feedback can be precious, alerting the company to product quality or customer service issues, but it can also be an exercise in crisis management if not handled quickly and professionally. Put a plan in place for how tricky issues will be handled.

5. Create original content for the social media outreach. Even if a company has a wonderful Web site, executives can't expect to simply re-purpose this content on social media platforms. Ralph Lauren has one of the most dynamic and interactive Web sites out there. But the content reappears verbatim on Facebook. Where are the up-to-the-minute wall postings? Louis Vuitton, a recent adapter of social media, seems to be on the right track; it broadcasts its spring 2010 ready-to-wear show live exclusively to Facebook followers, offering a big incentive for recruiting new fans and a reward to its most passionate customers. Another company embracing social media, Burberry, featured designer Christopher Bailey in a videotaped thank you to Facebook fans, with an acknowledgment that he personally is reading the comments posted on the wall, and a promise of exclusives just for them--a clever way to build loyalty and relationship with his core followers.

6. Follow the 80-20 rule. Social media is a forum to engage and build relationships, so it shouldn't be used to deliver a non-stop commercial message. Devote 80% of content to inform, inspire, amuse and connect with your fans around a brand, and 20% of content around product-driven messages. The more connected and inspired consumers feel, the more receptive they will be to ad messages.

Luxury marketers continuing to overlook the power of social media do so at their own risk. While it is no silver bullet for addressing all marketing communication needs, when done well, social media may be the one weapon in your marketing arsenal that inspires brand passion and product desire, and creates a legion of loyal followers.

*Dana Gers has spent most of her career working in marketing communications for luxury companies, where she specializes in modernizing established, classic brands. Her experience includes working for Baccarat, the Movado Group, Guerlain and, most recently, Salvatore Ferragamo, where she served as senior vice president of marketing for the brand in North America. A graduate of Cornell University, Gers is married with two children and lives in New York City.*