

THE INTERNET COMES OF AGE

At the end of the 1990s, there was much excitement about the Internet and how it might work for luxury brands, but for many it didn't live up to its early promise. This was due in large part to the technology and the fundamental problem of dial-up access speed which made complex imagery difficult to use. In the last 12 months, however, broadband has rapidly become commonplace, particularly at the upper end of the market, and luxury brands are beginning to realise that the Internet is once again worth their serious attention. At the same time as launching a regular column on this subject, we decided to put a series of questions to an expert in this area. ALEXANDER GALLE, who is the Creative Director of Gallé and whose portfolio includes websites for the likes of Asprey, Boucheron, Corum, Garrard, Gil Carvalho, The Halkin, Jimmy Choo, Villa Feltrinelli and Yves Saint Laurent, gives us some thoughtful answers

What has changed in the online world that makes the Internet a more attractive proposition for luxury brands?

I think there are three big developments that have made online advertising more attractive to luxury brands today than four or five years ago.

The first is to do with people and the evolution of digital producers in terms of integrity and professionalism. Initially, just after the dotcom boom, when every online agency was called Somethingfish or Yellowfrog or some other wacky pseudo-Californian name, there was little integrity in the world of online advertising. The producers of digital work are now much more professional. Personally I believe that, as in fashion and luxury, people should be much more prepared to put their own name, as gentlemen and designers, to their company: there is a real person called Yves Saint Laurent or Salvatore Ferragamo. It's a different game when your personal reputation is at stake.

The second development is to do with the landscape, with the opening up of the media. It's not about this or that website or online campaign in isolation, it's about the whole communication landscape and how it can feed a customer's journey that starts at the first point of contact with a brand, and ends with purchase and brand loyalty. I would of course include more 'traditional' media in this journey, such as TV or print. As an illustration, I have a client who is making her mind up today between investing in a new conventional ad campaign or a TV documentary that invites viewers to an online space, with a discussion forum and an online shop that sells the documentary's book. That's four different kinds of media, leading to a much deeper customer experience of her brand.

But the third – and by far the biggest – development of the past few years has been in the medium itself: online technology has become more powerful and sophisticated. You could call it 'near transparent'. A transparent medium is one that is so integrated into the way we live that we don't even realise it's a medium anymore. Similarly, interactive media have become less about technology and more about communication, which for us means an opportunity really to 'enchant' the audience.

Can you elaborate on this idea of 'enchantment'?

The big point to make is that, with the advent of broadband, integrated campaigns are now more seamless, so the basic rule of profitable communication has become more pertinent than ever: to say and show the right things at the right time in order to lead people to the natural conclusion that they must buy. The critical question, of course, is how you achieve this online. How can interactive advertising 'enchant' your customer, the way simple storytelling or singing does?

If you will permit a short linguistic digression... there is a German folk song that starts with the following lines: "Wo man

singt, da lass' dich ruhig nieder. Böse Menschen haben keine Lieder."

The English translation of this is: "Where you singing hear, lay yourself down, free from fear. Men intent on wrong never have a song." In French, we have a single word that translates the line "Men intent on wrong": "méchant", meaning "bad man". The odd thing is that this word "méchant" is composed of the prefix "mé" - which means "no" in old French - and "chant". Méchant therefore quite literally means "without song".

Just as in French, the idea of bad, the idea of wrong, is so intrinsically related to the absence of chant and of enchantment, that only one word exists to describe them both. So, in general human interaction and communication, the state of enchantment is equated with the feeling of good. Luxury brands' approach to online communication surely has to start from this point.

Why?

Because, apart from the notion of perceived product quality, the aspiration towards some transcended and higher good – a good beyond the product – is a key value at the core of most of them. So, it's primarily through intelligent and sustained use of 'enchantment' that online communication can help luxury brands – more than other brands – to develop their core values, stronger identities and better commercial results.

Can you give us an example?

When you become truly engaged in a film, for example, you believe you're thinking, but really it's the film that's doing the thinking for you. Your chain of thoughts was going in one direction, but through aesthetics – rhythm, colours, narrative – the film hijacks that chain and takes it in a different direction.

The point of contact between the two chains of thought – yours and the film's – is what you could call the 'point of enchantment', the point at which the film takes over. This is done using the same language we use to describe our most engaging experiences. We say things that are physically connected to the way we perceive things: we talk in 'seeing mode', in 'hearing mode', or in 'touching mode'. Viscerally, we experience films through the same modes. We are just talking about a more complex way to do rhetorics, using multiple media rather than just words.

On the one hand, you have the simplicity of talking about, say, the 10 greatest things about a product. In a similar way to what David Ogilvy used to do for Mercedes, ie a picture of a dashboard clock and a line underneath saying, "At 90 mph, the loudest thing you'll hear in the car is the ticking of the clock." It doesn't say "work out the quality" or "experience the quality", which doesn't mean anything as a call to action. It directly relates quality with something perceptual, talking in a language that relates directly to the senses: "hear the quality". And you do. You hear it. Quality sounds like this: tic tic tic, like a Swiss watch.

That is crucial to good interactive communications. Most quality is perceived value, not intellectual value. You don't calculate quality, you see it, you hear it, you feel it... and then you 'get it'.

On the other hand, you have an emotional value to communicate: purchases in luxury brands are emotional. Nobody buys a £12,000 watch because they need a watch. You just need something to trigger an emotion.

How do you relate this to the online world?

Say we're working on a luxury hotel in Corsica, like Casadelmar (www.casadelmar.fr), we can start with the theme of nostalgia. How many wealthy businessmen were born outside cities and how many of them long for a romantic return to the countryside? It's in all of us. The trick is to anchor this nostalgia to the quality of the place you're advertising. First you create the longing by evoking memories, then you answer the longing. And again, we're talking about very sensual language, like a childhood memory: you remember the scent of lavender, the play of light between the shutters during siesta, the rhythmic sound of the waves, you remember feeling alive.

But it doesn't have to be so romantic: we interviewed about 100 women outside Harvard Nichols when we started working for Jimmy Choo. One of our key questions was: "Have you ever sat down to try on a pair of shoes, loved them, but decided to come back another day?" 40% of women said "yes" for a variety of reasons, the predominant one being: I'll come back on payday. For most of them, the experience was quickly forgotten and they never returned to buy the shoes. Leaving the store means going into another mood, dealing with work, home or just life.

The point then is to create an online mnemonic 'echo' of the brand experience. You need similar conditions to trigger similar memories. The minimum effort would be to send subscribers an e-mail on payday with a fantastic looking product, an interesting newsletter or the release date of the new collection. We took the online newsletter route, complete with a column by Tamara Mellon and a picture of an iconic Choo shoe with a link to Net-a-Porter, which sells them online, and it has been very successful. The point is to become part of the fabric of what goes on in the life of a London woman.

So, even in a sales-driven environment the best results happen when interactive communication focuses on mnemonics, or 'memories', and enchantment.

Is there still a fundamental mis-match between the luxury experience and the on-screen one?

Luxury brands are actually perfect for the Internet. If you argue your case well, people quickly get the logic of what you're trying to do: it's a medium with intrinsic capacity to create and sustain meaningful and intimate dialogues between brands and consumers, as well as the most effective means of providing previously unthinkable levels of service – key attributes for most luxury brands. You don't have to sell online to develop a very intimate online relationship with your loyal customer base. You can use online media to manage exclusive customer events, or an exclusive appointment service.

What about selling online? Many luxury brands feel this would mean a loss of control and be damaging?

Partly, I think this is to do with the unappealing, cheap-looking things you will typically find online. The web started as a DIY medium: the original idea was that it should be easy to learn the basics and enable anyone to publish.

I too am often disappointed by poorly executed online

projects, because if you do it right, miracles happen. The luxury hotel industry is practically made for online success: hotel customers, by definition, buy something before seeing it in person. Results on good design are proven almost immediately with increased online bookings. The website put together for The Halkin (www.halkin.co.uk) made its money back in six weeks.

Who do you think is doing it best at the moment?

As with any new medium, it takes a few years before you see people turning their projects into works of true craftsmanship. But the online experience today can be very close to what a brand is about and press all the luxury buttons.

Gucci (www.gucci.com) is doing a fantastic job at echoing everything the stores do in the online environment. The site is so 'Gucci'. The company has really managed to evolve it over the last few years, from simple collection presentation to e-commerce. And the technology is very seamless, which is so important.

I think Colette (www.colette.fr) is also doing a great job with its online boutique. It probably doesn't sell more than 30 different products, but that's the whole idea: you don't choose between this or that perfume. You buy this one because Colette chose it. I think we're going to see a lot more of that in the coming years: smaller, not bigger. We're back to the small boutiques and artisans reaching an audience purely on lifestyle and design and of course if you are small, a website is a lot more affordable than a store.

What about sites that you have worked on yourself?

I was very happy with the Asprey website (www.asprey.com). When Asprey rebranded itself, the approach was 'great brands are made by great products'. So the starting point was that if Asprey made websites, this is what they would look like. I wanted the site to be like an accessory: canvas and navigation at the same time; and to use an aesthetic unit that defines Britishness. It suddenly hit me: stripes are to the British what spots are to the French. Shirts, school ties, pinstripe suits... the navigation blends form and function in a truly unique way: each section is a stripe, which widens when you roll the mouse over it to present the sub-sections inside. When I presented the stripes concept to CEO Gianluca Brozzetti, we immediately had a great discussion about creating belts and braces with the purple stripes pattern.

The great thing about working for Gianluca Brozzetti is that he went for something completely different for Garrard (www.garrard.com): we created a surreal world with golden giraffes on scooters. It was fun! The transactional section was a bubble gum machine that sends you a £100 raspberry or silver coloured ball by post. You have no idea what you're buying until you open the ball. The Japanese loved it.

Our most recent Gallé baby is the website for Gil Carvalho (www.gilcarvalho.com) which I really love. It's a complete communications project: we designed the logo, the aesthetic styleguide and we got to be very playful with the project as a result. We're tying the newsletters into the shoe parties Gil organises at the studio, and around his extravagant lifestyle. It's like a rock band in many ways: rock bands keep a permanent dialogue with their fan-clubs through newsletters, access to the stars, events... I quite like what Sacha Biyan and David LaChapelle, both photographers, are doing in the same vein: really simple, elegant sites with great pictures, tied in with books, films and fan newsletters.

There's evidence to show that the best ideas are coming from good interactive creatives right now, because they're the most willing to give it their best shot. They're the most audacious and as they used to say in Rome... *audacis fortuna adjuvat*.

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