
Book Review

Meta-luxury: Brands and the culture of excellence

Manfredi Ricca and Rebecca Robins

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Luxury strategy in action

Jonas Hoffmann and Ivan Coste-Manière

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Two books dealing with the luxury industry have been recently published by Palgrave Macmillan. The first, *Meta-Luxury: Brands and the Culture of Excellence*, is a fascinating book written by Manfredi Ricca and Rebecca Robins, two managing directors at Interbrand, the world's leading brand consultancy. As such, the book has from the outset a very innovative managerial orientation. This perspective is illustrated sharply by the inclusion of enlightening conversations with world leaders in diverse luxury fields. By integrating these conversations within the overall flow of the book, the authors succeeded in building an in-depth and informed understanding of the new paradigm of Meta-Luxury.

The first chapter briefly introduces the concept of Meta-Luxury as a needed replacement for what the authors consider the cliché of luxury. The argument is that as more and more brands define themselves as belonging to the world of luxury, and as luxury thus becomes *massified*, the con-

cept becomes meaningless. According to the authors, Meta-Luxury is a form of luxury that escapes the cliché of luxury and lets us move beyond it. Indeed, it is about luxury beyond luxury. It is about the culture of excellence.

The second chapter presents the authors' Meta-Luxury paradigm and provides details regarding its constituting elements of Knowledge, Purpose, Timelessness and Unique Achievement. The authors propose Meta-Luxury as an enterprise paradigm based on knowledge, purpose and the pursuit of timelessness, all of which is embodied in the notion of a Unique Achievement. This multi-faceted construal helps researchers and practitioners alike break away from the overused and underspecified concept of luxury that plagues the field. Indeed, even though many brands define themselves as belonging to the world of luxury, how many among them can claim to represent a unique achievement? How many have reached the stature of timelessness?

In the third chapter, authors explore the core of the paradigm and probe its four main pillars. The first pillar places the question *How* within a culture of excellence. This pillar relates to Craftsmanship and is closely connected to the concept of Knowledge. The second pillar comes from the question related to *What*. Indeed, the culture of excellence is connected to depth rather than breadth and to concentration rather than dispersion. Consequently, Focus is the second pillar of Meta-Luxury and is strongly connected to the idea of Purpose. The third pillar stems from the question related to *When*. Longevity, in itself an achievement, becomes a Unique Achievement of luxury brands, which seek to preserve the past while reinventing their future. History is thus the third pillar of Meta-luxury and it is closely related to the concept of Timelessness. The fourth pillar relates to the questions of *Who* or *For Whom*? All things considered, we tend to regard as more valuable those resources that are offered in smaller quantities. Hence, Rarity is presented by the authors as the fourth pillar of the Meta-Luxury brand.

Chapters Four to Seven go more details regarding the nature of the core processes supporting the pillars. Chapter Four teaches us about Craftsmanship. Craftsmanship is an intriguing alchemy between knowledge, purpose, timelessness, tradition and innovation. More importantly, Craftsmanship is based on human insight, not on digital memory. It is about passion, wisdom and intelligence. Consequently, the authors define Craftsmanship as the creation of individual objects that are unique and non-substitutable because of unique tangible and intangible rational as well as emotional qualities. These qualities stem from the predominant use of human skills and techniques in the conception and execution of the brand concept. Chapter Five is devoted to Focus. Focus, usually defined as the centre of interest for luxury companies,

is nothing but an overall approach or philosophy dedicated to the pursuit of excellence. Focus is the principle behind specialization, concentration, expertise and proficiency. In this book, Ricca and Robins define focus as the deliberate limitation of scope in time to a field where proven excellence can be pursued and an unblemished reputation protected. Chapter Six is about History. In this chapter, the authors relate History to diverse concepts in order to bring the notion alive and, in particular, draw analogies between history and the concept of DNA. Like DNA, a brand's history cannot be altered. Second, like DNA, History is nothing but the *invisible* hand guiding the brand's further development in time. Third, like DNA, History cannot be created artificially. Contrary to temporariness and longevity, history is solely able to achieve a subtle mix of uniqueness and achievement. Chapter Seven explores the concept of Rarity and posits two facets of the construct. The first is quantitative and relates to the quintessence of luxury. Rarity also has a qualitative aspect. Hence, as shown by the authors, the dual values of Rarity, quantitative and qualitative, resonate with the idea of being, at once, rare in numbers and remarkable in manifestations. To sum up, the authors define Rarity as the limited accessibility imposed by intrinsic values, ultimately making demand subject to discovery and affordability, both economic and intellectual.

Finally, after a brief summary of the four pillars of Meta-Luxury in Chapter Eight, the authors in Chapter Nine, *The Economy of Meta-luxury*, adopt a pragmatic angle and look at the brand and business management applications of Meta-Luxury. This chapter proposes a stimulating view of the seven distinctive features that define the economics of Meta-Luxury. Ultimately, in a concluding chapter, titled *Manifesto*, Ricca and Robins summarize their thoughts and convictions. All in all, *Meta-Luxury* is an

inescapable reading for all of those involved within the fascinating and magical world of Luxury brands.

Luxury Strategy in Action, co-edited by Jonas Hoffmann and Ivan Coste-Manière, is the second book on this topic recently published by Palgrave Macmillan. This highly pragmatic text addresses the preeminent question: How should luxury companies be managed in diverse, global environments and changing times? *Luxury Strategy in Action* aims to inform this conundrum by providing numerous perspectives on contemporary luxury management practice. The book is an edited collection of chapters, each tapping a specific area of luxury brand management. All chapters are written by skilled academicians and practitioners who all have in common the fact they are also lecturers at SKEMA Business School Master of Science in Luxury and Fashion Management in France. The book seeks to adopt a multi-cultural, holistic perspective. Compared with *Meta-Luxury: Brands and the Culture of Excellence*, this text adopts a more conventional, practical orientation about the *how-tos* of managing luxury brands in difficult and complex cultural times.

Chapter One presents the evolution of the luxury industry during the two last decades and describes the shift from family-owned businesses to the constitution of large industry conglomerates such as LVMH and Richemont. As this new battlefield is situated in emerging countries, the author explores the role of Brazil, Russia, India and China in shaping the luxury market as experienced now.

In Chapter Two, the complexity of managing a luxury company is highlighted. The author shows how the luxury business can be diversified and complex and, in addition, gives non-luxury goods practitioners insights into the typical areas of expertise required within this sector. Chapter Three is devoted to an explication

of the role of finance within the luxury industry. This chapter is indeed very practical as it adopts, from the outset, a clear pedagogical and applied orientation with an emphasis on the basics of financial statements, including balance sheets, income statements, cash flow statements and discounted cash flows. Chapter Four is related to the role and place of innovation in the luxury sector. Innovation is described as a process comprising four steps: path, insight, excellence in execution and rarity of experience, symbolized by the acronym PIER. The case of Richard Mille watches exemplifies this process.

As retailing is where it all happens, Chapter Five presents a complete review of online and off-line luxury retailing design. Through the use of several case studies, this chapter is, in our opinion, one of the most interesting and informative aspects of this book. This chapter stresses and illustrates how all brand manifestations, whether in physical or virtual stores, must be perfectly tuned, aligned and integrated. Chapter Six stands equally important. It presents the fascinating and complex issue of how luxury brands deal with Internet. More precisely, the competitive advantage generated by the Web will only be captured among brands that apprehend the Web with intelligence, strategic skill and business vision.

Chapter Seven details the main principles needed to build a luxury fashion brand: brand identity clarity, integrated marketing communications, product integrity, evocative and distinguished brand signatures, strict adherence to premium pricing policies, exclusivity, heritage, environment, excellent service and culture. Chapter Eight tackles another luxury conundrum: leveraging the luxury brand through line and brand extensions. A strong case is made for the perils of continuous brand extension that result in brand dilution and costly extension mistakes. Four case studies provide very



meaningful insights into this problem. Finally, the concluding last chapter explains that many drivers should motivate luxury companies to engage in more sustainable business practices. This chapter provides practical ideas for implementing sustainable development in luxury companies, at both strategic and operational levels.

Luxury Strategy in Action is a powerful read. As stressed by the editors of this collected works volume, each chapter can be read independently and in any order.

Although gathered from different authors and different perspectives, the chapters succeed in providing a holistic perspective on the art of luxury management. All the perspectives are worth reading and provide sound advice on how to manage luxury brands.

Pierre Valette Florence
IAE de Grenoble and CERAG,
Grenoble, France
E-mail: pvalette@upmf-grenoble.fr