

Communicating luxury to the masses

Shaziya Khan, JWT, shows how luxury marketers can take advantage of a developing mass-affluent market

WE ALL KNOW LUXURY markets are taking off. In mass and developing markets like India, luxury brands are growing volumes and there is promise of more. As a result, in marketing and advertising meetings, there is an emerging debate (one that will soon become global): how to communicate luxury brand messages to the mass consumer.

The question is a puzzling one. It gets fiercely argued by opposing schools of thought. Do we 'downgrade' communication to address the mass consumer but risk losing some of the mystique and aura of luxury; or do we retain the mystique of luxury communication but risk not having a true connect with the brand's new and potential consumers?

Beyond the push and pull of marketer and advertiser agendas, and beyond the particular category context, this article presents a high view – a strategic direction for luxury brand messaging to mass consumers, now and in the near future.

The affluent masses

Luxury volumes have been spurred by a significant growth in the rich in recent years (see Table 1).

Who are the new rich? They come in varied shapes, sizes and style quotients. Garment exporters, multinational bankers, college kids earning plum salaries at call centres or BPO (business process outsourcing) operations, well-heeled corporate wives, and successful entrepreneurs. What they have in common is that they have made it big. They

want the world to know just how quickly and how far they've climbed the social mobility ladder. Their consumption of luxury does just that, which makes these affluent masses the new target audience of luxury brand messages. The affluent mass consumer provides the biggest growth potential to luxury marketers flocking to mass and developing markets like India. Some of these are listed in Table 2.

An intellectual starting point Hypothesis 1

There is a historical parallel in Europe to what we are witnessing in India. When Latin books were printed in large scale in the vernacular languages which the masses could read, this created what anthropologist Benedict Anderson called an 'Imagined Community'. Even though the masses did not know each other personally, as they would in a physical community, they nevertheless shared a fellow-feeling because they shared similar ideas and ideals. Famously, Anderson defined a nation as 'an imagined political community'. Vernacular books enabled people to imagine this collectivity and played a key role in nation-building and people's movements.

As books went from Latin to the vernacular in Europe, luxury brand consumption is moving from the affluent classes to the affluent masses in India (and other developing markets). This has created an 'imagined prestigious community'. Luxury brands create a fellow-

TABLE 2

Some international luxury brands in India

International brands	Presence in India
Omega, Longines, Rado	Up to 24 cities
Chopard, Christian Dior	In 21 cities
Bvlgari, Tiffany, Piaget, Harry Winston	In Mumbai and Delhi
Mont Blanc	7 exclusive stores

Source: Kurt Salmon Associates, Technopak study, India Luxury Trends 2005

feeling of prestige and status among the masses consuming them. For example, when a lady enters a social do wearing or carrying an original luxury brand, even those who may not know her personally believe she must be of high status. Consuming luxury makes her belong to an imagined prestigious community.

Hypothesis 2

In the past, prestige was due to real financial distance. Luxury was consumed mainly by an aristocratic elite. These were very few in number. So the prestige associated with luxury consumption was based on real financial distance. The masses simply could not afford luxury. They were just too financially distant from the paintings, jewellery, clothes, homes, and so on, that the aristocratic elite could afford.

The key to the paradox of communicating luxury to the masses

What is the definition of luxury? At heart, luxury is about exclusivity. It is also defined as lavishness, magnificence, comfort, sumptuousness, opulence, extravagance.

Bear in mind the affluent masses. Today, given the rise in purchasing power, luxury consumption is no longer reserved for the few. This is a time in history when the affluent masses are no longer at a financial distance from luxury.

But prestige and exclusivity has to be driven by distance – except this distance is no longer financial, but intellectual and cultural. Communication is a powerful tool for creating this. So, luxury brand

TABLE 1

Growing wealth: better-off Indian households

Consumer classification	Income class (Rs '000')	Number of families ('000')	Growth rate
Strivers	500–1000	3212	17.50%
Near rich	1000–2000	1122	19.40%
Clear rich	2000–5000	454	21.30%
Sheer rich	5000–10000	103	23.40%
Super rich	10000+	53	25.90%

Source: National Council for Applied Economic Research, India. Income figures per annum at 2001–2002 prices

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messages must connote a sense of intellectual and cultural distance for its imagined prestigious community.

Intellectual and cultural distance is vital for creating prestige or exclusivity. Legend has it that when George Bernard Shaw won the Nobel prize he was invited to become a member of the 'Club of 100'. This was a prestigious club of 100 people, all leaders in their fields, and only when one died could a new member join. Yet Shaw refused to join this club. When asked why, he replied: 'I don't want to become a member of a club that wants me, I want to become a member of a club that doesn't want me.'

There is an Urdu couplet that makes the same point in a philosophical way: 'What we call the world is a magical toy. If you have it, it is like mud; if you lose it, it becomes like gold.' (Duniya jise kehte hain, jadu ka khilona hai; mil jaye to mitti hai, kho jaye to sona hai.)

In other words, if something is within your reach you don't value it as much as you value something that is far from you or beyond you.

How to connote 'distance'

It has been said that luxury consumption is associated with a certain 'ceremonial tension' which guarantees that you are indeed dealing with luxury. If you think about it, it's true. Gentlemen, when you go to buy jewellery in a shop – if you are buying small items you get them on the ground floor, but if you are buying some large pieces, they take you discreetly upstairs to the third floor. Ladies, how intimidating is it to walk into a luxury clothes store? In reality, so many aspects of luxury consumption are kept deliberately 'hard to get'. This 'distance' must extend to its communication as well.

Different aspects of communication can connote distance.

1. Foreign names evoke distance: foreign brand names are often mispronounced by Indian buyers. The person who can afford to buy a Mont Blanc may ask for it as 'Mount Blank'. Chanel perfume is called 'Channel' (as in the English Channel) by

its wearer. Yet this unfamiliarity with Swiss, French, German, American, Japanese names underscores the cultural distance and aura of these brands in the eyes of buyers, making foreign luxury brands so desirable.

2. Sign-off lines that you have to 'get' tell a tale of distance: not every one knows what an advertisement is referring to in its 'when you know' sign-off line. It is at an intellectual distance from you when you don't get it or have to struggle to get it. This ceremonial tension assures you that you are indeed dealing with luxury – precisely what makes the brand seem so luxurious and desirable.

3. Artistic and graphic visualisation signal distance – as an artist in our agency expressed it: 'the whole purpose of art is to grab your attention and transport you to a different place' (Shashank, at his Mac, 7pm, December 2005). Fashion brands whose communication alludes to 'geisha designs' (targeted to Indian women who probably don't even know what the word means), or those that show abstract visualisations of a petal and a line that reads 'the universe in a flower' are among the most famous, well-respected and best-selling luxury brands in this market. The imagery of these brands is at a great cultural and intellectual distance from their target audience. And this has created an immense aura of prestige around them.

The high view

'If you can talk with crowds and keep your virtue, or walk with Kings nor lose the common touch' Rudyard Kipling, 'If'

As the luxury market grows volumes in India and other mass or developing countries, luxury brands will 'talk with crowds'. The financial distance that evoked a real sense of prestige for luxury consumption is fast disappearing. It is imperative, then, that luxury brands 'keep their virtue' – be at a cultural and intellectual distance from their target consumers.

This delineates a new and key role for luxury brand messaging to the masses. In the absence of real (financial) distance, prestige is to be imaged or created via

deliberately 'distant' communication. This distance could be connoted in infinite ways – mystique, cultural exoticness, artistic visualisation, and so on, giving marketers and advertisers a rich canvass for creating communication. More importantly, this role of 'imaging distance to evoke prestige' gives a ripe, new and powerful logic to luxury messaging for the masses. It is a high view. One that unshackles us from current or forthcoming debates on this matter.

In conclusion

Intellectual and cultural distance matters more than ever.

Initially luxury brands get consumed by the elite few or 'the nerd'. As volumes grow over time, luxury brands get consumed by the affluent masses or 'the herd'.

'The nerd' comprises the elite who really understand luxury when they buy it. But the 'herd' buys luxury because the 'nerd' is buying it. Thus to sell to 'the herd' we must talk to 'the nerd'. The intellectual and cultural elite will be the only ones understanding luxury messaging. For the affluent masses, luxury messaging must remain at a cultural and intellectual distance – just beyond their grasp! ■

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