

Five Ways Successful Brands Unsell to and Instead Woo Customers

Author : Wolfgang Schaefer

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Have a **brand** and want to charge a premium? Then you better stop selling to your key audiences and start to woo them instead.

Marketing for premium-priced **brands** is evolving. The **digital** revolution, more informed and demanding consumers, and oversaturated markets have led to new demands if one is to create and sustain a premium-priced **brand**.

The **digital** revolution also has given rise to a new crop of iconic **brands** desired for reasons beyond utility, price, or worth. If some of the following **brands** "speak" to you—**Apple, Dyson** or **Mini, Nespresso, Patagonia**—they likely say more than "I am a smartphone (or sweater, cup of coffee, or car) to you. We call these **brands** "ueber-**brands**" in our book *Rethinking Prestige Branding* or at least **brands** that aspire to go "ueber" (which is German for going "beyond").

In a review of over 100 premium-priced **brands** across the most diverse categories, we found such **brands** to share some core principles in their approach to **branding**, one of them being to "seduce, rather than sell."

In the following we are looking at five ways in which successful Ueber-**Brands** "un-sell and seduce."

1. The right mix of pride and provocation

There's an old saying in the prestige industry: "With every millimeter the mouth opens (towards a smile), the price point goes down a notch." Prestige **brands** aren't there to endear us, they must impress us. They will not be bossed around by anybody—including their consumers. (Yes, "consumer is not the boss" in that case.) Traditionally, this has often been done through an unapologetic display of confidence or even arrogance.

Provocation has been another tool of the trade, particularly in the premium fashion industry, but is also increasingly exposed as a cheap trick. Today, Ueber-**Brands** follow a more calibrated approach, mixing pride with provocation by blending both in ever new and intriguing ways.

A great example is Below 42 a premium vodka from New Zealand. Its success is almost entirely built on an audacious spirit (no pun intended), starting from its politically incorrect print ads to the self-mocking tone in which it keeps building its legend and promoting its **brand** today. One of its ads reads, "Below 42, the vodka that has absolutely nothing going for it."

Another "American celebrities adopt our vodka like it was a Third World child." Here Below 42 turns "refined" on its head (quite literally with its head-standing kiwi icon). The company eschews anything remotely "cultured" in the conventional sense and go for outright counter-culture, starting its own tradition: proud in its product and provenance yet unbending in its attitude, iconoclast and standard setting at the same time.

2. The celebrity as a fan, not an endorser

Prestige **brands** crave a good endorsement, but they are careful to not get upstaged while enjoying the uplift. They often turn the relationship between **brand** and endorser on its head, presenting the celebrity as the one paying tribute to the **brand** or, at least, its humble user.

There are various ways to do this. One is the **brand** and celebrity partnering for a cause, for example the **Montblanc** campaign for literacy, **MAC**'s Viva Glam lipstick and its slew of famous ambassadors or the Mandarin Oriental's "She/He is a fan" campaign, which makes a modest donation to the celebrities' favorite good cause for volunteering, rather than "pay" her or him. Some of the commercials, which are like "mini-movies," blur the roles when identifying the star. Is it **Nicole Kidman**, now **Gisele Buendchen**, or **Chanel** No. 5? Is it **Charlize Theron** (and **Marlene Dietrich**, **Marilyn Monroe**) or **Dior J'Adore** in those much talked about perfume ads?

The **brand** becomes the star or director rather than supplicant. The ultimate in these power-play strategies, however, is when the **brand** outshines who should be the hero— or even playfully puts him down, like **Nespresso** does in its longstanding, light-hearted campaigns featuring **George Clooney** (in Europe) or **Penelope Cruz** (in the US). In those ads, the star is overlooked, as a cup of **Nespresso** takes the limelight. Interestingly, **Nespresso** said that Clooney was elected by **Nespresso** Club members as their ambassador rather than hired by their **marketing** department.

3. Avert the overt

The late artist **Keith Haring** once said: "If there's no mystery, there's only propaganda," and he certainly knew a thing or two about culture, communication, and commerce. And that pretty much sums up the third way of building prestige: Ueber-**Brands** play "hide and seek" more often than they do a "show and tell."

Mass **brands** make sure their **brand** message is didactic, loud, and clear, but modern prestige **brands** tend to stay veiled, creating an aura without overpromoting themselves. Yes, Mercedes will eventually talk miles per gallon, technology, or lease prices, but its spots will focus on celebrating the icon its car is first and foremost. Just recall the Superbowl XX ad where all the iconic models present and past congregate for a celebration of self.

There are three reasons for this:

- Overt selling is far too vulgar to make a superior impression.
- Our imagination is much better at creating aspiration than anything else. Prestige **brands** need to get our right brain engaged and make sure the left stays out of it as much as possible as critical thinking would only get in the way of making us believe.
- Subtlety and esoteric references are much better equipped to distinguish class from mass in a world where wealth and **branded** consumption is wide spread. You will not see a **Bottega Veneta** product openly **branded**, yet the weave will immediately signal to those in the know. Amateurs recognize a **Berlutti** shoe and its connoisseur wearer by the unique Windsor way it was tied (and both can be proud of "knowing" beyond just "having").

4. Be art-full

There's always been a close connection between the art world and many expensive **brands**. Both deal with products creatively inspired and exceptionally crafted. They build their value to a large degree on limited supply and share a highly discriminating and moneyed audience. They also complement each other, one supporting the other through deeper pockets, the other validating the one with a sense of sublime and sophistication. This embrace has gotten more intense, just think of the heavily commercialized art circuit parties from Basel to Miami, London to New York to Berlin or Hong Kong.

Most interesting, however, are not the age-old sponsorship deals or the boom of company museums like the new, Gehry-**designed** museum by Fondation **Louis Vuitton** in Paris. What's noteworthy are the innovative and integrative forms of cooperation and communication.

We are almost used to a fashion house releasing mini movies like **Prada** did with "A Therapy" by **Prada** shot by **Roman Polanski**. The surprise entrant last year, though, was that eternally expensive toy block Lego with its critically acclaim eponymous blockbuster movie (again no pun intended).

On the product side, fashion houses also lead the way with co-created collections like **Louis Vuitton's** 2001 super-successful graffiti bags by **designer-artists Stephen Sprouse**. Today, you will find limited-edition art on bottles from **Evian** (water) to **Kiehls** (skin care), on **BMW's** (Art Cars) or **MINIs** or even luxury toilet paper (Renova).

5. Be the media

We are talking about the **brand** as content machine and community magnet. **Digital** media, in particular, have been an enabler to create highly controlled, super-efficient **brand** experiences and engagements that never seem too eager or too pushy.

Two **brands** that have made this their premier **marketing** vehicle and styled their **brands** as media outlets rather than mere product venues are **Red Bull** and **Net-a-Porter**. The first may not seem prestige, but it certainly is if you look at its considerable price premium. And it has

grown into a media empire. **Red Bull** Media House offers anything from events to games to apps to TV to print, largely sourced from the collaborations and sponsorships **Red Bull** is doing, thus not only being a lighthouse for innovative **brand** and community building, but also providing great opportunities for secondary usage and income streams.

Net-a-Porter was built to be "the world's premier online luxury fashion destination" and was from the beginning not just an online shopping site but much more a magazine around fashion and luxury that also allows you to buy things. Luring people in with great editorial content and then allowing them to shop, if they come across something they like.

Culture, commerce, content, and convenience are all fused in perfect symbiosis. And that's done in a way that never undermines the superior standing and status potential of the **brand**, rather elevates it to cultural icon with omni-power. A true ueber-**brand** in other words.

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