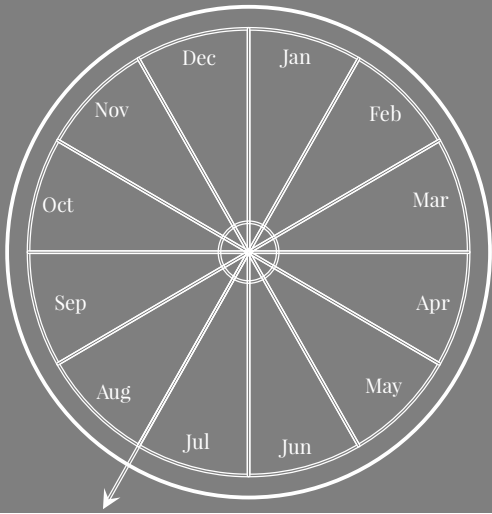


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International leisure travel returned this month. For the first time in a long time, the world is opening up – albeit at different speeds – to one of the most severely affected industries of the pandemic.

However, travel isn't quite what it was before COVID-19 – not yet, at least. For one thing, governments around the world have adopted the practice of selecting 'good' countries for inbound and outbound travel and at the same time recommending against 'bad' countries. In the UK, this has a traffic light system of Red, Amber & Green – now further complicated by the introduction of something called 'Amber Plus.' This not only contributes to an overall feeling of restriction but also a fear that your destination's status could change during your time away, resulting in difficulties on return (even if fully vaccinated) or, in some extreme cases, not being able to return home at all.

Testing on entry is now common in some developed nations, irrespective of vaccine status. This adds further complication to the process of international travel, which had for so long embraced innovations to make travelling less complicated. The pandemic has reversed years of progress

in making international travel more relaxed and less intimidating. Luxury travellers in particular have benefited from an increasingly stress-free experience using lanes of privilege, private entry and exit points and not being subject to the same conditions as other travellers.

Despite all these complications, there is a great determination amongst many – particularly the well-resourced – to travel. For some, it is about recapturing some semblance of normal life. For others, it is a precious foreign holiday (which once was taken for granted) after more than a year of passports gathering dust. Some even see that they have a duty to go away, to break free from the psychological chains that have been forged by the pandemic, to set an example to others.

Irrespective of the reasons, luxury hospitality organisations around the world will be welcoming discerning guests who are no longer blasé about jetting to and fro. They will be grateful for the experiences on offer. There will be a sense of relief to be away but also a fear that a swift return may not be as assured as it once was, forcing them to appreciate everything they can in that one visit – this will be the summer of maxing out.



Knowledge.
Perspective.
Passion.

Barton

info@barton-consulting.co.uk



THE TRUTH

OF AUTHENTICITY

Authenticity is one of those terms that everyone uses but not everyone understands. In luxury, it is one of those words that keeps popping up in conference panel discussions and PowerPoint decks. It's constantly mentioned as being important by some very experienced and very wise professionals, but when someone tells you that "authenticity matters" or that "authenticity is key", what does that actually mean?

A lot of the time, many brands look behind them for an understanding or interpretation of authenticity. History and heritage are safe to cling to and remaining true to these ideals is often seen as an expression of authenticity. One example might be using the same stitching pattern on leather goods that was created by the founder or naming a motor car series after an historical figure connected with the marque. But are these *really* symbols of authenticity? Yes, they are curios, unique to the brand. And yes, they feel like something connected to the soul of the brand. But they don't immediately showcase the brand's beliefs. Authenticity is a philosophy of keeping actions consistent with beliefs and desires – showing authenticity cannot be reduced to mere haberdashery. One excellent point that is

too infrequently made is that authenticity is actually much more about what you are not than what you are. Luxury is by its very nature an exclusive concept; not everyone gets to experience it, and not everyone can create it either. The biggest challenge the luxury world faces is the temptation towards broad expression – the idea that a luxury brand can, and should, be in as many verticals as possible.

Some have argued there is an authenticity to this. You transfer your beliefs, your ideas, from your core to a multitude of connected products or services, because there is a natural home there for your know-how. A great example of this is Hermes's transfer of knowledge and skill of high quality leatherwork in equestrian accessories to personal luxury leather goods, a philosophy that Hermes have continued to this day by introducing new verticals almost every year. No one would suggest that Hermes is an inauthentic luxury brand.

There's also a very solid case for saying that a truly authentic brand is one which evolves, not one which stands still, pretending that it is the late 19th century. After all, it is your philosophy and beliefs which truly matter – not what products fill your shelves from one year to the next.

“...Unique philosophies and visions are worth protecting and worth safeguarding against unnecessary commercial motives. Dilution of a brand is a serious issue, and yet many businesses don't take it seriously...”

A jewellery brand that has a deeply engrained authenticity and DNA to be a jeweller for modern women cannot possibly stand by their beliefs unless they evolve their product lines and show their understanding of the modern consumer.

However, the other element of authenticity is that we determine whether it exists by how we feel. It isn't easily quantifiable or exact. Instead, we must make a series of qualitative judgements about a brand that takes account of a multitude of variables including their area of expertise, their price point, their processes, their ownership, their management and, yes, their history and heritage.

These judgements are not as simple as determining, for example, that a brand has a long history – and that this makes a brand authentic. It requires us to evaluate that a brand that affects a particular historic image – but yet has no relevant history to speak of is not authentic, but that it would have been so if it had been transparent and confident about its origins and modernity instead.

Similarly with price, many commentators consider that an insufficiently high price is a mark of an inauthentic luxury brand. However, this incorrectly implies that the higher the price the more authentic it is. In fact, it is considerably less authentic to fully adopt a Veblen approach; pricing that feels proportionate to the experience is the truly authentic method.

However, the ‘authenticity Olympics’ in luxury tend to create an impossible ambition for perfection, which is simply not realistic in a commercial and competitive marketplace. For example, there is no doubt that brands get authenticity ‘points’ for being family owned – sometimes unjustly – which tends to cast large, publicly owned businesses in an unfair light as being impersonal, run by faceless committees and completely focused on profit; the opposite, therefore, of authenticity.

Whilst in some cases there is some truth to this, the quaintness of ‘small’ ownership often exaggerates authenticity. As a result, publicly-owned brands are seen homogeneously as globalist behemoths run by accountants who trick consumers by making things on the cheap and selling them on for a distorted price. Consumers are completely blind to the fact that family-owned businesses can – and do – pursue the same strategy.

The biggest elephant in the room though is that, like innocence, once lost, authenticity is near impossible to regain. Unique philosophies and visions are worth protecting and worth safeguarding against unnecessary commercial motives. Dilution of a brand is a serious issue, and yet many businesses don't take it seriously enough when considering the opportunities that lie out there. Remaining true to the brand beliefs and ideals is not imprisonment; it is a form of faith. And like faith, its reward is not immediate & immense but gradual and eternal.

Sector updates



Image: Off-White

There was much hoo-ha this month about the sale of a majority stake in luxury streetwear icon **Off White** to LVMH. Of course, the purchase of any business by the French conglomerate makes serious waves, but there was considerably more written about this sale because the nuance of it was that LVMH hadn't really bought the operations of Off White. Rather, they'd bought more access to its founder, Virgil Abloh – who is already the creative director of menswear for Louis Vuitton. As the release stated; “Additionally, LVMH and Mr. Abloh...will leverage together the Group’s expertise to launch new brands and partner with existing ones in a variety of sectors beyond the realm of fashion. Initial discussions have already begun.” But as Abloh says that his key metric is “relevancy”, Barton thinks the expectation of a violent shake-up at the group’s brands is a touch overblown.

Delvaux, the Belgian luxury handbag brand, was acquired by Richemont this month, as further evidence of the Swiss-based group bolstering their soft-luxury offerings. No price was quoted for the purchase from the Fung family and Singapore’s sovereign wealth fund, Temasek, but estimates of €250m have been made, based on sales of €130m. There was much scepticism that the purchase will do much to help the hard-luxury focused Richemont compete against the likes of Kering and LVMH, who have a swathe of best-of-breed soft luxury brands and leather goods specialists. A bit dismissive perhaps, in the opinion of Barton, given that Delvaux is the oldest luxury leather goods ‘maison’ and was the first (in 1908) to file a patent for a leather handbag. Particularly given that heritage brands, such as Goyard & Faure Le Page, became cult favourites among the anti-Vuitton cognoscenti.



Image: Delvaux



Image: LVMH

In a summer in which it has repeatedly flexed its considerable muscles, the unveiling of **LVMH’s** revamped “La Samaritaine” in Paris is the most symbolic of all, bringing together as it does the philosophies which underlie the group. First, there is its history of taking on rejuvenation projects of once-loved-but-now-dusty grand dames. Secondly, there is its blending of the old and the new, the historic and contemporary. Thirdly, its belief in multi-sector, experiential luxury – represented by the huge number of restaurants within the complex, and the inclusion of the new Cheval Blanc Hotel, which opens in September. Perhaps awkwardly for LVMH, the best things about the structure, in Barton’s view, are its heritage features, particularly the Art Nouveau façade and original staircases in the lobby. The new surrounding rippled glass screen – designed by Pritzker-winning firm SANAA – has already been dismissed by Parisian critics as resembling a shower curtain.