



Text: Gemma Balmford

Leaders in the luxury goods market are embracing ecommerce and crafting authentic and meaningful luxury experiences, finds Retail Focus.

The luxury goods industry has apparently entered a new phase, where conspicuous consumption is giving way to more meaningful luxury experiences. According to Euromonitor International's Global Luxury Goods Trends Report, luxury brands and retailers are seeking ways to expand their portfolios, driving up investment in luxury experiences and lifestyle branding.

Despite globalisation, authenticity, quality, exclusivity and unique luxury experiences are set to grow in importance for consumers, suggests the report, and luxury brands will have to ensure that they maintain sales without becoming too mainstream.

'Luxury is moving away from a highly branded commodity category, to crafted individualised experiences and products,' says George Gottl, co-founder of design consultancy Uxus, which works for

clients including Selfridges and Sephora. 'True luxury today is about craft. Crafted products, crafted experiences and crafted spaces.'

Today and in the future, personality is everything, believes Gottl. 'People want real experiences, made by real people who have a unique view on the world and offer excellence and quality on all levels. What we are seeing is a movement away from the traditional luxury big box brands to localised crafted artisan experiences.'

Architect Nick Leith-Smith, who designs stores for luxury shoemaker Manolo Blahnik, agrees that sensitivity and consideration to geography, demographic and materials are key to creating a unique experience. 'Brands and retailers are increasingly understanding that they can't simply create an environment which is an extension of their brand,' he says. 'Consumers appreciate and want to buy into the entire story underpinned by a unique in-store experience.'

'With our work for Manolo Blahnik, we always create a distinct personality

for each space, in response not only to location but to match the innovative and eclectic nature of the brand.'

For the new Manolo Blahnik shoe salon at Selfridges London, Nick Leith-Smith drew inspiration from Blahnik's affinity with Bath, which is steeped in neoclassical and Georgian architecture, as well as the work of neoclassical architect, Robert Adam. The space has a monochromatic look, with dark wood cabinetry and furniture contrasted with shades of palest honey-toned panelling and table tops, thoughtfully accented with brass detailing and splashes of colour. As always, the Spanish designer's style, humour and playful irony subtly resonate to create a space to reflect, shop and appreciate the artistry of his shoes.

For the launch of the salon, Blahnik designed a limited edition shoe that came with a framed sketch of the style drawn and signed by the designer.

'Changes in consumers' attitudes and perception are forcing and making the luxury world more daring in their

Above: The newly refurbished Fine Jewellery Room at Harrods, designed by David Collins Studio.



Left: The new Harvey Nichols ground floor Beauty Lounge.



Right: The new Manolo Blahnik shoe boutique at Selfridges London.

communication and design strategies, breaking the traditional model,' says Carlos Virgile, director at design studio Virgile + Partners, which worked with Harvey Nichols on the new menswear department and Beauty Lounge.

Real luxury will always be about providing service, maintains Virgile, whether that's through digital communication and e-commerce or in-store.

The new Harvey Nichols ground floor Beauty Lounge is the latest stage of an ambitious redevelopment plan for the Knightsbridge store. The dedicated area is open early morning until late, offering express services from blow dries to manicures. 'The ground floor at our flagship store is the portal to our brand, so we've set out to create an impactful and luxurious environment to welcome customers,' says Stacey Cartwright, group chief executive officer at Harvey Nichols. 'We believe we have created an unrivalled destination for beauty in London, offering the best edit of beauty and fragrance brands, both global and niche, driven by the highest level of customer service from our beauty advisors and concierge team.'

As competition within luxury goods brands intensifies, retailers are embracing new technology as a means to differentiate themselves and to enhance the shopping experience, states the Euromonitor report.

However, in contrast to high street stores, this technology is usually carefully and seamlessly integrated into the overall concept and experience so is not that apparent, notes Lewis Taylor, design director at David Collins Studio, which specialises in luxury interior design. 'Such technological advances are mainly used for increasing customer service levels, customer insights, CRM and stock management.'

While there was once skepticism at the idea of selling luxury goods online, ecommerce is now one of the biggest growth stories in luxury goods retailing,

according to the Euromonitor report, and is set to be the industry's key battleground over the next five years.

'The path-to-purchase in luxury is evolving, with more luxury brands, such as with Prada recently, available directly online,' says Taylor. 'These channels are great for the brand to project its tone of

voice and heighten the customer brand experience, in addition to the bricks and mortar store.

'There will always be physical stores, but with omnichannel purchasing, brands are showcasing ever-changing and unique offers in-store to ensure customers return.' **Rf**

Knightsbridge Estate: From high street to high end

Since developer Chelsfield acquired the Knightsbridge Estate on London's Brompton Road in 2010, the tenant mix has moved away from high street brands to more premium and luxury stores, such as Tommy Hilfiger, Porsche Design and Watches of Switzerland. Where possible, the real estate firm has removed and replaced modern shopfronts with facades more sympathetic to the building as a whole, bringing the architecture from the upper part of the building down to street level. It has also put in place an estate-wide lighting scheme to accentuate the features of the buildings, and is about to embark on a pavement widening scheme to improve pedestrian flow.

Watches of Switzerland is the latest store to open on the estate, which sits between Harvey Nichols and Harrods. The three-storey luxury watch showroom is part of the company's 'Golden Triangle' strategy, which includes

the Regent Street and Oxford Street locations. It houses the UK's largest Patek Philippe in-store boutique, as well as a Rolex boutique and an exclusive VIP area on the second floor.

At the heart of the store is a triple-height atria space with a dramatic OLED Blackbody light installation, featuring 200 drops that appear to float between the ground and first floor.

'Bricks and mortar remains one of the best ways for luxury retailers to showcase their products,' says Sarah Waller, asset manager at Chelsfield LLP. 'We are seeing retailers focusing more on delivering stores that are adapted to suit the needs of the specific markets. Rather than rolling out a standard shopfit, retailers are assessing the needs of the local market to ensure that the finishes and service offer best meets the needs of the people walking in through the front door.'

