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E-tail: Important Ally in Fortifying Brand Identity

Apparel companies increasingly rely upon online presentation to tell a brand's story and enhance the multi-channel experience for consumers

Most marketing experts agree that projecting a consistent brand image is critical, no matter where that product may be sold. From the storefront and television, to the catalogue and Web, potential customers should ideally feel the same "vibe" from the way the clothing is presented, because that's what they identify with. It's the reason they want to purchase it.

"Our customers are very protective of their 'babies,'" says Alex Mendoza, partner at Stylophane, a San Francisco-based e-business marketing and management firm. "They want to be sure that their vision of the brand is accurately translated in the various messages they show to the world, whether it's in advertising or where the product itself is displayed for sale or for promotion."

But every delivery channel has its own strengths, weaknesses and idiosyncrasies. These limit, or at the very least influence the way brands can be projected. Stores and print catalogues, for instance, are both excellent for telling the story of a brand, notes Christophe Cremault, vice president of marketing at RichFX, an online merchandising technology company based in New York City. Stores provide the best visceral experience and are good at passive branding since people see that merchandise as they walk past it. Catalogs are best at proactively reaching potential customers and following them into places laptops rarely reach, such as the bathroom.

Conversely, Web sites are weaker at achieving these objectives. However, they represent the most streamlined and utilitarian retail channels available to apparel companies. A customer can find and purchase a

piece of clothing online in record time. And when a customer shops online, it's usually a safe assumption that he or she is familiar with the store or brand in question.

For that reason, effective online branding is critical. Customers who shop online will be the first to become disenchanted if the experience doesn't reflect the brand they know.

Online branding valued beyond the sale

Even for customers who don't buy online, a Web site or e-mail campaign can serve as a linkage to other channels where the brand will be reinforced further. Smart marketers know that different venues work in tandem to create sales.

"Online is a very, very powerful adjunct today, but I do see it as an adjunct," Cremault confesses. "All the different channels have their own plusses. That's why multichannel retailers are doing so fantastically well. They are learning how to leverage each of the channels independently, but also jointly."

"The apparel business is interesting because it's so much about people's perceptions of themselves, as opposed to the product itself," he adds. "That's really expressed by the story the store tells about the brand. The layout, the furnishings, the lighting — it's about all those things."

Creating synergies between retail, other channels, vital

A paper catalog can provide somewhat the same experience, albeit without the tactile and spatial dimensions. The cover invites you in, and then the book tells the story. With

etail though, it's hard to tell a story with an online store, because it's geared toward fulfilling a goal or completing a task. There's a search box. Casual browsing is possible, but not terribly probable, and that limits the types of branding that can be done.

The key, says Cremault, is synergy between channels. "You send the consumer a printed piece, but then you also put it online and invite consumers to browse the material, to experience the brand not on a task-oriented basis," Cremault says. "These types of messages are extremely difficult to send by just listing a bunch of products. So you need that pictorial and photographic and lifestyle shots that will tell the story of the brand."

Recreating some of the catalog's lifestyle images can help you create a world that a consumer finds familiar, yet intriguing. But here's the rub: In the brick-and-mortar store, a customer has access to the constant ministrations of a sales associate who's there to help. The online experience, if it's designed well, is much more uniform no matter what the price point of the merchandise.

How then, can apparel retailers maintain some of the feel of a distinctive level of service? "You can compensate for that lack of physical experience by providing the consumer with something that's similar, such as powerful zooms on the products," Cremault says. "The products had better be well photographed. You can provide things like product rotation and enabling color change, so you can see the gamut of products."

It is here that the Web has a slight advantage: While it is nearly impossible to have all your products in your stores in all the

available colors and sizes, the retail store can exceed expectations by allowing access to an otherwise exclusive world.

"Many retailers now have actually decided, in order to create a little bit of excitement, to only carry a certain amount of their product in certain stores," Cremault explains. "But online, you can have everything."

Pointing the way, accelerating the experience

What retail lacks in warm fuzzies, it makes up for in speed, an invaluable attribute for brands cultivating a cutting-edge image.

"An idea can go from concept to presenting itself in final form to hundreds of thousands of your core audience in just days," Mendoza says. "I'll get a call from a record label or promotion company saying that a hip-hop artist has a new record out and there is an opportunity to do a contest on a cable music channel. They'll want to know if I have a client that would fit a cross-promotion with them. They'll give us 500 singles to give away as a gift-with-purchase promotion on our client's Web site, and we give them some gear to offer as part of a prize package on television. The opportunities can happen very fast."

Online stores can also take the place of sale catalogs. "Some of our clients are using it as a primary [channel]," Cremault says. "You want to run a sale and you have two or three weeks of life left. You don't have time to create a new book, print it, ship it, and get it into people's hands on time. But we can reuse some pages they have, change the prices, put a new cover on it, change a little bit of the copy here and there, then we put that online. We run a massive e-mail campaign around that book. It will not have as much penetration as a print book, but the cost is so low and the response time is so swift that it doesn't matter."

Even something as simple as an e-mail can help you trigger recognition in your customers.

"The overarching message that comes from the chief branding officer for any large apparel manufacturer, or anyone else,

is consistency," says Nick Walsh, account director at e-Dialog, a Boston-and London-based e-mail marketing service provider. "You want to have a consistent customer experience, and you want it to reinforce the brand qualities that you have worked so hard to bring up to this point."

You don't always need to create a complex environment to convey that message, he says. "We definitely don't want to muddle a brand with too much information. I think simplicity is a good general branding practice. In e-mail in particular, usually 'short and simple' works. You want to make sure that the core brand values are recognized immediately when you open up the e-mail, that you have a clear indication of the logo and images that reflect the content you use in other media."

E-tail's strength: brand reinforcement

Observers agree there is a difference between presenting a brand to someone who's never seen it before and reinforcing a brand in the mind and heart of a loyal customer.

In general, online presentation achieves the latter objective. Visitors to a Web site have most often either typed in a URL, searched for a company name, or clicked through from an advertisement. They're usually looking for a specific retailer.

Consumers who are on your e-mail database are qualified even further. "People who sign up for newsletters or sale alerts represent our clients' most active, loyal shoppers," says Arthur Sweetser, e-Dialog's vice president of marketing and professional services. "When it comes to your most important shoppers, obviously the ability to manage the communication and the brand is even more important than it is in a radio commercial, where you might be talking to a whole bunch of men that will never show up in a women's apparel store. So that's where I think that the ability to make sure you are brand-consistent is paramount."

Walsh says most companies' branding goal is to give consumers an affinity for the product line, a clear understanding of what it represents. But e-mail campaigns (and the

Web and print catalog pages they point to) can do even more than that; they can actually make the consumer feel that the brand has an affinity for them.

"We have gotten more and more sophisticated with developing profiles of customers," Walsh says. "We can increasingly target them with relevant information that helps us to get into the trust loop, if you will. [The consumers] can say, 'Not only do I like the stuff that is offered here, but I actually trust these people to bring me things that I like. I don't have to go find it on my own.'"

Even a simple e-mail can carry the hallmarks of the brand, according to Sweetser, who says his company produces e-mails that are synergistic with its clients' look and feel. "[British retailer] Marks and Spencer came to us about three weeks ago and said that they wanted to run a one-day sale," he says. "They hadn't planned this sale, and they wanted to make a major event, to sneak up on Brits and let them know that there was going to be this great event happening. It started with [their] releasing to us the brand messaging that would be physically in the store windows and appearing in the newspaper ads."

The e-mail campaign was designed to match the window and ad merchandising. "It had brand integrity," Sweetser says. "If they looked at their e-mail at six in the morning, then they opened up their newspaper, and then on the commute they drove by the storefront, they would have seen that same imagery."

In the end, Sweetser says online branding works best as a link in a chain.

"We believe frequency is critical in getting someone to take action," he says. "You can't always depend on e-mail or the mass media or the store. You really want it all working together. You are going to buy that skirt, that jacket, whatever. It's just a race to see who you are going to buy it from."

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