



EXPERTS

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EXPERTS - BRANDING

## Creator of Ueber-Brands

JP Kuehlwein's LinkedIn profile brings it to the point: "I create brands that excite consumers and make them willing to pay a premium." The affable co-founder of Ueber-Brands Consulting and co-author of the bestselling *Rethinking Prestige Branding – Secrets of the Ueber-Brands*, written with his pal Wolf Schaefer, looks back at more than 20 years of experience, in which he has helped create and re-stage brands that together generate over one billion dollars in incremental sales per year. Following high-level stints at Procter & Gamble, Frédéric Fekkai & Co. as well as Smith & Norbu, Kuehlwein now spends his time on his [blog](#), [podcast](#) or [YouTube channel](#), guiding brands towards higher spheres. BEAUTYSTREAMS caught up with the marketing maven to talk past, present, and future of the concept of "Ueber" in a fast changing retail landscape.

REPORT: Paulina Szmydke-Cacciapalle



**B: You have coined the term “Ueber-Brands” to describe modern prestige brands. Could you explain what it means?**

Ueber-Brands are brands that are able to elevate themselves “above and beyond” (which translates to ‘ueber’ in German) the competition by creating “meaning beyond the material.” In other words, they are more than objects to us, more than a handbag, a vacuum cleaner, a mobile phone, or water but also more than a circus show, for example. Think of Hermès, iPhone, Dyson, Badoit or Cirque Du Soleil, to name a few. Then think of the relative premium we are willing to pay – if we are considering price at all – for that glass of Badoit or that Dyson machine compared to other options available. In the case of a Hermès Birkin bag, we might even be willing to wait for months before finally being allowed to spend a minor fortune for that bag. In a world where money can buy almost anything and in which more than a few, decent alternatives are available in almost any product category, our research found that it is often mission-driven or even mythical aspects of a brand that attract and seduce us. When you choose to buy a Patagonia sweater you might also choose to make an ideological statement about where you stand on environmental protection. At minimum you might want to project yourself as an “outdoorsy” person. If it was just about “keeping the body warm,” cheaper alternatives should drive a purely rational choice. Interestingly, many of the

choices above are not available on Amazon – which means these brands even get us to make that special trip to the Apple store – or at least to Patagonia.com.

**B: In the age of social media, what does it take for a prestige brand to stand out and be successful today?**

In our book, we are talking about seven principles that Ueber-Brands – across categories – commonly apply to elevate themselves, stay up there and keep growing in our esteem and in their sales. These principles are not media platform-based, but they involve quite a bit of communication, conversation, and social networking. These brands manifest their mission, they look to seduce their biggest fans – the “Ueber-Target” – and make them share the gospel and they are playing with us making us long to own them and at the same time making us belong to their exclusive “club.” Social media actually lend themselves to some of these rituals by making people “long to belong.” Take Berluti’s exclusive and quirky “Swann Club” dinners at which the top customers invited end up polishing their shoes together. By itself, this branding event would just reach a few dozen people. Thanks to social media, hundreds of thousands get to see the Instagram pictures, YouTube videos or life tweets, longing to become part of this exclusive club and

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Patagonia

making the Berluti owners feel better about spending as much on shoes as others do on cars.

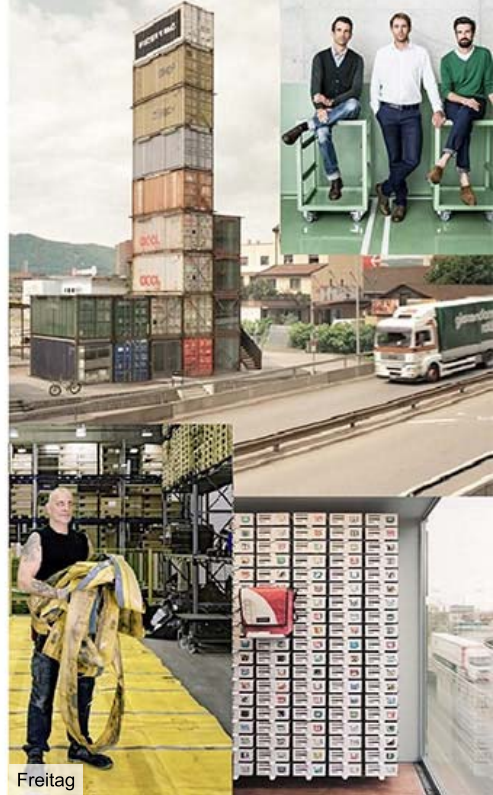
**B: Premium brands are usually reluctant to sell online. Can they exist in the digital realm and how, in order not to lose their “myth and mission”?**

Luxury brands were as reluctant to embrace social media as they are about selling online. But just like it being a question of what you say on social media and how, it is the same with e-commerce. It can hurt – or help a lot, if done right. Take the Freitag brand of bags and accessories made of recycled truck tarpaulin. It's not luxury, but it is premium lifestyle at \$200-600 a backpack or duffle bag or \$100 a wallet. Freitag is using e-commerce not only to have a footprint that reaches far beyond the presence of its physical stores. It uses its online store to tell you the creation story of the brand and of the bags. You can see videos about where the tarps come from and how they are 'butchered' and cleansed in a unique process to then be “re-contextualized” into one-of-a-kind bags. For each tarp is cut in a different way, has different colors and/or patterns and shows different signs of wear. And you can watch fun stop motion films of every bag model to see how it can be filled, used and abused – without breaking. In other words, Freitag uses the e-commerce site to

bring its recycling and reuse mission to life and add some brand tonality and myth to the material.

**B: Is there something that prestige brands can learn from the mass market and that mass can learn from prestige?**

Prestige brands have learned how to scale brand awareness, presence, and business hiring expertise and introducing processes from mass marketers in CPG, in particular. The watch-out is not to “burst the bubble,” which is the dream surrounding their brand by becoming omnipresent and predictable as mass brands are designed to be. Many more mass brands, on the other hand, should embrace Ueber-branding to prevent losing buyers that decide that either the more convenient and/or cheaper Amazon offering is just as good or that another brand feels more meaningful, personal, local, healthy, even if it costs a bit more. Hershey chocolate has donated a very large portion of its profits to medical research and an orphanage run by the Hershey Trust, every year since 1918. Nobody knows about it. Do you think, though, that some moms who spend a fortune on locally-made, fair-trade, one-for-one food and children's items might change their mind about that “heartless industrial Hershey chocolate” if they knew? They might even join the cause and be willing to pay a premium!



Freitag



**B: There's been a lot of debate about the "real influence" of so-called influencers. There seem to be two types, those who drive sales and those who drive brand awareness. Which way should prestige brands lean?**

Harness the passion of your true brand fans, your Ueber-Target, rather than buying the favors of 'influencer' mercenaries. Think of Red Bull's crazy stunt - people jumping out of the stratosphere or into a canyon. Or those people at the Berluti dinner. They will talk in authentic and relevant ways about your brand and will not ask to be paid. What you should do is put tools at their disposal that make the sharing easy. For example, the "Worn-Wear" blog where Patagonia fans can swap their favorite garment stories. And you should invest into the community so it grows and thrives. That's where MINI or Red Bull is a master of all things events or Lululemon leverages its stores and yogis to build local fan communities (who exercise in the store from time to time to make a point).

**B: In beauty, what works in one region doesn't always work in another. Do brands need a tailor-made rhetoric for each market, or is prestige understood universally around the world?**

A brand needs to find its mission (reason for being) and manifestations (product, people, places, etc.) and stay true to them, rather than trying to be

"local" or chasing trends. Take Aesop, the Australian beauty brand. It has a unique, cerebral, monastic-modern approach to beauty and design as expressed through its products, people, places. That does not change, even though the fantastic interior design of their famous stores changes with every location – that is part of who they are. A modern Asian store design? Yes. Whitening products because they are really "big" in Asia? NO! Because they would clash with the accept-who-you-are beauty philosophy of the brand. Asians do not go to Aesop to find Asian products but to find Aesop products and to get a unique perspective on beauty. Very different from Estée Lauder, Tom Ford or SK-II.

**B: Where is sustainability on the list of today's prestige brands and how do you see the trend evolve at high-end level?**

Trying to do business in a sustainable way will become a price for doing business, if it is not already. But that does not mean every brand should elevate it to the core of its equity. On the contrary, to truly stand out and be credible as a sustainable brand, a brand needs to invest heavily in people, manufacturing, education, etc. Just look at Patagonia, Freitag or Weleda. These are admirable brands that inspire us. But we also need brands that amuse, seduce, indulge or make us dream.



Aesop

**B: As a former senior executive at Frederic Fekkai, who is billed with inventing the premium hair care category, do you see more prestige brands launching more accessible products to connect with a younger/ less luxury-oriented customer? Is there a trend towards democratization?**

I don't envision the 'democratization' to happen – it is already here, whether you are in cosmetics, skin or hair care. But I do not think it is a question of a certain generation being "less luxury-oriented." Everyone needs a bit of luxury, sometime. And it will always be like this. Now, the definition of luxury is quite fluid. And the stereotypical images of luxury change over time and cultures. Also, what is luxury for some or on certain occasions is norm, bling, kitsch or not even a consideration to others or on other occasions. You can think of a baseball hat by Supreme bought for \$100 by a high-school kid as a luxury. The kid doesn't need that hat and really should not afford it (if he even can). On the other hand, that heavy golden watch for \$75,000 might be viewed as "pure luxury" by many but as "distasteful pimp-ware" by others, who might change their mind once they hear it was created by Jeff Koons or once they have a pay raise and can actually buy one. Once the millennials grow up and actually earn/have inherited enough money, they will become high-ticket item consumers – just like their baby boomer parents did growing out of their hippie phase.

**B: If you were a new brand starting out (possibly from a BRIC country, which is perceived less trustworthy than say France or Italy) and positioning yourself in the prestige market, how would you go about it?**

Don't try to fit the mold of a "luxury brand" as defined by the French or Italians – or the many "luxury marketing" classes popping up in universities around the world (often collaborating with universities in France or Italy). Be yourself in your own unique cultural context. The Italians have shown us how leather shoes can be luxury. The Swiss how incredibly complex mechanical watches can be luxury. Silicon Valley how the combination of tech and design can be luxury. What can India, China or Egypt inspire us with? For sure there is enough history looking back and vision looking forward to make us dream. I think Singapore is pretty good at that when it comes to resort- or air travel hospitality, for example.

**B: Where do you see the Ueber-Brands going in the future?**

The bleeding edge in Ueber-Branding is brands that do not only talk and showcase mission and myth, but actually truly live it from the inside out. If you "look behind the façade" of many luxury brands, you see organizations that can barely be differentiated from a bank headquarter or industrial plant. Where is that supposed creative passion, craftsmanship, civil engagement? In too many cases, it is the creation of an ad agency, marketing department, interior designer. And from there? Ueber-Brands will go where human desires and dreams are leading them and we will go where they are leading us. It's a constant give and take.



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