



# HOW TO START A LUXURY BRAND

Alexander Gallé is the creative director at GALLÉ, whose client list reads like an ABC of the world's leading luxury brands, starting with Asprey, Boucheron and Corum, passing through Fabergé and Jimmy Choo, and ending with Yves Saint Laurent. For the benefit of new brands starting up in luxury, we meet with him to discuss the craft of designing and marketing luxury brands.

**TAoL**

I want to start with some background behind what you do. How did you get to work so intensively in the luxury brands sector?

**AG**

If you'd asked me a few years ago, I would have probably told you about our studio's progression from designing campaigns for Hollywood, and how both the film and luxury industries are primarily involved in selling emotions to their customers. That is, they both rely on the uses of enchantment to sell an idea. The only difference being that, in the luxury sector, there's physical proof that you've bought into the idea... when you buy the product.

**TAoL**

And if I ask you today?

**AG**

Well, nowadays, I take a more holistic view, and I draw from a much broader cultural experience. Luxury brands don't just sell one narrative, the way a film does. They sell an entire narrative fabric. A cultural fabric, if you like. So, starting a new luxury brand is pretty similar to starting a new country.

**TAoL**

I'm not sure I fully understand the analogy. Tell me more...

**AG**

It's probably easier if I give you an example. When Italy unified in the mid-19th century, Massimo d'Azeglio said "We have made Italy; now we must make Italians." You see, Italians didn't see themselves as Italians. In their eyes, they were Genoese, Piedmontese, Tuscans, Neapolitans, etc. So, the biggest challenge wasn't to complete a political vision, but a cultural vision. In fact, that vision took a long time to complete. It was only in 1974, in the middle of the "years of lead", that Giovanni Leone and Aldo Moro – Italy's President and Prime Minister – realised that completing it was necessary if Italy was to have a *raison d'être*. They needed people to buy into "brand Italy".

My father ended up working for them – he was a professor in philology – and he became the first non-Italian to receive an Order of Merit, which is more or less the Italian equivalent of a knighthood.

Now, philology was in its infancy at the time, especially the area of semiotics. So, the idea of using the study of symbols, of narratives, of culture, to create what you would call a "nation brand" today... that was very radical, back then.

But it worked: Italy's Ministry of Culture was created in 1974, and over the next decade or so, Italians learned to love Italy, and foreigners learned to love Italian culture, which led them to buy Italian wine, food, fashion, cars, motorbikes, shoes, coffee, etc. Even today, you can see the result when you watch programmes like Top Gear. Every car they talk about is assessed with numbers – speed, consumption, acceleration, etc. – except Alfa Romeo and Ferrari: Italian cars are valued by the amount of love you feel for them. In that way, Italy has become a luxury brand, and you can only really say that about a handful of countries with a strong cultural presence, like Britain and France. It's no coincidence that so many luxury brands hail the country they come from with such vigour. You can add emotional value to your brand when you tap into deep cultural connections. And I don't just mean this in some abstract way: the products will sell for a much higher price.

**TAoL**

I get it. So you're saying that luxury brands should aim for the kind of depth that a country has with its patriots? I mean, in the relationship they have with their customers.

**AG**

That's right. My approach, when I work with new luxury brands, is that I generally divide the work in two parts. The first part is to find the one core value, and give it some kind of emotional resonance. Let's call that the Brand-Xness. It's great if you can put it in a single word. For Corum, for example, it was "courage". Just like you buy a Patek Philippe to leave a "legacy" to your grandchildren, you buy a Corum to reward yourself for the courage you had to start your own business, to sail around the world, etc. Now, you may say, how does a timepiece express courage? The answer lies in how you imagine time itself. Legacy is long time, courage is short time: seize the moment, free yourself, unlock your heart... all pretty strong impulses to express if you're selling an expensive watch. We used "unlock your heart" because it finally gave meaning to the Corum icon: the Corum key. The key is courage. Use the key and you'll conquer the world.

The second part is in line with the quote from d'Azeglio we discussed earlier. Launching a new luxury brand means saying: "we have made Brand-X; now we must make Brand-Xians".

Everything you do – your logo, your campaign imagery, your language, your product, your behaviour – creates a cultural fabric that emotionally connects Brand-Xians with you, and with each other. If you get it right, your brand becomes a catalyst for



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a cultural phyle, which is a group of people who see themselves as "people like us". They adopt a cultural value – your Brand-Xness – and they find ways of expressing it in their personal style, in their social life, by doing things that other people don't do.

When you find your Brand-Xness, and when you find the ways Brand-Xians get to express it, that's when you'll know you've got the branding right. If you really hit the spot, it's them that'll tell you how to do it, because they'll openly talk about what you mean to them. All you have to do is pay attention.

For more information on the Gallé design studio, visit [www.galle.com](http://www.galle.com)