

# Engagement as the Core of Social and Digital Media Strategy in the Fashion Industry

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**Abstract** The main purpose of this paper is to recognize and to underline the role of engagement as the core of a digital and social media strategy. Since many fashion brands haven't exploited completely the potentialities that the continuously evolving digital media can offer, we have reviewed the literature in an effort to structure an approach to define an effective digital media strategy. Furthermore, we examined the Burberry case to identify the axes that addressed brand strategy and the role of engagement in its success. The main contribution of the paper is therefore an engagement-oriented approach to the definition process of a digital strategy that can be implemented by companies who intend to enter the digital business. The current scenario demands a continuously evolving mind-set and organization focused not only on reaching target audiences, but also on retaining them through a customer-centric strategy. The suggested approach might be adopted by companies belonging to various sectors, but customer engagement can be especially useful for visually-oriented sectors like fashion, where consumers are easily reached and already overloaded with content from many sources, and where a captivating and innovative digital marketing strategy can become a critical success factor.

**Keywords** Customer engagement · Digital strategy · Experience · Contents · Social media monitoring · Omnichannel

## 1 Introduction

Social networks were originally conceived as virtual spaces to share personal information, pictures, experiences, feelings, and opinions. Joining a social network became viral: millions of users were attracted by the compelling necessity to be “present” and by the satisfaction found through the published contents. Enabling

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users to access such masses of information stimulated the need to constantly get and give more, gradually turning these interactions into habits. The intrinsically engaging feature of social and digital media is a strong component of strengthening the importance of engagement as the focus of social-media (SM) strategy.

While the phenomenon was becoming massive, many marketing strategists around the world realized the vast potential of SM. Nonetheless, fashion brands (especially luxury brands) were initially reticent to adopt SM in their marketing strategy due to the contrast between its massiveness and the exclusivity of luxury goods. Recently, this has changed: as a sector in which visual merchandising is a main topic, the Fashion Industry started recognizing social and digital media as a great opportunity to communicate and interact directly with consumers.

Both practitioners and researchers hold that the power of social and digital media can be maximized if used effectively, and supported, for instance, by a well-structured strategy definition, leading to major results in terms of consumer engagement and brand positioning, with the ultimate goal of inducing brand loyalty.

## 2 Literature Review

### 2.1 *Scientific Background*

Brodie et al. (2011) defined customer engagement as a psychological state caused by interactive experiences under diverse contexts, consequently reaching various levels of CE (Gambetti 2012). Brodie described customer engagement as a dynamic, iterative process which creates value within service relationships. He also noted its role in relational concepts, such as loyalty and involvement, which can be antecedents or consequences of nomological networks governing service relationships. Philipp Kotler, an American marketing guru, also remarked on the active role of customers if engaged, stating that, as long as consumers play a key role in the creation of value by product and service co-creation, marketers should focus on the development of meaningful connections with costumers. (Achrol 2012).

Mollen and Wilson (2010) defined online engagement as a cognitive and affective commitment to an active relationship with the brand encapsulated in digital tools which communicate brand value, underlining its dimensions as dynamic and sustained cognitive processing on the satisfaction of instrumental value (utility and relevance) and experiential value (emotions). In 2012, Sashi underlined that, with effective execution, SM can be a valuable communication instrument to enhance brand consumer engagement. This was reinforced by Erdogmus and Cicek (2012), who studied the impact of SM marketing on brand loyalty and concluded that effective campaigns on social media are “the most significant drivers of brand loyalty”. They also identified content relevancy, popularity among friends, and omnichannel as other main drivers (Nadeem 2012; Thipathi 2014).

Engaging customers is the result of a cultivated, bidirectional relation, and, similar to all human relationships, this is not an immediately reachable result. Sashi (2012) defined a seven-stage cycle to describe the process that aims to shape customer engagement: connection, interaction, satisfaction, retention, commitment, advocacy, and engagement. Sashi states that customer engagement is the state where customers feel high levels of emotional attachment and have logical reasons for loyalty, which can result in behavior exhibiting brand advocacy and unconditional loyalty. Consequently, fashion brands should “distribute” their efforts to guide their customers through the entire cycle, while avoiding an early interruption of the link. For instance, a brand might have outdated web content because it focused only on the connection-cycle stage and ignored the channel feeding, thus weakening the retention stage and probably leading to the cycle break point. As stated by Erdogmus and Cicek (2012), providing relevant and updated content is one of the most crucial strategies for managing a brand on SM successfully (Kumar 2012).

As the core of social and digital media strategy, the engagement should be one of the main criteria for evaluating digital/social campaign results. In fact, Hofmann and Fodor (2010) stated that effective social-media measurement should start by converting the traditional ROI approach by calculating the returns in terms of customer social-media investments motivated and driven by brand-versus-consumer motivation to use social media.

## ***2.2 Industrial Background***

Some interesting trends regarding the adoption of a SM strategy were presented on the latest Digital Competitive Map (Solca 2016), a report edited by Exane BNP Paribas, which benchmarks the performance of luxury brands on digital media. The analysis is conducted along two axes: “Strategic Reach” (SR) and “Digital Customer Experience Proficiency” (DCEP), both with their own evaluation criteria grouped by categories. It’s notable that a separated category for Customer Engagement is present on both axes.

The general results showed that the digital competitive map score grew by 9% in comparison to the previous seasonal readings, while two-thirds of brands in the panel showed significant improvements, meaning that luxury brands are investing in order to increase their performance on digital media. The best performer was Burberry, which stood out and maintained its overall leadership. Fendi, Loro, Piana, and Dior showed the largest improvements on the new Digital Competitive Map.

It was emphasized that there is still no consensus in terms of digital execution priorities because different brands led on different performance criteria: Burberry and Loro and Piana lead in key product presentation criteria. Burberry excelled in personal services—in particular for style advisor, conducted by phone, email and online chat. Dior also excelled in style advisor. Coach led on the all-important cross-channel-services criteria, while Burberry and Fendi were leaders in customer engagement through email proficiency. (These criteria belong to the Digital

Customer Experience axis). Other noticeable implementations on Digital Customer Experience were in online order in store, PayPal (Burberry), store search, free delivery (Tory Burch), extra effort on style advisor, collect in store, product exchange in store (Cucinelli), you may also like, match with, ask for visitor localization on desktop/mobile, and web landing pages on emails (Moncler).

Also L2, a member-based business intelligence firm that benchmarks the digital performance of brands, recognizes Burberry as the best in its Fashion Digital Index, which measures the initiatives of 83 luxury brands on websites, e-commerce portals, digital marketing, and social-media presence. Burberry outperformed Kate Spade, Ralph Lauren, Louis Vuitton, and 79 other brands with its activities on Periscope and Snapchat and with its prolific mobile-platform improvements which translated into notable increases in social engagement and brand visibility and a tripling of online sales. These results were published by other digital media like Pambianco, Digiday, fashionmagazine, <http://wwd.com>, etc.

In the next chapter, Burberry's digital strategy will be studied to extract some best practices from the top digital luxury brand of 2015.

### 2.2.1 Burberry Case

Back in 2006, Ahrendts and Bailey, Burberry's CEO and CCO (now CEO and CCO), clearly stated that "the vision was to be the first company who is fully digital" looking forward "to build a social enterprise". Ahrendts also mentioned to the Harvard Business Review that the strategy was completely centered on the brand and that, to purify the brand message, they would focus also on digital.

After that announcement, in 2009, came the launch of "Art of the Trench", a microsite that runs user-generated content of people wearing Burberry's signature trench coat, as the first act of the digital transformation (It was upgraded and expanded at the end of 2014). In the same year, Burberry launched its Facebook page and live streamed the Spring/Summer 2010 fashion show, thus overcoming the paradigm of exclusively live runway action.

Then the Burberry Acoustic project showcased "young British bands that Burberry believes in", and, since 2010, consumers can watch videos of the bands performing music and wearing clothes from Burberry's collections.

Burberry has been among the first brands to test new social media channels and developments: In 2013, they posted a video on Instagram while announcing the launch of Instagram for video, and they tested instant orders via text messaging on WeChat in China; In 2014, just after Twitter's buy buttons rolled out, Burberry incorporated the "buy now" button on the Twitter profile; In April 2015, they jumped on Snapchat and Periscope, a Twitter app for live streaming videos which was launched in March 2015, during the live-streamed Spring/Summer 2016 fashion show, and shared shots of the entire collection before it premiered on the runway, driving excitement and engagement among the public to the tune of 100 million impressions. In July 2015, the new service Apple Music streaming was activated, and three months later Burberry became the first brand to get an Apple

Music channel. At the end of September 2015, Burberry and Kakao, Korea's largest social platform with 190 million followers, announced a global partnership that enables simultaneous activities across Kakao Talk, Kakao TV, and Kakao Giftshop and offers Korean audiences direct access to its runway shows and campaigns. It closed the year 2015 with the first 3D interactive marketing campaign in partnership with DreamWorks Animation, enabling five participants, in turn, to pick and personalize a scarf using their smartphones, then to display their 'creations' on the famous Curve screen of Piccadilly Circus (London), and finally to buy it online.

Burberry has partnered with Google twice: the first time in June 2013 for "Burberry Kisses" that used "lip detection technology" to enable users to send digital kisses to loved ones; the second time for "Burberry Booth" on which holiday shoppers could create a 15-second edited version of the Festive campaign in which they appear alongside such celebs and the clip is instantly sent to the user, to motivate the replication of the in-store experience.

Many other in-store experiences have been implemented: in-store digital events; the Burberry Retail Theatre was the first ever live simultaneous virtual trunk shown in stores globally, broadcasting multifaceted content all over the world directly to the stores and in which the audience was able to interact with the collection through iPads and to order online.

Burberry dispatched a Digitally Enhanced Flagship Store equipped with full-length screens around the store which can easily be converted into mirrors and RFID-embedded clothes to enable shoppers at Burberry's Regent Street flagship in London to get specific contents like information about the materials used in a bag or a catwalk videos, when approaching one of the screens in a fitting room.

The brand became an example of digital-media strategy, proving that engaging consumers is possible by presenting the broader culture of the brand with social media contents, even if the company's core business is fashion. Bailey declared that the goal was to bring customers closer to the brand by the mind-set "Mind share if you want market share".

WaveMetrix, a social media monitor, released some results in 2010 about how consumers "thank Burberry" for sharing the "quality music" on Burberry Acoustic and "providing us with great new artists". It also reported that consumers "love" the "amazing" fashion collections and "can't wait" to see the designs in stores. These results showed that social-media content encouraged consumers to discuss the Burberry brand and consider purchase.

Burberry structured a robust, internal digital team that creates the content shared on platforms and on mobile, thus reinforcing the consistency message on digital channels. The transformation encompassed three new departments Social Media, Mobile, and Insight and Analytics; this brought IT to the front because it was realized that a Marketing Department couldn't execute without a strong technology partner. In addition, a special group was dedicated to wearable tech and innovation (the "What If Group").

In the brand's Strategic Report 14/15, Bailey affirmed that highlights included: a 9% increase in comparable store sales, reflecting Burberry's strategic focus on the retail channel; the sustained outperformance of the digital business; and

double-digit growth in the Americas and EMEIA regions, each underlining satisfactory results for a digital approach. L2, according to Reuters, reported that the whole of the luxury goods market grew only 1–2% in September 2015, while Burberry's revenue was up 11%.

Furthermore, Burberry's chairman Sir John Peace announced, looking ahead to 2015/2016, that "key investments will include stores in flagship markets, technology and continued digital enhancements".

The four key themes of Burberry's strategic agenda, Peace stated, will be "Brand first, Customer-centric, Famous for product, Productive and responsible". Interestingly, the first and second themes included, as Burberry's long-term priorities, the global engagement driven by innovative creative content and experiences, supported by digital, social, and traditional media in addition to online and in-store innovations, which work together to create a seamless experience in order to be sector-leading in understanding, engaging, and serving its customers, both online and offline.

### 3 Methodology

This study consisted of two parts. In the first one, already-existing literature reviews on CE have been examined in order to gain an understanding of its relationship with digital and social media and consequently its role in digital strategy. Especially important was the engagement cycle proposed by Sashi (2012) and reinforced by his statement about the importance of engagement to increase customers' emotional attachment which would potentially turn into brand advocacy and unconditional loyalty behaviors.

In the second part, after identification of the best performer in digital strategy in the luxury-fashion industry, we examined the Burberry case to recognize the axes that comprised a brand's effective digital strategy, and we analyzed how engagement played a role in this success.

Burberry's best practices showed four common significant patterns/features: identity (same brand's voice across all platforms); omnichannel (use all channels to reach consumers); integration (of the different social and digital platforms); and continuous innovation (use the latest tech innovations to surprise and consequently engage costumers).

Particular aspects of Burberry's best practices include: delineating customer-centric objectives and consequently campaigns; innovating in order to captivate and engage customers—through all channels as pioneers for some functionalities and by collaborations with many different partners; adopting a mind-share approach to overcome the paradigm of the exclusivity of luxury fashion; implementing in-store improvements to enhance the customer experience; and having a dedicated team for innovation and content creation.

Finally, after this analysis and taking into account some of the identified best practices, one can endorse an engagement-oriented approach devised to support a brand while defining a customer-centric digital strategy.

## 4 The Proposed Model

In this chapter, we propose an engagement-based approach to define the processes of the digital strategy for a fashion brand. Initially, we describe some critical issues that can delay or block the workflow when switching to digital will be mentioned, and then we consider some of the best practices identified in the previous chapter.

The first issue a fashion brand faces, when considering an investment in social or digital media projects, is its lack of expertise in the field, due to its different core business. Furthermore, the initial approach usually anticipates calculation of a ROI from social media, for which there isn't yet an accurate, valid model.

Another difficulty brands may encounter is not having the appropriate organizational structure to support a multi-dimensional project because that constitutes implementation of a social-media strategy. In fact, a dedicated (internal or external) team, for content management and/or generation with IT skills to handle the different platforms, could be necessary. Conversion to digital and social media is not (only) about reaching consumers through all the channels but, more importantly, about engaging them with the brand and its products which, if successfully driven, would take consumers to a spontaneous replication of brand's message. So, a constant feeding of the channels is required, which translates in greater effort and resources for the brand.

Moreover, having a dedicated team will make it easier to maintain a unique brand voice while being omnichannel and platform integrated, which is crucial for the brand's identity protection.

To achieve significant results, the brand should be ready to change its mind-set in order to proceed with a structured-strategy definition, while considering that the adopted approaches can be infinite thanks to the variety of channels and possibilities to be present 'online'. This means to be open-minded to overcome some of the previously mentioned issues through a well-structured strategy definition, keeping in mind that building lasting relationships is never an immediate result.

The suggested strategy definition, focused on engagement, starts with the iteration and assessment of these three closely-related steps:

1. *Define the engagement-oriented goals.* State the engagement-oriented goals based on the actual state of the brand in terms of awareness and engagement by using Social Media KPI in order to quantitatively evaluate the initial state, then to set target KPI values and, finally, to measure the concrete results. There must be a definition of specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, and time-bound, customer-centric objectives to drive the entire process to result in successful engagement.

2. *Choose the target audience and channels.* The choice of the target audience and the channels is the primary determinant for both the type and quantity of the contents to be generated and managed, and for the identification of specific indicators to measure reach, customer engagement, and replication.
3. *Define the resources.* Establishing resource availability in order to evaluate if the activities might be executed through a collaboration between the existing areas of the company (IT and marketing), or if it is necessary to define a dedicated team for content management and/or generation.

Once these aspects have been assessed, it is possible to proceed with a content plan and proposal which should be evaluated before its implementation:

4. *Define the content plan.* Content planning which includes posting a calendar and the frequency for related content or campaigns for the chosen channels and subsequent assignment of activities to the allocated resources.

The implementation steps should be:

5. *Define the brand voice.* Establishing a unique brand voice for all the channels and/or adapting internal communication guidelines for the contents that will be generated and published to engage customers while protecting the brand's identity.
6. *Generate content.* Generating a variety of attractive content in order to keep audiences engaged.

Finally, it is necessary to evaluate the impact and effectiveness of the implemented actions by measuring the specific indicators for each channel, using SM analytics software, and analyzing the results and trends for strategy optimization for the next iteration.

## 5 Discussions and Conclusions

The main purpose of this paper has been to recognize and to underline the role of engagement as the core of a digital and social media strategy.

Many fashion brands are still missing the opportunities that the continuously evolving digital media can offer.

The literature was reviewed in an effort to structure an approach for the definition of an effective digital media strategy. Furthermore, the Burberry case was studied to identify the axes that addressed the brand's strategy and the role of engagement in its success. As a result, we proposed an engagement-oriented approach for the process of defining digital strategy to be implemented by companies that intend to enter the digital arena. The current scenario demands a continuously evolving mind-set and structure focused not only on reaching audiences, but also on retaining them through a customer-centric strategy.



The suggested approach might be adopted by companies belonging to any of various sectors but customer engagement can be especially useful for visually-oriented sectors like fashion, where, since consumers are easily reached and to whom content can be delivered, a captivating digital marketing strategy can make a difference.

In conclusion, it can be stated that engagement plays a crucial role in any social-media strategy. Companies should switch to a mind-set that considers direct interactions with costumers as an opportunity to build a lasting relationship which will gradually drive replication and revenue growth, by offering content strategically constructed to be consistent, continuously innovative, diverse, and consistent.

## 6 Further Developments

A first step in the future action plan of the project is the validation of the proposed model through enactment of several case studies, thus evaluating performance in order to optimize the current work. Other further developments could involve in-depth study of social-media ROI modelling or delineation of a focused analysis of the interactions and on-line interests of a brand audience and its relationship with content management in order to optimize the digital strategy.

Finally, evaluating the performance of some the most recent digital trends in customer experience (micro-moments, programmatic ads, beacons, etc.) could be interesting in order to analyze their effectiveness and to contemplate their adoption in the digital strategy.

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