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## Are Luxury Brands a Contradiction in Terms?

### Introduction

We live in the age of brands and branding, where you are judged by the name and the logo on your phone, your trainers and your handbag. The price of a product can be inflated dramatically beyond the cost of its production if carries a particular name or logo.

In a way brands are the opposite of luxury for they are often purchased by consumers who do so because they are standardised in appearance and function and are also reliable. This seems to be diametrically opposed to the idea of luxury products, as things which are differentiated from other products and largely standardised. Then we have what are termed 'designer brands' particularly in the fashion sector. These can carry great status yet often they are made in relatively large numbers, often with little personalisation. The fact therefore that relatively large numbers of such products, which are generally very expensive and high quality, are made must surely affect the idea of what constitutes luxury. Our consumer world is currently full of products which purport to be, and are accepted by consumers as, luxury brands, despite them being produced in large numbers.

There are some other interesting dimensions to this discussion around branding and luxury that we may wish to discuss briefly at this point.

First, in the field of manufactured goods there is the interesting phenomenon of fakes – lower quality copies of luxury products that, nevertheless, on the face of it have the same appearance of the 'real thing' and carry the appropriate name or logo. Everyone seems to recognise that these fakes will not be of the same quality as the original, but many buy them anyway suggesting, that the status acquired by being associated with these labels is very important to some people who may be unable to afford the authentic article.

Of course, in tourism, hospitality and events, this faking of the tangible product is almost non-existent, although copying elements of the product of a leading

brand is not unknown! And while no destination can be seen as a fake there is considerable debate around the authenticity of destinations and 'inauthentic' could be seen as an alternative word for fake!

Second, in many sectors of manufacturing we now have everyday brands which would, by no stretch of the imagination, be perceived as luxury, developing products and marketing them in ways designed to make them appear to be a 'luxury purchase'. This is often done by developing so-called 'limited editions', which suggests a rarity value which is often synonymous with luxury, yet the production run for these 'limited edition' clothes, soft drink, chocolates and so on could run into millions of units! In relation to the tangible elements of the product in tourism, hospitality and events, such 'limited editions' are not so obvious although they could be said to be represented by the opportunity to pay to upgrade to a better hotel room or a higher class of travel on the aeroplane.

Third, and most intriguingly perhaps in the context of tourism, hospitality and events, is the issue of services. Branded hotels, airports, casinos and so on may create luxurious physical environments and seek to impress consumers with lavish tangible goods such as food and drink, entertainments systems, and comfortable beds, but they are also service businesses where a big part of the experience comes through intangible service delivery.

Here I would suggest that the whole idea of branding begins to break down somewhat, or certainly that element of it relating to the service being of a similar standard and style time after time after time – in other words consistency. It is impossible to fully standardise a service delivered by a human being, despite all the training in the world. Service delivered by people is never the same on any two occasions because of changes in the relationship between three sets of factors:

- The server, even if it is the same person, has moods which change, feels great or feels unwell, is enjoying their working day or is hating it.
- The consumer has the same issues around mood and feeling well or not, but also brings other variables to the service interaction, including their personality, previous experiences and expectations.
- The context in which the service takes place, which covers everything from the number and identity of other consumers within the service delivery location, to how busy the operation is, to the physical environment, to the quality of the tangibles – such as food and drink – that the server is given by the rest of the team to provide for the consumer.

Furthermore, the idea that branding ensures a certain standardisation and consistency is also increasingly not true in the hospitality sector. Here the widespread use of franchising and management contracting in relation to hotels and restaurants leads to issues around the implementation of brand standards and values in every single unit operating under a particular brand.