

# Epilog

## Q & A with Uché

### **1. Why did you write this book? Did it come about as an accident?**

I have nurtured the idea of writing this book for about five years. It came out of several gaps that I discovered through my work as a business consultant for luxury brands. Irrespective of the country or product category, I noticed that luxury brands were struggling with the same issues and challenges. Some of the most resounding of these were linked to how to create a luxurious experience in the virtual world and how to reproduce the DNA codes of a luxury brand online. Many brands were also struggling to understand which products to sell online and how to do so without sacrificing their innate qualities and identities. I knew that I would write this book one day as I carried it around in my head for five years, so it wasn't an accident.

### **2. Why write the book at this precise moment, in 2009?**

There are two main reasons. The first is that the arrival of the social web, or what some people prefer to call Web 2.0 or Web 3.0, has led to an explosive transformation of the mind-set of luxury clients, both online and offline. Attitudes, interests and general behavior have changed dramatically in the last few years. This has led to a real revolution that is challenging the way luxury presents itself and also what clients expect from luxury brands. This movement has also been reinforced by the global economic recession and its impact will further be felt in the next few years. I felt that these issues required urgent attention. The second reason is that the World Wide Web is celebrating its twentieth anniversary this year and there couldn't be a better time to make a contribution to this wonderful invention that has transformed the entire world and humankind.

### **3. Which luxury brands have the best websites?**

I am often asked this question and my response is usually the same. There is none. This is not because luxury brands are not smart enough to have the best websites but simply because there is no pre-set magic formula for creating "the best" website. Representing luxury online involves several

intricate strategies and approaches that have to be individually developed and executed in line with each brand's identity and core essence. Also, the degree of application of web elements like design, functionality, atmosphere, rich content, systems and applications varies between brands. The goal should be to create a coherent and unique experience across the entire board.

I find it often surprising to see how much time and energy luxury brands spend comparing one another's websites in a bid to become "better" than competitors. These brands often focus on the design and visual appeal rather than the total experience and complete brand immersion. Creating a luxury website should not only appeal to the eyes but also to the mind because long after the colors and design are forgotten, the virtual experience will always be remembered.

#### **4. What do luxury consumers look for on a luxury website?**

Consumers have been interacting actively with the Internet for the past twenty years and this exposure has led to constantly changing expectations. At the beginning of the World Wide Web, they were driven by curiosity to discover the virtual world and therefore they were easily attracted and pleased by beautifully developed websites. Today, this is no longer enough. The constant evolution of the Internet has led luxury consumers to believe that they are the center of the online universe. This means that they expect to be recognized and interacted with on a personalized level, whether it is through products, services or other offerings. Today's luxury consumer is seeking to be engaged by brands online and they will accept nothing less.

#### **5. What should luxury brands do about blogs, social networks and virtual worlds?**

Albert Einstein once said that *"Not everything that counts can be counted and not everything that can be counted counts"*. think this should be the watchword of luxury brands as they get carried away by the excitement of the social web and by the competition of accumulating fans and followers on platforms like Twitter and Facebook.

I've heard many people say that luxury brands should create blogs, social networks and private islands on virtual immersive worlds like Second Life. I don't entirely subscribe to this idea because of the very nature of the social web and luxury itself. The social web acts as a congregation point for people to connect and express themselves through dialogue and exchanges. It thrives on independence of thought and draws its credibility from its objective nature. It is a medium created by the people for the people. Placing

a luxury brand in this mix and expecting to have the same results is quite tricky, except the luxury brand is prepared to be entirely open, transparent and accepting of both positive and negative content. Most luxury brands are not ready for this. It is true that the active users of social networks are seeking brand engagement and intimate relations but I believe that luxury brands can fulfil their expectations without directly creating blogs or jumping on the bandwagon of social networks like Facebook, Myspace, Twitter and so on.

Integrating the social web in luxury is similar to learning a new language at an advanced age. It's a real challenge for luxury brands, especially as most brands have been used to communicating mainly through images and little text for a long time. Today the social web obliges communicating mainly using words and luxury brands have to learn to evoke desires and dreams through text. How do you make people dream using 140 characters on Twitter? Here lies the main challenge.

The answer is in understanding the phenomenon of the social web and how it is transforming people's mind-sets and the attitudes of an entire generation. This will lead luxury brands to understand the right approach and platform to adopt. The majority of luxury brands are yet to grasp the world of social networks.

I've seen several official communities created by luxury brands on websites like Facebook and My Space and most of them are poorly executed and they generally do not respect the codes of social networks like having a real two-way conversation with the people on the networks. Social websites provide people with an individual voice and a face, and it is quite difficult for corporate bodies to reproduce this. However I strongly recommend that luxury brands should closely monitor social websites as the information gathered on these networks are essential for tracking the evolution of consumer mind-sets and devising communications approaches. With the evolution of technology and the possible expansion of social networks in new dimensions, there will be several more possibilities. But the most important factor is to have a strategy.

## **6. How can a luxury brand select the right products to sell online? Should they sell everything online?**

This is also another question I am asked all the time! I think that luxury e-retail should be approached very carefully, as there are several issues linked to it. First, the purpose of e-retail should be established and some questions should be answered: Is it purely for revenue generation? Is it a means of brand communications and image reinforcement? Is it an avenue to increase desire through inaccessibility? Is it a way to capture client data and reinforce relationships? Is it a means of channel integration? The answers to these should enable a luxury brand to decide whether to place the entire product

collection for online retail and if not, which specific products to sell online. Second, there should be a core integrated strategy behind e-retail operations, otherwise it could fall apart.

**7. You introduced the concept of the luxemosphere as a core aspect of luxury online. Can you explain the idea behind this?**

Luxemosphere is coined from two words “luxe” and “atmosphere”. Its meaning is obviously the creation of a luxurious atmosphere in a specific environment, both online and offline. It has been presented in the book as an essential aspect of ensuring a powerful online experience through sensory communications, which is very important in luxury. Luxemosphere uses different tactics to achieve a specific ambience that could evoke sensations in people. As we know, luxury is all about pleasure that results from a high degree of sensory appreciation, and positive sensory vibes go a long way in assuring a high-impact experience. In the online context where there is no direct human-to-human physical contact, this factor is even more important.

**8. Is it true that luxury brands that don't have websites will stop existing?**

Of course not. This is not likely to happen. However, what will happen for sure is that the luxury brands that avoid having their own websites will lose control of how their brands are represented online and, subsequently, how the brand is perceived in the real world. It is already happening with the arrival of the social web, where brands no longer control what consumers say or show about them online. The user is now in charge and has taken the reins of control in cyberspace. The most important means for luxury brands to address this phenomenon is to emphasize their brand heritage and value through having a high-impact website.

**9. How should luxury brands approach other innovation-based areas like mobile and merchandising technologies?**

The integration of technology and innovation in luxury doesn't end with the Internet. Technology may also be applied in product design and extension, material sourcing, store merchandising and mobile technology. Did you know that technology that enables body scanning for made-to-measure clothing now exists? Or that it is possible to try on clothes in fitting rooms through a recreated virtual model without ever putting the clothes on? Or that interactive mirrors in dressing rooms can enable distant and collective shopping? Or that the mobile phone can be used to capture sensory data on different products? Or that materials for clothing can now filter bacteria

while conserving body heat or generating coolness? The possibilities for the integration of technology in the luxury field are endless.

**10. What advice do you have for young and emerging luxury brands regarding the Internet?**

I think young brands are extremely fortunate to be operating in the digital era. Every aspect of launching and growing a luxury brand has been made easier by technology. It is now possible to attain global brand awareness status in a relatively short time frame as a result of the Internet and instant communications. Product development, retailing, communications, sourcing, production and international expansion are all opportunities for young brands in the short term. My advice to emerging brands is to take full advantage of the digital media and new technologies, and never to think that they are too small or too young to act big!

**11. Did you face any challenges while writing the book?**

Endless challenges! First, I had to deal with web content that was constantly changing. Sometimes I used some websites to illustrate some points only to find upon completing that section that the website's contents had changed or that the entire website had been completely re-designed. This meant that I wrote some sections and chapters several times and I constantly added content until the very last minute of editing. Also, it was quite a challenge to convince some brands to release statistics linked to their website traffic, online sales turnover and other sensitive information. Eventually many of them did. Despite these, in general the challenges led me to strive to give the best to the book and I hope it has paid off.

**12. What was the best part of writing this book?**

I totally enjoyed every moment of writing *Luxury Online*. I guess it also comes from having an ongoing consulting practice in luxury e-business. Another enjoyable aspect of this book was hosting Club e-Luxe, the executive club for luxury e-business professionals. The involvement with Club e-Luxe meant that I was immersed fully in luxury e-business on a daily basis and it was easier to understand the challenges as well as identify the right approaches and technologies to overcome these. I also received enormous support from luxury brands too numerous to mention. People were generous with their time, insights, viewpoints and feedback. Since I wrote parts of this book during several business and personal travels, it was a real benefit to know that no matter where I was, I only needed to send an email or make a

call to brands and they often responded instantly. I don't think I would have been able to write this book without this level of support.

I also received great support from my team at Luxe Corp, whose patience and flexibility in working around my pressure cycles and endless deadlines went a long way in making completing this book possible.

**13. Did your previous book *Luxury Fashion Branding* influence the contents of this book?**

Definitely. As soon as *Luxury Fashion Branding* was published in 2007, I knew that I was ready to write this book. I had so much to say in the e-business section of the previous book but couldn't due to limited space. Also, most of the questions I was asked during the book's presentation were related to the Internet and technology, and it was apparent that the issues in these areas had to be addressed. In addition, publishing *Luxury Fashion Branding* in full color also made me realize that this book had to be produced in full color as well.

**14. Any downside to writing this book?**

Yes! As a result of the thousands of luxury websites I had to visit in my research and the many fantastic new brands and products that I discovered in the process I am now broke from shopping online!

**15. Can you tell us which is your favorite luxury brand?**

Sure. I'll tell you when I'm ready to be out of a job!

\* Interview conducted by Sara White Wilson