Title of Article: Digital storytelling for the independent Belgian designer

Written by: Mauranne Geenen

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Research Question: How effective is the communication strategy of the independent Belgian designer in our present day global fashion industry?

Justification for Choice of Magazine: With the aim of sparking conversation, thought and further research, the following article was written for the audience of the Flanders DC – Flanders District of Creativity - online magazine. As an online platform focused on supporting creativity and creative businesses from Belgium, it is an appropriate platform to reach a large audience interested in the creative development of the Belgian Independent Designer. Flanders DC, which in the spring of 2017 merged with the Flanders Fashion Institute, stands as a research center that supports and advises creative entrepreneurship from start-up to mature leveled businesses within the creative market. The article presents a critical analysis of the traditional communication strategy now used by the Independent Belgian Designer and how digital storytelling can offer a solution. Possibly, being extremely relevant and usable for new projects or coaching sessions within Flanders DC.

Link to article: https://indd.adobe.com/view/cdbdb3af-8940-40e4-8d68-8999de4b577f

(Article in complete layout for online publishing with imagery and movies, under need the full text of the article for easier reading)
Digital storytelling for the independent Belgian designer

With technology so deeply rooted into our daily lives it seems inevitable for Belgian independent designers to finally embrace the possibilities of telling a brand’s story online instead of only focusing on their offline presence.

Antwerp, Belgium. The independent Belgian designer, from the start of their success almost 30 years ago, has always relied on earned media. Earned media, in the traditional meaning, refers to publicity within the media that is earned due to the creativity and uniqueness of a collection without being paid for. Digitalization and consequently the rise of Social Media added an entirely different meaning to earned media or more accurately owned media, content that is created by the label itself. By generating owned media that is so exceptional, new and brand consistent the audience can transact this into earned media due to the possibility to instantly share, comment and like content through online social media.

Human beings are designed to like new, surprising and emotional content. Similarly like listening intensely to an interesting story or laughing passionately with a good joke, branded content can evoke strong emotions from their audiences. Digital storytelling is the modern description of the ancient art of storytelling. Throughout history, storytelling has been used to share knowledge, emotions and values. These stories have taken on many forms and continuously adapted to the medium available at that time - from a circle around the campfire, to the silver screen and now to the Internet. Digital storytelling engages a range of technical tools to weave a personal tale, using images, graphics, music, or sound mixed together with the creator’s specific voice. (Porter, B. 2010)

Before, when the Internet was not yet part of our daily lives, media was a monologue to passive, captive audiences reading through, for example, a print magazine. The dominant communication model used was earned media, besides investing in large advertisement campaigns - which was unattainable within the small budget of an independent fashion house.

Today, media is profoundly different. Mario Ortelli, a senior luxury goods analyst at Sanford C. Berstein, describes media nowadays more as a ‘multilogue’ than a monologue, which unfolds
over a wide network of media-technology platforms where the audience is an equally active participant and potential consumer. Brands cannot monopolize the conversation anymore, but instead they must imitate synergetic, mutual relationships with their audiences (Kansara, V. 2016).

For the independent Belgian designer who prefers to avoid commercial, global marketing strategies targeting international consumers, online media is the ideal approach in creating own content. With targeting fans that already follow the brand, digital storytelling generates more brand awareness and loyalty if done successfully and potentially a far wider reach of new ‘earned’ followers.

The consumer, the Belgian independent designers targets, has stayed the same for a long time. Their appreciation for quality and exclusivity made them extremely loyal consumers. But as time evolved many consumers have also changed, the Internet made them more aware and demanding. Global availability and a highly saturated market created highly volatile and less loyal consumers towards one brand only. Luxury consumers still tend to purchase from brands they are familiar with, but if the independent Belgian designer remains a digital laggard, it will not generate enough brand awareness for the new digital consumer.

While at the start of the Internet revolution, online presence was seen as a commercial marketing strategy, strongly avoided by independent creative designers, it now grew far beyond that. The average western consumer spends more time on digital media and technology than on work or sleep (Kansara, A. 2016). Ignoring these resources would be like the independent Belgian designer refusing to go to China 20 years ago, which currently is one of their biggest markets.

The Belgian designers are already active storytellers within their collection, each have their own muses or sources of inspiration that gradually develop into a collection, augmented with apt details, fabrics and shapes. Their stories are ultimately told in a runway show where every look defines certain elements of inspiration. The independent designer has always avoided extensive marketing strategies, both for budget and commercial reasons, but with the rise of Internet an entirely new level of communication has gained ground within the industry, but is still left largely untouched by the independent designer.

While shifting towards a more digital presence is necessary, how brands communicate and connect with these new consumers is more challenging. Currently, the majority of Belgian
designers uses social media and digital content in a straightforward, singular manner. Runway images are re-used on every platform, important news such as the launch of a new collection, stock sales, store openings are communicated similarly across all platforms and website are used as informative sites rather then seen as a brand extension. By doing so, the consumer constantly gets to see the same visuals across all channels not adding new, surprising content that potentially could re-trigger the audience’s attention.

Progressing towards a more active social presence, where not only the product but also the brand story and value are told will provoke much more emotion, interaction and trust from the audience. According to Eva Chen, Instagram’s head of fashion partnerships, consumers are nowadays equally inspired by the story and lifestyle as by the product. Combined with social media, the brand’s story lets you tap into consumers’ emotions while creating a direct link, which ideally leads to more brand awareness. (K. Georgiou, 2016)

Transmedia storytelling, an extended version of digital storytelling where the audience becomes an active participator within the brands’ story would be the ideal strategy for the independent Belgian fashion designer. Transmedia storytelling defined by Henry Jenkins, Provost Professor of Communication, Journalism and Cinematic Arts, represents a process where integral elements of a fiction get dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels for the purpose of creating a unified and coordinated entertainment experience. Ideally each medium makes its own unique contribution to the unfolding of the story. (G. Fiorelli, 2015)

Audiences are automatically more attracted to new content, exactly why transmedia storytelling is so relevant. To be noticed on our oversaturated online platforms new content needs to disrupt the ordinary content. Precisely as to how designers are constantly looking for newness within the product, how it is delivered should also captivate the audience’s attention for their interests in the unknown.

When the brand moves away from the singular content message to a more integrated brand experience with adjusted versions across the audience’s journey the dots will connect for your viewers in a convincing and stimulating way. Chanel opted for this true narrative approach, making Coco Chanel one of the most recognizable characters within the fashion industry. The story of Chanel gives the product much more meaning and the audience a way to immerse into the story behind the company’s growth.
Or Jacquemus, who so clearly put a stamp on the identity of the woman of the South-of-France and dragged this image across all brand elements. From collection inspiration and online store elements to the Instagram account, within every post a strong recognition to the South-of-France or ‘une femme française’ is perceptible. A strong story helps us to make sense out of the masses of information and content we receive daily, and the storyline helps us to seek out patterns and recognition instead of randomness. (D. Björk, 2016)

An online marketing strategy is not a singular approach, the audience can share, comment, like, engage with the content, making it more an ecosystem that needs to be nurtured actively in order to survive (Kansara, V. 2016). A fully integrated storytelling communication strategy requires agile strategic initiatives, layered content, ongoing creativity and continues engagement from the brand. But the payoff can be the Holy Grail for brand marketing: An engaging audience, loyal brand ambassadors and the potential of a strongly earned position within the fashion industry.

When the Belgian independent designer moves from message towards experience the current consumer will get immerged into the world and vision of the label and an emotional connection will start to grow on these consumers, being one of the most influential elements of consumption. As important as it is to stay ahead of the curve on technological innovation, the key to success within this digital era is to remain human for the independent Belgian designer: a strong brand narrative, delivered via appropriate platforms, suited towards today’s digital lifestyle and audience.
SOURCES


