

WHAT'S NEXT: LUXURY TRAVEL & LIFESTYLE TRENDS

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The mass market in the United States continues to trade up as people want to act and feel rich. They've taken elements of luxury brands and the vocabulary of the luxury lifestyle and appropriated them to mass culture. The result? The upscale consumer is starting to go elsewhere. Some are going the route of ultra-luxe as in six or seven star hotels, residence clubs, ever more remote destinations, and exclusive events and services with high price tags.

Though small but growing in number, others are choosing to go to the other end of the spectrum, what Phillips technology in their latest advertising campaign is calling "**sense + simplicity**". Translated to the hotel design area we've seen minimalism, but all too often the "sense" part of the equation as in functionality and comfort are lacking. Hopefully that's next. Robinson Crusoe type experiences on private islands and endurance events are gaining new appeal. Simplicity has also reared its head as in "spiritual" holidays which attempt to leave behind not only the world of excess but also, the physical world.

A striving to look or be like "old money" is becoming a thing of the past. "The newly rich, super confident as they are, no longer feel a need for the trappings of the old rich", said Philip Hook of Sotheby's at the recent Luxury Briefing conference in London. As the *New York Times* recently reported, if Nantucket's new mogul residents can't get into an old golf club where the membership is in five figures, they build a new club of their own where membership costs six figures.

As Chris Sanderson, Creative Director of London's The Future Laboratory said, what is true across the board is that consumers are sated, bored with product. **Now it's less about product and more about experience**, preferably an emotional experience. No one is probably a greater personification of this new affluent consumer than Sir Richard Branson who realized the importance of selling the experience in his Virgin Atlantic airline and lives a life filled with unique experiences whether it's traveling to space or dressing up like a satyr to herald his airline's new route to Havana.

Travel products need to be geared to this desire for experience and connection with a place. Peninsula Hotels does a superb job of this with its academies where you can practice calligraphy, take classes in Chinese textiles and learn to make buttons or study Chinese medicine. (Check out www.thebluefish.com concierge site for one-of-a-kind experiences ranging from flying a military jet to stunt driving.) **Travel marketers and communicators need to tell a story about their product** that imparts a sense of experience along with the requisite information. In the Riviera Maya's Ikal del Mar it's about "Poetry of the Sea" and the villas named for prominent Latin American poets or the stories about Mayan rituals and a Shaman-blessed Mayan-inspired spa. Connoisseur events for high tier spenders and loyal customers are booming as never before. This kind of special VIP attention promises to grow with the opportunities posed by the internet for customer targeting and communication. In fact, though viewed as the harbinger of the antithesis of service, the internet can be used to develop previously unimaginable levels of service.

Look at American Express' "How To Get In On The Act Promotion". Gold card holders can catch sneak peeks of upcoming Broadway shows and go behind the scenes, as well as get prime seating and early on sale ticket offers on the internet.

In this new world of luxury, it's also about **uniqueness and escaping homogeneity**. Thus, the success of boutique hotels. Intercontinental Hotels recognized this in its Indigo Line, positioning it as a group of individual hotels. Cutting edge design by name architects, interior designers and icons of the fashion world like Armani, Versace, Bulgari and Phillippe Starck are creating this new "specialness." This designer imprimatur is so powerful that in real estate and hotels a name can

even compensate for a less than ideal location. It remains to be seen if when these fashion groups spread they'll be able to maintain the uniqueness which is their reason for being in the first place, or if they will also come to be perceived as formulaic.

What's the next possible progression from boutique hotels? **Making the consumer "co-author"**, much as what has happened in designing athletic shoes and jeans. Probably one of the most exciting new trends is one giving guests the opportunity to customize aspects of their physical hotel experience, and not just with a choice of pillow or mattress. It's on the way. Los Angeles' Bel Air Hotel is giving guests the option to customize a suite and in HSMIA's "Marketing Review", industry experts foretold of electronic walls that are movable so guests can apportion space as well as choose their artwork, color and lighting.

What is certain is that the traditional words to describe "luxury", "spa", and "gourmet" have been debased and a **new vocabulary needs to emerge** to take their place. Composite words maybe? Or we'll become a society of more images and fewer words --- following the age old adage, a picture is worth a thousand words.