

# Gold Standards

Building effective PR strategies for luxury brands demands finesse, flawless judgement and impeccable taste **by John MacKay**

I don't think I've ever pitched a luxury goods client where there wasn't a range of big and small agencies competing for the business, and with good reason. Beyond the value of the business itself, there's great prestige in having Tiffany & Co., or Kiehl's or Baume & Mercier on your client list. Luxury goods magnetically attract new clients for all the reasons you know; if you're working for the best, you must be the best. Mustn't you?

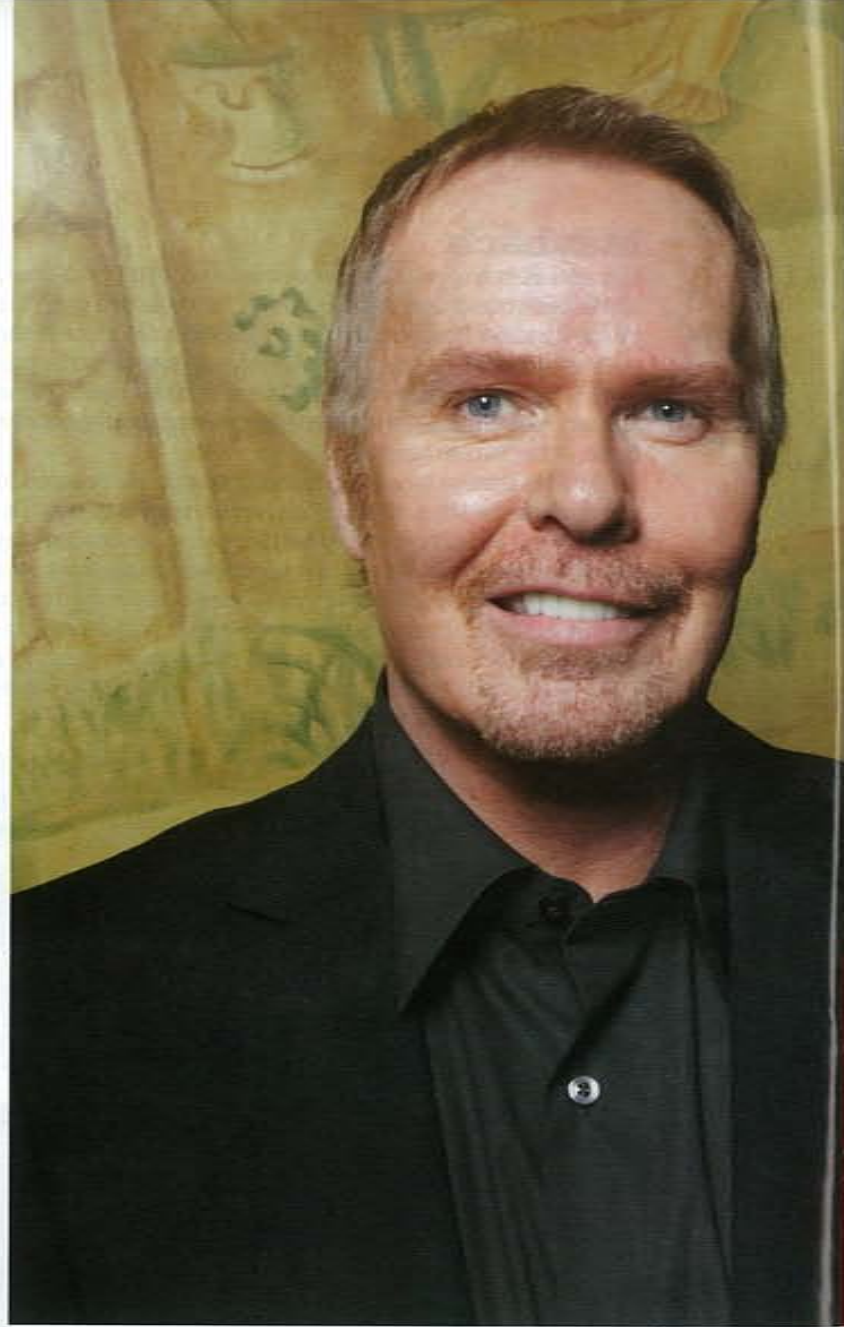
Just as sure as there will be big agencies gunning for the business is the fact that a small agency, more often than not, will land it. I've been on both sides—managing luxury goods business for my own Toronto boutique agencies over the years and for a mid-sized L.A. firm—and it looks to me like smaller agencies are better equipped to rise to the remarkably high standards of service and program execution that luxury goods marketers require. Piece of cake? Of course. All they're really asking is that we be at the top of our game and excel at the kind of things that are the very core of our business, every day.

When you take on a luxury goods client, be it a world-famous jeweller, a great apparel retailer or an automobile, you're being charged with publicizing some of the finest products in their category and you have become the custodian of one of the

world's most carefully developed, precise and scrupulously maintained images. No companies, in my experience, know who they are or how they want to be perceived quite like the makers of luxury goods and you, as their PR agency, have been carefully chosen to speak on their behalf. And I mean carefully. They've built that image with the same care and passion that goes into their products and they see you as an extension and reflection of themselves. That's why, more than likely, every member of your team that's going to work on the account has to pass muster and your contract may call for you to be the principal spokesperson and account manager.

So, they know who you are—and they definitely know what you do. With luxury goods, PR is never advertising's poor relative, it's often the primary component of their marketing program. They'll have an exceptional in-house PR department that knows exactly what can be achieved and how to achieve it. They'll value your national or regional expertise and they'll want your innovative thinking, but mostly they'll want to know that you "get" them. That may be a great idea but is it really "Hermes?" And are you sure that the charity you teamed up with Wayne's Widgets is right for Vespa? You may need to refine your thinking.

Remember media relations, those coverage-generating calls to the press



that you've relegated to your juniors? Press coverage and product placement drive the business of luxury brands; they know it, value it and respect those who do it well. You'd be well advised to rediscover an interest in shaping a story and pitching it yourself. And you'll be expected to have relationships with the style journalists, who aren't your average newsroom habitués. They're a trend-focused, discerning, sophisticated lot who expect you to speak their language. Oh, and get comfortable with saying no to press coverage from a publication or TV show that isn't up to scratch. You're as much a protector of your luxury goods client as you are promoter.

Good taste may be relative, but the luxury goods world pretty much defines it for us all. Knowing your way around a caterer's menu, a wine list, understanding why Florist X is really

the best...whether you're developing press or customer events, they have to be impeccable. And speaking of events, the social world is more important to luxury than ever before. You don't have to live the life, but you do have to know the social landscape; who's who and which charities and arts organizations the "who's" prefer. If these things seem inconsequential to you, please take note: they're an essential part of the alchemy that moves luxury goods.

While it's sometimes a heady world, luxury goods companies clearly revere the exquisite goods they create; at heart they're craftsmen, the perfect merging of art and commerce. Working with the best may not mean you're the best, but it certainly makes you better. **M**

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