

Luxury Vs. Ultra-luxury: how the world's most expensive car brands speak, and speak differently.

After 6pm, London's Mayfair is a mini-Monaco. Light bounces off the chrome detailing of supersized ultra-luxury cars, sitting nose-to-pipe outside exclusive members' clubs. Meanwhile, a persistent strategy of "Recession? What recession?" has succeeded in buoying up the UK market for luxury cars. Indeed, even before the recent general UK economic good news, trade figures revealed an 11% year-on-year increase in the registration of new cars.

Now, our linguistic analysis of the luxury and ultra-luxury car brands' external communications reveals that, with rising consumer confidence, there is a need for these brands to clarify their verbal identities in order to better engage potential buyers.

In brief: Some **ultra-luxury** brands are failing to use brand language which reinforces their superior qualities, especially around unmatched notions of heritage. This leaves the boundary between ultra-luxury and luxury blurred, apparently offering luxury cars a free tow. Some **luxury** car marques are trying to take advantage of this opportunity, but are using language which is rich with over-claim, leaving a hollow centre to their brand.

The Challenge

A brand's language is the most malleable tool at the marketing team's disposal. And so the question is: How can ultra-luxury and luxury car brands modify their language to clearly define their position within the category and engage their consumer?

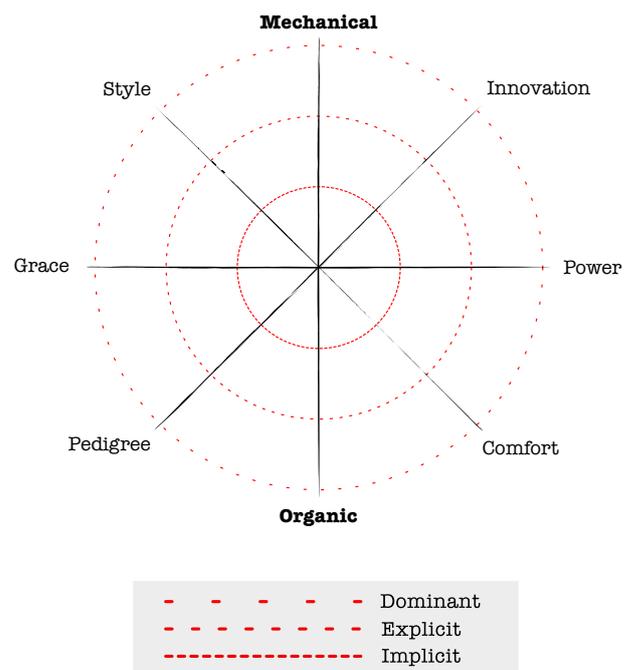
In the luxury car sector, we examined the external comms of Mercedes, Audi, BMW, Lincoln, Porsche, along with Japanese upmarket versions of their mass-market marques, such as Acura, Lexus, and Infiniti. We did not cover pure sports-aligned brands in either sector; these stand apart and deserve separate coverage.

"Ultra-luxury" car brands we defined by price point (most models of the marque exceed £100,000). We looked at a handful including Rolls-Royce, Bentley, Maybach and Aston Martin. The recent demise of Maybach provides an interesting illumination of the dangers of misjudging your brand language.

¹ www.smmf.co.uk/2013/09/august-new-car-registrations-rev-up-ahead-of-september-plate-change/

The Luxury Market: Choose your metaphor

Currently, the central axis of luxury car language is the raw power available to you, the driver. At one extreme, brands emphasise the mechanical nature of this power: they borrow from the language of technology, precision engineering, and refined design. At the other extreme, organic qualities are emphasised: the language of sport and athletic performance is used - often borrowing from the world of the racehorse, with words such as thoroughbred and pedigree. This is occasionally taken a step further, into artistic self-expression, with terms suggesting passion and drive.



Key axes to plot the major themes of each brand's written communications.

There are now more millionaires in the world than there were in 2007²

As our graphs show, luxury car brands typically stretch the themes of their comms across secondary axes, notably Innovation/Pedigree, Style/Comfort.

In the luxury brands' choice of words, tone of voice, conceptualisations and narrative models, they construct verbal identities which create a sense of a driving experience. With an additional layer of exclusivity, the luxury brands separate themselves from "commodity" cars.

There's no question that this is an appeal to the narcissism of the buyer, their self-image reflected in the shiny bodywork of their new purchase. This is a classic example of the Personal Narrative model: the language is used to suggest that the product will allow the busy-but-discerning executive to fly higher.

There are alternative narrative models being used. In particular, the older brands such as Jaguar and Lincoln draw upon their pedigree, using a blending of Foundational and Historical brand narrative models. Newer brands like Lexus and Infiniti use a Visionary narrative model, emphasising innovation and new experiences.

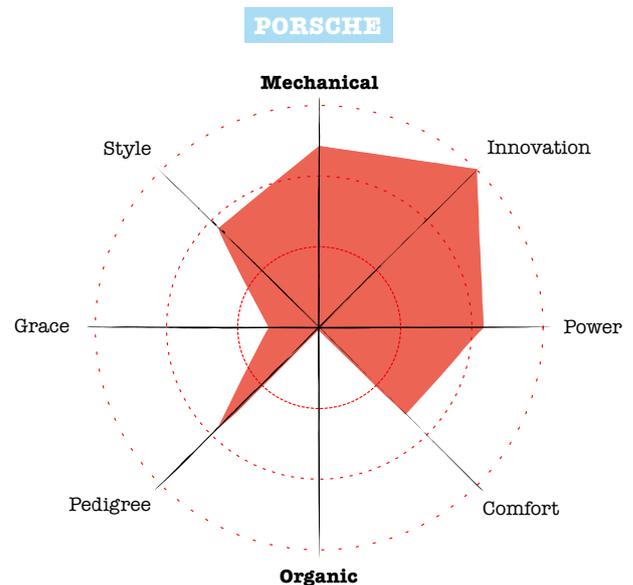
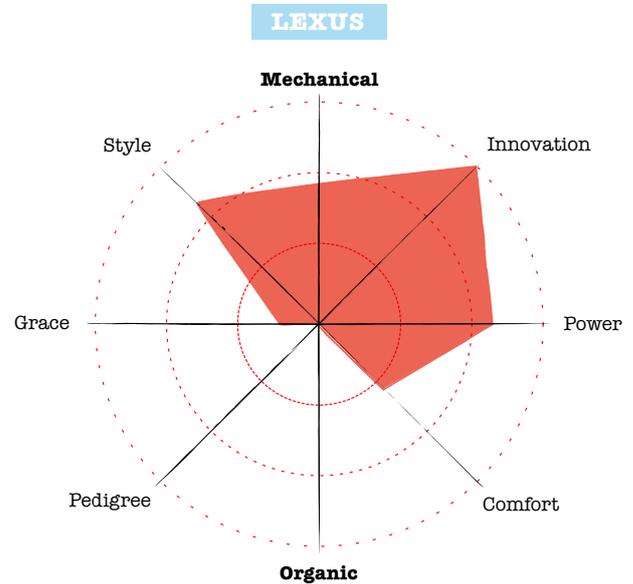
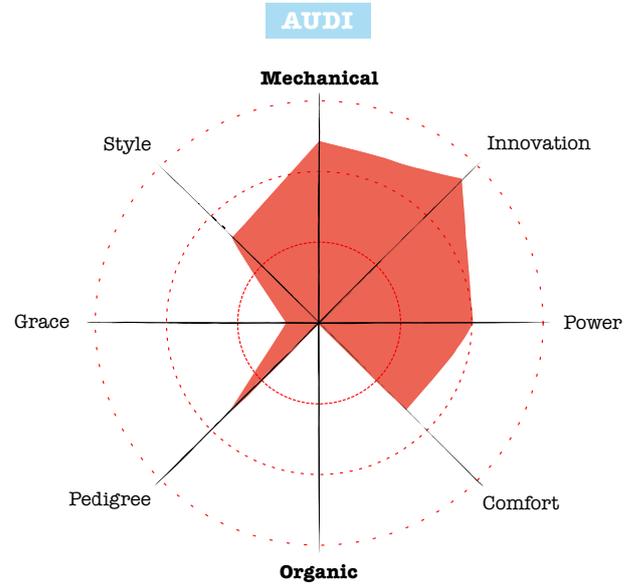
Porsche is an interesting deviation. Its communications assume a starting point of near perfection, with each new model being an incremental improvement. It's a Myth-Making narrative model.

Ultra-Luxury: A Cut Above

In ultra-luxury sector, the language centres on the feelings available to you as a passenger. The central axis remains Power, but the notion is that Grace is a rejection of any overt display of Power.

In the brands' lexicon, abstract and concrete nouns such as "leather", "comfort", "experience", "craftsmanship" abound. As a group, these concepts echo the Renaissance notion of sprezzatura, an (apparently carelessly achieved) quality of effortless. This is best illustrated by Bentley's prominent display of its founder's desires: "To build a fast car, a good car, the best in its class." This sentence can be so admirably blunt because of the sophistication that is inherent in the brand's identity.

² www.capgemini.com/sites/default/files/resource/pdf/World_Wealth_Report_2010.pdf



The ultra-luxury sector is ‘boundaried’ by the notion of sprezzatura. As such, the qualities of superior engineering, bespoke interiors, and stylish design, which their poor cousins in the luxury world work so hard to stress, are taken as inherent, and go unmentioned by the ultra-luxury brands.

It’s essential to note that this notion of apparent carelessness is more readily thought of as a signaller of older, European-style class markers - particularly English class markers. We are reminded of the kind of person who uses ‘summer’ as a verb.

In contrast, consider the failure of Maybach and the increasing strength of Rolls-Royce and Bentley³. The latter two have the “right stuff” to support their exclusivity. Maybach’s brand was almost unknown outside Germany and seemed inherently alien and inferior.

Our Recommendations

With these boundaries of luxury and ultra-luxury so clearly marked (see graphs), the opportunities for brands to use language to improve their engagement with potential buyers are obvious. The key issue is how to avoid the unwitting blurring of the luxury and ultra luxury categories:

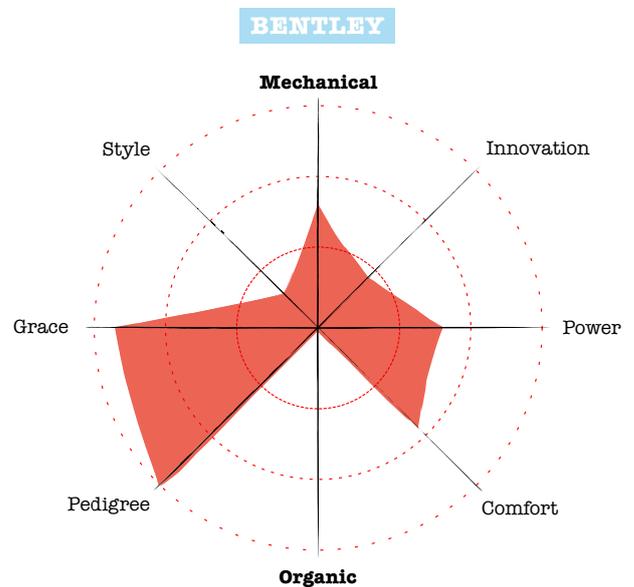
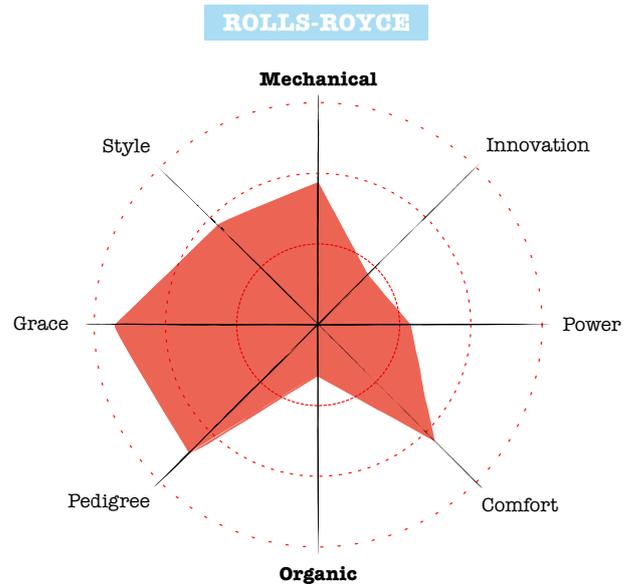
1. Know your place. Ultra-luxury brands have access to cultural markers, such as old-world sophistication, which are valued widely - especially in developing markets - and which are not wearable by most luxury brands. Ultra-luxury brands (cars, but other sectors as well) can shut the door on mere luxury brands by signposting these values more clearly in copy, tone of voice and appropriate narrative models.

2. Know your narrative. Although the luxury car brands appear to be aware of the major themes, they are often applying them pick-n-mix fashion through the different channels. A strong and comprehensive codification of a brand’s verbal identity, indicating where the central voice should or should not flex, will enable it to stand out and maintain a consistent, clear promise in the market.

3. Know your voice. At Verbal Identity, we believe “visuals attract, verbals engage.” Some brands (notably Audi and Mercedes) have an identity dominated by visual codes, leaving them noticeably mute and cold. Interestingly, this problem operates at different levels in different countries. Audi, for instance, has confidence in a much more verbal approach on its US webpage, but is relatively silent and disengaged in the UK.

4. Know your niche. Despite their price point, SUVs have traditionally not been talked about as luxury brands, with the category adopting an emphasis on utility and reliability instead. Lexus has grasped this fact and adapted its SUV copy successfully. In contrast, Infiniti’s copy for its SUV rejects the category definers, emphasising luxury and power. It currently experiences lower market penetration.

It would never be conceivable they could be an ultra-luxury brand: they just don’t have the breeding.



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 - - - Explicit
 . . . Implicit

³ www.theguardian.com/business/2013/apr/10/bentley-jaguar-land-rover-sales-boom



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Verbal Identity are brand strategy consultants specialising in language. We use linguistics, customer insights from text analytics and tone of voice writing to create language which creates value for our clients.

To find out more, or speak to us about how language can, ahem, drive your brand, call us on 020 3053 8329, email Chris West yowesty@verbalidentity.com, keep up with us on Twitter [@verbid](https://twitter.com/verbid), or visit www.verbalidentity.com