

By Cyril Demaria

GOOGLING «LUXURY»

Look at the word «human»

Luxury used to be about «bling», technology and distance from common mortals. It is now about warmth, personalisation, quality and tailored products and services. In a word, human.

«Luddite»: a word used by technophiles to describe outliers going against change or avoiding technology. This movement, launched in the XIXth century in the UK by textile artisans against mechanized looms, is seen as a desperate fight against the inevitable progress towards a better future. A few Industrial Revolutions later, the Luddites movement remains a curiosity studied aside Fourierism and cooperatives.

How would these historical movements be relevant in the Internet era? According to AT Kearney, a consultancy, the digital economy is worth 6% of the British gross domestic product (£82 billion). £45 billion are generated by e-commerce and mobile commerce; and £37 billion by connectivity services, advertising and device manufacturing. The importance of digital economy, above the worldwide average, is seen as a major advantage for the future development of the UK. However, this appreciation does not take into account the economic downside of such a change - which was the concern of the Luddites.

Though it is unlikely that any regulation or social movement can alter significantly the march of technological progress, the way its consequences are handled is crucial. Some economic sectors are advanced indicators of the impact of a given technology. Among them, textile, but also the leisure industry, the media and cultural goods and services are frequently mentioned, having been affected

by the emergence of analogical and then digital technologies. Three Zürich-based entrepreneurs have accepted to comment this evolution.

Just a little human touch

Video-rentals are probably among the most often cited victims of the digital era, high speed Internet and the globalisation of culture. Joey Macht, entrepreneur and owner of ELM Video in Zürich, has witnessed the evolution of her business from video tapes to DVDs, and now under the competition of on-line offerings. ELM Video is specialized in offering movies and series in English (9'000 titles today), from classics to the most recent ones, and plans to broaden its scope to German language.

Though not a primary need (such as housing, food, water or air), «entertainment has become part of the life of everyone», states Mrs Macht. The competition has hence increased over time, from cable-TV, on-demand offers, downloading and streaming, and even public libraries. What keeps ELM competitive is the quantity and quality of its offering, but above all «the contact, a key loyalty factor», explains ELM's manager. «On-line, there is no chance to talk, to see the covers, to touch, to ask for help and recommendations. We know who are our clients, what they like and - unlike on-line comments - we offer professional (i.e., objective) advice», declares Mrs Macht.

Hence, even though vulnerable to dematerialised offers, ELM Video emphasizes its extended service to clients, and a personal relation with cus-



tomers. «Respect and care are the core values of our activity», states Mrs Macht. «Because our movie choices are connected to our mood, our personal touch and service are unmatched».

The «village relationships»: a model of luxury sports offerings

The importance of a personalized service is confirmed by Renato Petrò, co-owner and co-manager of FitExpert. Even though fitness and sport could appear as the most vulnerable to «do it yourself» and to the fashion of applications for mobile phones, video at home and even sports programs for entertainment devices, there is a need for sport coaching «to get more out of the training than in typical training centre», states Mr Petrò. «The real luxury is for the client to work with a coach, beyond simple motivation, to reach a target».

In fact, this offer has developed at the same time than information technologies: «twelve to fifteen years ago, this offer was essentially American and dedicated to a niche market of individuals extremely conscious of their body shape. Now, it is a matter of getting fitter

and the key success factor is the personal contact. Despite being well educated, clients need this contact to actually go to the club – and train adequately», explains Mr Petrò.

Applications for mobiles, Internet and other dematerialised offers do not adjust to the need of the person. Even more, «training goes away from technical movements: we are training muscles used over the course of the normal working day. As clients are increasingly sitting at a desk, we need to adjust the training. We work out coordination, and for that machines are useful but less relevant than for muscle building», analyses Mr Petrò. The quality of the education of trainers is paramount, as they need to adjust the personal training regularly. «Personal training is the most efficient form of training. Humans are made to live in villages. Personal relationships matter even

more today in big cities.»

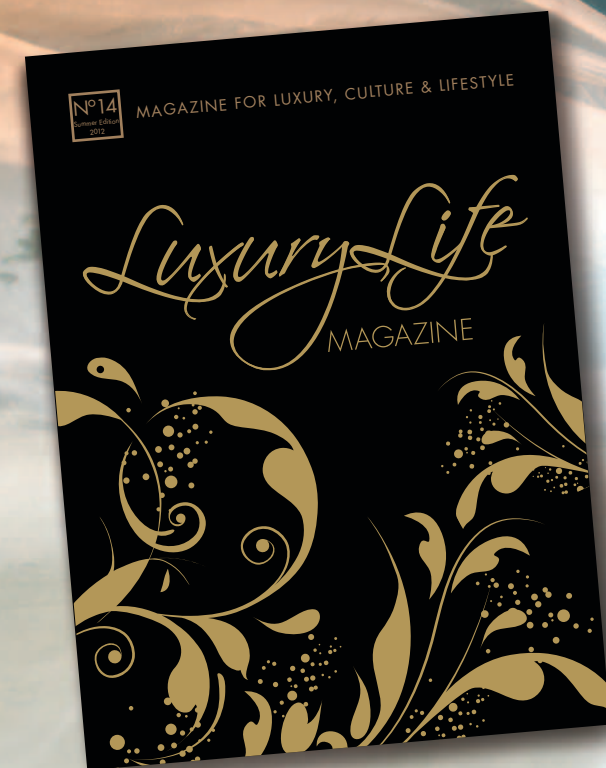
Efficiency, range of offering and human touch drive clients towards revamped businesses. This is confirmed by SuitArt, a start-up which capitalizing on an old business: tailor-made suits. Just when cheap prêt-à-porter seems to invade every single part of the fashion industry with copies of great designs, quality fights back. As Mathias Böhm, CEO of SuitArt explains, «wearing a custom tailored suit can surely be defined as luxury». The choice here is among 5'000 fabrics, but also cuts and details such as the form of the collar, the color of threads and buttons, monograms, linings...

Why is human touch so important in this sector? «There is a considerable gap between having your suit measured and designed with the help of an experienced consultant; and taking your own measurements via a video tutorial or the Internet with limited choice of fabrics and details. Our service and our product rely on a personal interaction», explains Mr Böhm. «We are living in a society where people always desire the best quality for the lowest price possible. Our advantages come from the fact that we are willing

to walk the extra mile when it comes to the satisfaction of our customers. We not only want to satisfy them: we intend to inspire them».

The company describes itself as «pairing hospitality and vision» for the customers. Just like for ELM Video and FitExpert, technology has indeed fostered the attention on the quality of human relations for SuitArt. The CEO states, that SuitArt «welcomes almost every form of new technology that finds its way into our world. Thanks to new online softwares, we were able to simplify the way we take orders, thus allowing us to work even more efficiently than before».

Success validates this approach. Luddites would be see this as the revenge of textile craftsmanship over mechanized production. The irony is that technology has made this possible. ■



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