The Uncompromising Customer:
Addressing the Paradoxes of the Age of I

*IHG® Rewards Club not applicable to Kimpton® Hotels & Restaurants; to be included at a future date.*
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Preface: Richard Solomons

This is IHG®’s fifth Trends Report. We are once again pleased to share our insights into the changing world and provide best practices that help make business and brands fit for the future. Creating brand experiences for long-term profitable growth is at the core of all of the IHG Trends Reports. Since 2013, we have examined developments such as the brand-business transition from transactions to branded relationships, and we have explored how to make membership meaningful at a time when loyalty is becoming ever more important to many industries. We have discussed the importance of trust in strengthening these branded relationships.

This year’s 2017 IHG Trends Report, The Uncompromising Customer: Addressing the Paradoxes of the Age of I focuses on the brand-business strategy of addressing contradictory customer needs in order to create compelling, trustworthy, customer-driven branded products and services. Customers today do not want either/or solutions: they want the best of both worlds where the best trade-off is no trade-off. Customers expect brands and businesses to optimise conflicting needs. For short-term and long-term success, single-minded solutions will not work. Today’s customer is uncompromising. Consistent global brands must address the consumer paradoxes of the Age of I: be locally relevant and personally differentiating, delivering a compelling, valuable, multi-dimensional idea.

Working with our long-time partner, Arcature, synthesising IHG information as well as a variety of external, third party sources, we have identified the paradoxes shaping our world. In this Report, we explore four that represent major opportunities with important business, brand and financial implications. Brands play integral roles by offering compelling paradox promises of brand experiences that optimise contrary needs. Resolving conflicting customer needs requires businesses to adopt new behaviours. The Six Best Practices for Addressing Paradoxes.

With all the challenges today, these new practices guide the development and implementation of highly relevant, differentiated product and service brand experiences. This is a key focus for IHG. The purpose of our business is to create Great Hotels Guests Love, through providing True Hospitality to all. This requires a dedication to real service; genuine compassion, thoughtfulness and the human touch. These are the characteristics we know are important to meeting modern day consumer needs.

For businesses, creating these extraordinary brand experiences strengthens customer relationships and grows brand loyalty, leading to strong, profitable, high quality revenue growth.

Richard Solomons
Chief Executive Officer,
InterContinental® Hotels Group

Brands play integral roles by offering compelling paradox promises of brand experiences that optimise contrary needs. Resolving conflicting customer needs with preferred brand experiences requires new behaviours.
Executive Summary

The Age of I

• Over the past five years, IHG examined the societal dynamic within the Kinship Economy called “The Age of I.” The Age of I reflects our desire for both inclusivity and individuality, both assimilation and differentiation. In The Age of I, group and individual influences combine to affect the brand choices we make. Brands are signals of connection and expressions of choice. Brand decisions are driven by our desires for both interdependence and individualism.

• The Age of I is a forceful paradox, driving numerous other paradoxes with profitable opportunities for brands and business. Success in The Age of I means addressing needs-driven, occasion-based conflicts by developing compelling, trustworthy branded paradox promises that deliver relevant, differentiated brand experiences. Paradox promises address desired yet conflicting needs by delivering the benefits of no trade-off. Promising and delivering paradox promises generates high-quality revenue growth.

• In this 2017 IHG Trends Report, The Uncompromising Customer: Addressing the Paradoxes of the Age of I, IHG identifies four major paradox opportunities that can create extraordinary trustworthy brand experiences, driving brand decisions customers make as individuals and as members of communities. IHG explains how brands (organisations) can leverage paradox promises into brand-focused strategies and actions, creating a pathway for profitability. IHG provides Six Best Practices for optimising paradoxes that create high-quality, sustainable revenue growth brand experiences.

Brands are complex, multi-dimensional ideas. A single-dimensional solution is not a pathway to profitability. People do not want to give up one aspect of the desired brand experience to receive another aspect. Globally consistent, locally relevant, personally differentiating brands address contrary needs.

The Four Paradoxes

Today customers seek trustworthy brand experiences based on the optimisation of conflicting needs. For example, some people want brands to address the opposing desires of wanting to belong and wanting to be an individual; being known to many and preserving anonymity; craving something rare that is easily available. Today’s paradoxes offer businesses product or service solutions that turn contrary desires into motivating paradox promise opportunities.

IHG identifies four over-arching paradoxes that reflect some of the most important social dynamics of The Age of I. These are:

- **Paradox 1: Separate but Connected:** The New Definition of Connection
- **Paradox 2: Abundant Rarity:** The Changing Definition of Luxury
- **Paradox 3: Seeking a Better Me and a Better We:** Responsible Individualism
- **Paradox 4: Do It Myself and Do It For Me In My Way:** Rethinking Consumer Control
1. The Paradox of Separate but Connected: The New Definition of Connection

- Technology, digitisation and the 24/7 existence have changed how we relate to family, friends, strangers, automobiles, appliances, our homes, medicine and entertainment. More than contacting, communicating, and collecting “friends”, connecting means integrating with individuality. In The Age of I, connection means bonding together with others and brands to augment a community while at the same time communicating uniqueness of self.

- The Paradox of Separate but Connected also reflects our need for the optimisation of connecting and disconnecting: individuals seeking constant belonging with people, brands, places and things while seeking personal asylum from intrusive alerts. Always on, we are in contact at all times, linked in the flurry of the never-ending fast news flash keeping us up-to-date. We connect with the environment, with local cultures, and with products and services enmeshing us in the world, yet individually, we want time for solace, silence, and solitude. We face the paradox of both constant up time and also the need for regular down time. The need for down time in a constant uptime world is labelled as Digital Detox by Bloomberg BusinessWeek.

- Constant connection and sharing create databases that erode privacy. Disconnecting would bring back privacy but at the sake of being connected.

- Today our attention spans are shorter. The result is that brands must meaningfully connect in mere seconds. Generation Z wants information as quickly as possible yet they lose interest quicker than other cohorts. Brands must affect people who connect and disconnect in the blink of an eye.

- People have sacrificed human connections for digital dimensions. We want both: the optimisation of human touchable and conveniently clickable.

- Implicit in the new definition of connection is that social networking is no longer a channel strategy or a communications tool: it is a way of life, a way of having individual freedom with personal interdependence within the network. Social networking is today’s evolution of community - technology makes it easier for us to connect with those who share our interests.

- The new meaning of connection creates paradoxes in the way we work. For example, I am part of a business brand and I am my own business. The on-demand economy connects unified branded work communities of individuals who operate as independent businesses: an untethered force of individuals integrating into organisations on a flexible, personal basis creating a brand experience of unity with diversity.

- Also, new office spaces offer places for people to work individually together with others just like them, reflecting the individuality and inclusiveness of the Age of I. “We Work” spaces are an example. Additionally, research shows that Millennials believe work is a place for career-building connections, more than a place to build a career.

- Age generates connection paradoxes. Cohorts respond differently to how, when, why, and where to connect. Brands (organisations) need to juggle conflicting connection needs. For example, Gen Z appreciate brand sharing for connections but want personal safeguards, while Boomers are sceptical of brand sharing but participate because they want brands to know them.

- The Kinship Economy is defined by the business evolution of brand experiences based on transactions to those based on relationships, changing attitudes from feeling disconnected, to feeling connected, to wanting to feel interconnected. Brands are credible interconnectors with customers, prospects, loyalists, and membership communities. People want a feeling of Meaningful Membership in an interconnected community that also respects their individuality.

Executive Summary
2. The Paradox of Abundant Rarity: The Changing Definition of Luxury

• In The Age of I, luxury is no longer something scarce, expensive and available only to the lucky few. Luxury means different things to different people in different situations. Luxury is the most premium, most exclusive, elusive offering for a small group of wealthy people. Or, luxury is an offering maximising both scarcity and availability. In other words, the potential profitable paradoxe challenge will be a luxury brand that epitomises “abundant rarity.” Globalisation hastens this luxury paradox: being available in more places and to more people, but at the same time, offer consistent, unique luxurious experiences that guests have come to expect from boutique hotel brands.

• Boutiques by their very nature are distinct properties available only in one location in the same way, making these scarce luxuries – yet the luxury experience remains consistent across all properties.

• With 63 hotels across the US, at Kimpton Hotels & Restaurants, new hotels start with a blank slate and fresh perspective when it comes to design. The brand also represents decades of experience marrying historic buildings with modern interpretations, reflecting yet another paradox: old and new. These are hotels that cannot be replicated given their unique architecture and storied pasts. Coupled with Kimpton’s heart-centred culture of care, luxury is reimagined with an inclusive, not exclusive approach.

• Just as no two neighbourhoods are alike, no two Hotel Indigo properties are alike. Of over 70 properties worldwide, they are each designed to reflect the local culture, individual character and history of the surrounding area, close to the shopping, local restaurants, museums, art galleries and great music that makes each neighbourhood distinct. Each neighbourhood has its own special markers and traits reflected in its Hotel Indigo, but all Hotel Indigos are integrated by the connectivity of the brand’s promise.

4. Globalisation hastens this luxury paradox: being available in more places where more people can experience luxury, makes it less rare.

• Demographics generate luxury paradoxes. For example, Gen Z, the generation following Millennials, define luxury as products and services that anyone can access and that highlight one’s individuality. Truly authentic, original, crafted products and services are available luxuries.

• Today, giving to others is considered a luxury. Giving helps others, while transforming the giver. For example, Carnival Cruises created a luxury vacation category they call “social impact travel” where customers help to transform the areas of their ports of call. The cruise line thinks of this as mobilising and educating their travellers for the better good.

• Privacy is a vanishing luxury: so providing “secure privacy with personalisation” is one way to deliver a luxurious brand experience. Privacy has become a valuable asset.

• Brands providing a feeling of relaxation, restoration, and rejuvenation deliver luxury experiences. Yet we live in a techno-world. Comforting technology puts our minds at ease.

• Time is a luxury. A paradox of luxury time is the maximisation of desire and delay: instantly satisfying desire while building the anticipation (and waiting-list status) of delay.

• Today, we can experience luxury without having to own the luxury. Luxury experiences are available for hire, from yachts, gowns and cars, to homes and villas. Access-based luxury demonstrates how important the total brand experience is relative to actually purchasing and owning the luxury item.

• Luxury and prestige are different, although not mutually exclusive. A prestige brand has widely recognised prominence, perceived worth and/or importance, expressing money and power. A luxury brand has extravagance, sensuousness, and great comfort. Prestige means, “I am important.” Luxury means, “I feel indulgent.” A Patek Philippe watch is prestigious; an Omega watch is luxury.

KIMPTON® HOTELS & RESTAURANTS & HOTEL INDIGO® – BOUTIQUE AS AN ATTAINABLE LUXURY

Boutique is the fastest growing segment in the hotel industry. This growing demand for boutique hotel experiences means that these kinds of hotels need to be available in more places and attainable by more people, but at the same time, offer consistent, unique luxurious experiences that guests have come to expect from boutique hotel brands.

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Hotel Indigo Singapore Katong, Singapore
3. The Paradox of Seeking a Better Me and a Better We: Responsible Individualism

- A Better Me and A Better We is a new dimension where people seek personal, self-improvement while seeking public, civic or global improvement. They want self-satisfaction and selflessness.

- A Better Me and A Better We is the outcome of Responsible Individualism where individuals seek opportunities to take responsibility for their own behaviours, while taking responsibility for the impact of their behaviours on others. Responsible Individualism is not only how we behave as individuals but also how we behave within a social context that has social meaning: good for me while good for you. This impacts Corporate Social Responsibility as well.

- There are workplace and workforce implications as data shows that employees who genuinely feel connected to the business and the brand in terms of happiness perform better as does the organisation: better brand, better business and better me.

- Age makes a difference: IHG identified the Expansive Mid-lifer in the 2013 IHG Trends Report as older people who have an appetite for travelling well in the world while enhancing their personal well-being. Gen Z desires human engagement yet equates improved self-betterment with digital social media, as “followers” provide validation of self-worth.

- Better Me and Better We has implications for corporate brands. Corporations have the opportunity to augment credibility, integrity, and responsibility by leading in being good by doing good. This accrues Trust Capital.

IHG® Foundation – Offering Guests and Colleagues A Better Me and Better We

The IHG Foundation is an independent charity, launched by IHG in February 2016. It focuses on four key areas: helping communities to develop skills in hospitality, providing support for those impacted by disaster, facilitating local community investment and protecting the environment.

The IHG Foundation gives IHG colleagues and guests the opportunity to actively participate in giving back to the local community. It allows them to take responsibility for their own behaviours, while also taking responsibility for the impact of their behaviours on others - to seek personal, self-improvement while also seeking public, civic or global improvement.

For example, IHG® Rewards Club loyalty members have the option to donate their points to the IHG Foundation via the online redemption catalogue and are kept up to date with stories of impact from the charity, so they can see how their contribution has truly made a difference. By supporting IHG Foundation projects across the globe, IHG Rewards Club members are doing their part to make local communities better places to live for all.

In 2016 over 120,000 colleagues from IHG hotels and corporate offices worldwide joined in on a week of global awareness and fundraising activities in aid of the IHG Foundation. They were encouraged to pledge and take part in as many different activities as they could outside of their daily routines. The activities raised more than $350,000 for the IHG Foundation.

Disaster Relief

Through the funds raised by IHG guests and colleagues, when disaster strikes, the IHG Foundation works with humanitarian agencies around the world to help people get back on their feet and ensure they are better prepared for future disasters.

For example, in August 2014, a 6.2 magnitude earthquake hit the central region of Italy. More than 260 people were killed, and over 400 injured. The villages of Accumoli and Arquata del Tronto were severely destructed following the quake, and in Amatrice, three quarters of the town were completely destroyed, with more than 260 people killed. To support emergency relief efforts, the IHG Foundation made donations to the International Red Cross and International Red Crescent Societies.

IHG® Foundation – Offering Guests and Colleagues A Better Me and Better We

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Over 400 aid workers from the Italian Red Cross were sent with emergency vehicles to the area immediately after the quake. Mobile kitchens were set up for those forced to leave their homes, and the Italian Red Cross team were on hand to support victims.
4. The Paradox of Do It Myself and Do It For Me In My Way: Rethinking Consumer Control

- Technology, apps, mobility, digitalisation, robotics, constant contact, 24/7 time spans, and artificial intelligence create consumer control paradoxes. Is the machine merely computing or actually thinking? Kiosks, voice-activated applications, digital wallets, conversing bots, self-tracking of physical and mental functions (the quantitative self), driverless cars, connected cars, connected-smart appliances in the connected-smart home, all shift accountability of actions to things other than ourselves - changing our perceptions of what we can accomplish.

- In The Age of I, technological changes affect how we perceive ourselves as individuals and how we perceive ourselves as part of a group. Digital is more than binary code, more than an e-commerce channel: digital is a social force that diffuses control.

- Robotics makes our lives and choices easier, putting us at ease. But this is a paradox, too: can robots deliver humanised ease of mind?

- The 2013 IHG Trends Report highlighted Invisible Travellers: they go from home-printed boarding pass to in-flight Wi-Fi to app-ordered transportation to hotel kiosk, to app-ordered food. Many Invisible Travellers prefer the paradoxical personal yet person-less travel experience. In contrast, Gen Z appreciates the convenience benefits of the digital world. However, they also desire the experience of human contact. Although true Digital Natives, Gen Z seek person-to-person contact.

- Each cohort perceives self-control and the relationship of man and machine differently. Brands must address the consumers’ desire for being in control while in many cases not being the controller. In the battle for the soul of control, the best brand experiences will be delivered “my way”, regardless of who or what is in control.
The four identified paradoxes offer numerous brand-business opportunities for growing extraordinary brand experiences as the foundation for sustainable high-quality revenue growth. IHG offers six best practices for addressing consumer paradoxes of our fast-changing global, local, and personal world.

1. **Aim for Integration Rather than Balance**

In a world of paradoxes, aiming for balance will not foster profitable success. Balance means viewing paradox promises as constant sum contests of conflicting benefits: 50% of one thing and 50% of another. The result is that neither benefit is optimised. This is not today’s reality.

Integration means making a better, new whole from the combination of two or more entities. It means moving from promising a compromise to delivering the best of both. Promising and delivering satisfying solutions for customers that integrate the best of both is a winning, commercial formula.

2. **Use Needs-driven, Occasion-based Segmentation for Superior Business Management**

Needs-driven, occasion-based segmentation is not a mere marketing tool, but a strategic brand-business practice that if properly conducted helps define the brand-business landscape for enduring profitable growth. It is a brand-business necessity helping identify the conflicting needs that must be addressed in order to deliver an effective paradox promise. Recognise that people’s needs change based on the occasion.

3. **Communicate with Conversation**

Brand experiences are built on relationships with customers who feel connected to each other while expressing who they are as individuals. In the Age of I, the lost art of conversation is a luxury. Conversation is collaborative: it is an engaging, connecting, channel-agnostic, interactive and integrative force. It can be vocal or digital. For those who need the human touch, a human voice can be highly involving. For those who prefer digital dialogue, text messaging can be appealing and absorbing. Conversation is also about listening: it is a chance to hear what someone else has to say. Listening builds trust. Within the brand experience, conversation can be turned into commerce if managed properly. Understand the consumer’s communication needs, then listen and use the brand experience to make it meaningful.

4. **Manage the Brand’s Multi-Dimensionality**

In the paradoxical world of brand communities and co-creation, the idea of owning a single-minded, distilled word in the customer’s mind worldwide is an out-of-date business idea. In The Age of I, where sharing and engagement within a branded experience community are critical, distilling a brand into a single thought is a formula for failure. The logic of the paradox promise means that a brand is not merely a simple idea or word: a brand is a complex, multi-dimensional idea that includes relevant, differentiating features, functional, emotional and social benefits as well as a distinctive brand character. No single idea can possibly relate a standardised brand message to every customer that is relevant at the right time for the right reasons. A compelling brand experience must engage its members with the right combination of elements not a simplistic, over-condensed singularity.

5. **Develop Ambidextrous Brand-Business Teams**

Paradox promise solutions and management require a new way of thinking about the brand, its experience and the business ramifications. Create ambidextrous brand-business teams with divergent thinkers who can strategise and act unified on behalf of the brand. Each member has individual strengths, talents, and passions. Yet, the team can work in an integrated manner. An ambidextrous brand-business team turns the uniqueness of the team members into cohesive, unified initiatives for brand success. Brands benefit from both lateral and linear thinkers. HR has a key role to play. The creative friction that exists when pairing people who think differently generates original ideas. The paradox of genuine creative thought and disciplined thinking produces breakthrough strategies and tactics.

6. **Address the Paradox of Brand Control**

Who controls the brand? Some say that business does not own the brand, but customers own the brand. The external world of peer testimony, news, word-of-mouth, and ratings websites controls the brand. This is the new paradox of brand control: is brand control in the hands of the business or is it in the hands of the external world? The answer is both. Business must not give up control of the brand to the external world. Yet, the external world does impact and influence the brand reputation and perceived trust.
Conclusion

In the Age of I, we live in the paradoxical world where we seek inclusion in a meaningful group and at the same time want to protect and express our individuality. It is a transformative time – short-term and long-term – where the strongest brands will promise and deliver the “best of both” when addressing conflicting customer needs. Addressing a trade-off by compromising important elements of a brand experience in return for gaining other equally important elements, is not the path to profitable growth. Brands that succeed do not concede. People desire the duality in a relevant, differentiated, integrated brand experience. In our new, fast-paced, 24/7 Age of I culture of individuality and inclusiveness, people want brands to optimise not compromise.

The goal of business is to satisfy customer needs profitably. By creating solutions for contradictory desires – paradox promises define brand experiences leading to brand preference and loyalty.

YOUR RATE BY IHG® REWARDS CLUB – ADDRESSING THE PARADOX OF BRAND CONTROL

As a consumer-driven company, IHG goes directly to its loyalty members to ask what they want most from IHG Rewards Club, and uses those insights to continue evolving the programme. Thus, allowing consumers to influence the development of the brand, while still maintaining control and ensuring IHG Rewards Club continues to provide a superior and personalised experience for its millions of guests around the world.

In May 2016, IHG introduced Your Rate by IHG Rewards Club giving members access to preferential rates when they book direct. This was supported by extensive consumer research, which showed that IHG Rewards Club members want to feel that they belong to a ‘special club’ with preferred pricing for members.

Consumer insight also revealed the importance to members of ‘recognition’ as individuals. In response, a new integrated Customer Relationship Management (CRM) System enables hotels to respond to members’ individual preferences and offer services and experiences that are personally relevant to them. From recognising stay preferences such as room location or pillow type, to tailored booking options and relevant post-stay offers.

The Paradoxes of the Age of I
Customers seek brands providing satisfying, trustworthy experiences based on the optimisation of conflicting needs: convergence and distinction. How can we capitalise on these apparent contradictions? Over the past five years, IHG examined the societal dynamic within the Kinship Economy called “The Age of I.” The Age of I reflects the paradoxical desire for both inclusivity (belonging) and individuality (differentiation). Through innovation, renovation, and creativity, brands can resolve conflicting needs with focused, delightful, deliverable brand experiences. Additionally, brands act as trusted signals of inclusive connection (I belong) and expressions of individual choice (I am me). Research shows that both group and individual influences combine to affect the brand choices we make.²
IHG has identified four over-arching paradoxes that reflect some of the most important social dynamics of The Age of I. These are:

1. **The Paradox of Separate but Connected**: The New Definition of Connection
2. **The Paradox of Abundant Rantyn**: The Changing Definition of Luxury
3. **The Paradox of Responsible Individualism**: Seeking a Better Me and a Better We
4. **The Paradox of Do It Myself and Do It For Me In My Way**: Rethinking Consumer Control

Branding and consumer behaviour have moved on from providing a product to delivering a customer experience that adds value while maintaining the integrity of the brand's essence. A paradox promise is the idea expressed in a simple, compelling manner. A paradox promise recognises that people have multifaceted needs, treating solutions as constant sum contests: 50% of one thing and 50% of another. More of one desire means accepting less of another. Integration means moving from promising the best compromise to delivering the best of both, the paradox promise.

A powerful paradox promise is not single-minded: it is a complex, multi-dimensional idea expressed in a simple, compelling manner. A paradox promise recognises that people have multifaceted individual problems. It satisfies customers’ desires for no trade-off brand benefits while maintaining the integrity of the brand’s essence.

Delivering paradox promises with high customer-perceived brand value will build brand experiences that generate brand loyalty. For corporate brands (organisations) with branded portfolios, research shows that high customer-perceived brand value of the company’s brands generates satisfaction leading to brand loyalty, which in turn increases the perceived reputation of the corporate brand – a virtuous circle.

Social media makes it easier to connect with people who think and like what we think and like. Social media makes it easier to connect with people who think and like what we think and like.

In China, “wired” young women (approximately 115 million between ages 25 and 35), turn to online social communities as places where they feel they can express their individuality.

### The New Definition of Connection

Technology, digitisation, the 24/7 existence has changed the ways in which we relate to family, friends, strangers, cars, homes, business, shopping, data, appliances, and our self. Connection is a human need, and is now a multi-dimensional, paradoxical force bigger than contacting, communicating, collecting and conversing with “friends”.

The new definition of connection means integrating with individuality. People want bonding together with others and with brands while at the same time expressing uniqueness of self. They want to belong to the dynamic of the group network while proclaiming their own identity. The Age of I fosters this as it is based on connections of individuals within the context of a common business.

Another paradox is the desire for both connection and disconnection. We have constant contact with people, brands, places and things. We share with those who love what we love. We agree with people who agree with us. Technology makes it easier to connect with people who think and like what we think and like.

Social media makes it easier to connect at all times, in any place. Gen Z equates happiness and self-esteem with social media, for example! Always on, in contact at all times, we are linked in the flurry of the never-ending fast news flash. Bloomberg News says, “Be On. Anytime.”

The velocity of live, streaming content and conversation keeps us up-to-date. Social media connections work but many are not actually real: the sharing is virtually genuine. Connections have evolved from voice to virtual, from human touchable to digitally clickable. And, now people want both.

Facebook claims that it will “help you connect and share with the people in your life.” The challenge is to determine how this approach to social networking affects our communities and brands. Research demonstrates that segmentation is critical to determining how brands should target with social media.
Light-switch Linkage: On-Off, Up-Down

Always on throws us off, yet another paradox. All-the-time connections, and confused internal clocks alter lives, as people are no longer regulated by day-part, mealtime, work-time-schedules; time zones are the new continents. 11 People no longer just complain about reduced time due to activity over-scheduling: people now complain that they have reduced time due to information overload. We are always plugged in but wish for some unscheduled time. We connect with the environment, with local cultures, and with products and services enmeshing us in the world, yet we desire solace and solitude. The paradox of constant time and the need for down-time: although constantly connected, people seek out dots to alert “that interrupt and distract from real life. People feel the loss of time to reflect, the lack of time-outs and pauses in our pace of life. Reports indicate that when under connection consumption pressure, people tend to do more things at once. That compounds the stress, preventing feelings of task accomplishment.14

Connections require attention. Research from Microsoft indicates that the human attention span fell from 12 seconds in 2000 to eight seconds in 2013.15 Shorter human attention spans force brands to meaningfully connect in mere seconds. Gen Z wants information as quickly as possible yet they lose interest quicker than other cohorts. Brands must affect people who connect and disconnect in the blink of an eye.

The Privacy Calculus

Constantly connecting and sharing personal information creates data that erodes privacy. Disconnecting would bring back privacy at the sake of personalisation of services and communications. Research indicates that customers create a “privacy calculus” weighing the benefits of the sharing reward against the sharing costs. Brands have an opportunity to address the paradox of privacy reward and privacy risk. Trust is required: people want to know to whom they are giving their information. There is another opportunity: to collaborate and create standardised approaches to privacy across industries while hyper-personalising responses to individuals’ information profiles within brand. Segmentation is critical: different people have different attitudes and behaviours when it comes to privacy. The increase of “wearables” means personal data is accumulating and being accessed by a wide range of providers.

Unified Workplace of Connected Individuals

The new meaning of connection creates paradoxes in the way we work. The on-demand economy creates unified work communities of connected individuals: an uninflicted force of individuals integrating into organisations on a flexible basis creating a brand experience of unity with diversity. Building unity of purpose among working individuals – when many are non-employees – is a key challenge for brands and organisations. The increase in devices, data traffic, and storage has transformed our working lives. Where we work, how we connect with employers, co-workers and clients can be immediate regardless of place and time. Communal workplaces are a burgeoning industry; estimates indicate 10,000 co-working places worldwide by the end of 2016 – a small number yet clearly growing.16 Additionally, new data suggests that Millennials in the US say career-building workplace connections are as important as “doing a good job” in the workplace. Millennials find that networking and relationship building is highly valuable for one’s future.17

Bombarded with constant intrusions of communications, some people want to separate from the stream. A start-up in London called Kovert creates wearable jewellery products – connected to an app – designed to “empower you to disconnect” by giving the wearer control to filter out the overwhelming intrusions of mobile and digital devices. The user can program the app to identify people and sources and stop these messages.18

IHG® NEW IN-HOTEL DESIGNS – UNIFIED WORKPLACES OF CONNECTED INDIVIDUALS

Today’s business travellers want to be as productive as possible. They work while they travel. They know that their workplace experience enjoys a comfortable and convenient experience to productivity. They seek a hotel experience that blends work and relaxation.

The Crowne Plaza® brand’s Flexible Meetings Solution provides modern business travellers with a high-tech environment. It combines Stimulating Spaces, On Demand Service enabled by technology, and Food That Fuels enabling how people meet and work today – through improved, social, and informal groups – “the meetings around the mealtimes.“

Crowne Plaza Hotels & Resorts also introduced the Work Life room, which provides guests with flexibility to sleep, relax and work all in one place. Like the “working triangle” of a chef’s kitchen, the new Crowne Plaza room allows guests to move freely between three key areas – a cocooned bed, a flexible ‘nook’ and a streamlined workspace. These spaces address the modern business traveller’s needs for informal meetings and the paradox of ‘room’ for comfort and productivity.

To ensure that this brand remains at the forefront of the new way of doing business, in the Americas region, IHG will invest in design-led, culturally-relevant, technology-enabled solutions to genuinely empower, energise and inspire the modern business traveller. This is designed to further create a guest experience with modern design, innovative technology, responsive service and flexible spaces that put the modern business traveller feel comfortable, in control and productive.
Connection by Age Cohort
Age generates connection paradoxes. Cohorts respond differently to how, when, why, and where to connect. Brands (organisations) need to strategically juggle conflicting connection needs. For example, Gen Z appreciate brand sharing but they do it with care, seeking personal safeguards, while sceptical Boomers want brands to know them with the least amount of information sharing. Millennials seek an “online collectivism” while at the same time they “celebrate individualism in their virtual communities.”

Space as Place
Connected online communities – networks – have turned the virtual space into a veritable place: a playground, a work ground, a social ground. On the other hand, the rise of CONS (conventions) driven by fans’ need to connect face-to-face, (comic-con, sci-fi-con, game-con, cat-con, quilt-con, Star Trek, and other fan-focused conventions), brings individuals together in actual physical places with real like-minded others where everyone expresses themselves within the physical collective experience. Standing in line waiting to buy an iPhone is another example of a “CON” – being an individual participating in a convergence of enthusiasts. Another connection paradox of The Age of I: the desire for virtual spaces and real places.

There are conventions for everything from quilts to beer, “expanding with an obsessiveness bred by the Internet. The industry of the con or convention offers what the Internet does not: face-to-face experiences, custom swag (gifts), exclusive sneak peaks and the bragging rights that come with traveling to the spinning centre of a pop-culture universe for one intense weekend. Many participants view these events as moments of pure expression. You get the energy, the community, the collective experience. People are there for that thing that is never going to happen again.”

Social networking is no longer a channel strategy or a communications tool: it is a way of life, a way of having individual freedom with personal interdependence within the network. Belonging has always been part of human nature: social networking is today’s evolution of community – technology makes it easier for us to connect with those who share our interests. The paradox is that a social network is the sum of all of the individual relationships, linking one person to another.

Social networks are part of everyday life for Gen Z and a major means by which they connect with peers. Gen Z is hyper-social. They are very visual and very creative in the ways they engage with others. They understand visual information with ease. They are Generation Collaboration because of their fondness for networking.
What Can Brands Do?

Business evolved from brand experiences based on transactions to relationships, changing attitudes from feeling disconnected, to feeling connected, to feeling interconnected. Brands are credible interconnectors with customers, prospects, loyalists, and membership communities. Brand experiences should create a feeling of Meaningful Membership in an interconnected community that also respects their individuality.

Brands must create a new language for communicating that moves quickly, simply, visually, building extraordinary trustworthy valuable brand experiences. Additionally, brands can provide curated information that helps filter out the unnecessary. Building trust into connections is an imperative. Live streaming is one way to bring transparency (a trust component) into the brand experience. When people see how the brand behaves “live in real time,” the brand creates a trust connection.

German sportswear brand Adidas live-streamed the US athlete James Rodriguez signing his sponsorship deal, so everyone could see exactly what is involved. Turkish Airlines live streamed an Istanbul-New York City flight from start to finish with views into the cockpit and real-time crew interactions. In October 2015, in advance of the Playstaton launch, Sony streamed a series providing views and insights to current and potential buyers and players.

Use segmentation as a strategic brand-business practice for understanding customers, knowing their needs, problems and use occasions. Connection is a multi-faceted force: segmenting on the basis of customer connection, functions, emotions and social needs is one way to better know how to generate new connection paradox promises.

Generating high-perceived customer value is critical. IHG examined the new value equation in the IHG 2015 Trends Report discussing the evolution to Trustworthy Brand Value. In the transition from transactions to relationships, the creation of trustworthy customer-perceived brand value for product brands, service brands and corporate brands affects brand preference and business success.

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2. The Paradox of Abundant Rarity: The Changing Definition of Luxury

The Changing Definition of Luxury

In The Age of I, luxury is no longer something scarce, expensive and available only to the lucky few. Luxury is a multi-dimensional concept, business strategy and economic sector reflecting multiple conflicting needs and desires. Luxury can be the most premium, most exclusive, elusive, expensive offering for a small group of wealthy people, or an offering that maximises both scarcity and availability. In other words, the potential profitable paradox challenge of “abundant rarity.”

Brands such as Furla, Tory Burch, Burberry and Michael Kors promise affordable, available luxury. Luxury can be affordable exclusivity and expensive availability. It can be frivolous or a necessity. Or, it can evolve from the former to the latter. Luxury brand experiences can offer luxuriousness that is within reach. Zappos, the online shoe retailer, now offers Zappos Luxury with different shoe brands than its regular Zappos brand.

The Paradox of Exclusive but Not Elite. Wine can be a luxury beverage or cheap swill. Some bottles of wine can cost upwards of US $2000 in restaurants while others can cost US $10 at retail. Auctions trade very old, highly coveted, expensive bottles of wine. And yet, there is a new phenomenon in wine: accessible in price but not accessible in terms of production: not elite but exclusive. Sommeliers call it the Instagram Effect: posting wine choices that are affordable but produced in small batches on allocation, creating instant desire so these become difficult to find. In California, the frenzied “hunt” for scarce bottles of affordable wines is now a cult activity.

Personalisation: Universal Understanding and My Definition

Individuals have their own definition of luxury while accepting that there is a common, global definition: the subjectivity paradox. People have an ideal, common vision of what is luxury. But luxury is also very personal. It is a fine, personal line between where the ordinary ends and the extraordinary begins. A Range Rover may be a luxury for some while it is the rugged, utilitarian, sex option for others. In China, luxury is a signal of belonging to a desired social group more than an expression of individuality. In developed countries, people see both individual, personal status and belonging to a particular social group as integral to luxury brands.

Personalisation of couture fashion is another paradox: can the luxury buyer personalise the couturier’s creation? Some say it is the end of luxury couture control: luxury buyers can now control the elements of the item they buy, from dresses to shoes, from suits to shirts. Can a design that is no longer the designer’s still be a designer creation? Where is the line between couturier design and customer decoration?

"Luxury means different things to different people. More mature markets are craving a new, evolved kind of luxury. This is why offering luxury customers a relevant, personal and exclusive experience will become even more crucial than it is today. It will be a differentiating factor between old and new luxury." Rob Sinclair-Barnes, strategic marketing director, Amadeus IT Group, a global travel technology company.
Globalisation and Localisation

Globalisation hastens a paradox: being available in more places where more people can experience luxury makes it less rare. Standardisation is a luxury hallmark yet localisation is important in developing markets. In China, some retail luxury establishments localise the brand experience adapting to local market conditions. Research indicates that luxury brands must achieve some adaptation but within the overarching framework of a globally standardised and homogeneous brand image. In China, luxury is more inclusive than exclusive.

Age Makes a Difference

Attitudes toward luxury evolve as people age. Increased sense of self and changing values alter one’s idea of and desire for luxury. For younger cohorts, peer pressure shapes luxury attitudes and behaviours as the need for distinction from and with the peer group is strong. Boomers and some older segments of Millennials, are less affected by peer pressure. Needs and occasions affect the meaning of luxury. Gen Z define luxury as products and services “available for all that celebrate one’s uniqueness.” Truly authentic, original, genuine, crafted products and services are available luxuries. Gen Z has a practical attitude towards luxury, seeking more relevant, utilitarian luxuries. Reports state that Gen Z seek experiences rather than things, experiences that are visual, tangible, and able to be shared via social media. They see a social function for luxury.

According to The Brookings Institute, Chinese clients account for twenty-nine percent (29%) of all personal luxury goods purchases worldwide, made mostly while travelling. This alters the landscape as the demand for luxury goods exceeds the idea of scarcity. Researching luxury in China indicates that along with social status, face and guanxi (social networking), customers purchase luxury brands in order to be accepted. “Individual behaviour is strongly influenced by group expectations and people tend to conform to the group norm.”

Tiffany CEO, Frédéric Cumenal: “We cannot fool ourselves any longer that fancy things are interesting simply because they are fancy. Meaning is of critical importance to the contemporary customer. Status no longer comes from just the image or price of an object but from its association and values.” Sophie Maxwell of Pearlfisher (a global design agency) stated: “A new sensibility has emerged in the luxury world, one that moves us away from overt material things to more discreet and special experiences.”

HUALUXE® HOTELS AND RESORTS

HUALUXE® Hotels and Resorts is the first upscale international hotel brand designed specifically for Chinese guests. It maximises the integration of global, local and personal. The brand takes the best aspects of renowned Chinese hospitality and applies IHG’s international scale and insights into the Chinese market, to consistently deliver a modern and authentic, Chinese experience that balances contemporary and traditional design but within the overarching framework of a global brand.

Woven into every detail of the luxury brand’s service and design is an appreciation of and respect for Chinese culture and heritage, with particular emphasis on the unique Chinese values of etiquette, rejuvenation in nature, status recognition, and spaces enabling social interactions.

For example, the thousand-year-old Chinese Tea Culture is woven into the overall experience at HUALUXE Hotels & Resorts. Guests can enjoy a wide selection of tea served in authentic crockery, in the hotel’s premium signature Tea House, by in-house tea masters.

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The Luxury of Privacy:
Privacy and Personalisation
Privacy is a vanishing luxury. The more we share our personal data, the more we lose our privacy. Keeping secrets is now considered a luxury. People sense the virtual (viral) vulnerability created by opening their lives. Providing “privacy and personalisation” is one way to deliver a luxurious brand experience. Privacy is a valuable asset. People believe they must trade-off between providing information for premium, status service and maintaining privacy. The brand challenge is delivering a personalised “luxury” experience designed around an individual while protecting the individual and the information needed to design the “luxury” experience. Brands that do this well will build trust.

Gen Z define privacy as security: they favour sharing but want safeguards. Survey data shows that Gen Z is nearly twice as likely as any other generation to want liability insurance and background checks when it comes to shared-service companies. 21

iGen (Gen Z) take a practical approach to shared services — they have always known shared-economy services and count on companies such as Uber and AirBnB to solve challenges from transportation to where to stay on vacation. While 25% of Baby Boomers do not trust shared-service providers at all, Gen Z takes a practical approach to the business model and safety. 63% of Gen Z agree that background checks on people providing shared services is the #1 way to earn their trust. That percentage is higher than any other generation. 44

Comforting Technology
One aspect of luxury is luxuriousness: extremely comfortable sensuousness. Luxuriousness — a tender, soothing appeal — helps define luxury. Cashmere is comfortable and luxurious. Coco Chanel said: “Luxury must be comfortable, otherwise it is not luxury.” Brands providing a feeling of comfort in terms of ease, calm, relaxation, restoration, or rejuvenation deliver a luxury experience. Even simple items can be raised into unpretentious luxury.

Yet, we live in a digital, cold, techno-world. Brands that turn technology into a comforting experience will heighten emotional connections with customers. “Sensitive uses of technology are enabling luxury brands to positively re-imagine their roles and reach modern audiences.” 45 Comforting technology puts our minds and bodies at ease.

The Luxury of Giving to Others
In our sharing economy, giving to others is considered a luxury. Giving helps others, while it is transformative for the giver. In these instances, luxury is making improvements in the lives of non-kin others while simultaneously altering the life of the giver. 37

Carnival Cruises created a luxury vacation category they call “social impact travel”, where customers help to transform the areas of their ports of call. The cruise line thinks of this as mobilising and educating their travellers for the better good. 42

Kimpton® Hotels in New York City offers guests “the services of Style Concierge and ace stylist, Roxanne Hauldren. After a phone call or email consultation prior to the guest’s trip, Ms Hauldren creates a custom digital look book, personalised shopping itinerary and private shopping tour to fit style and budget.” Pick your favourites and these will be in your room upon arrival. 46
The Italian luxury shoe brand, Tod's, wants to offer customers instant access to collections with the release of more frequent new product availability. Owner/CEO Diego Dalle Valle stated, “Every brand needs to change the way in which it is thinking. We are thinking about instead of a collection every six months, to have new products every month or two.”

These changes are designed to satisfy customer demand for “buy now, wear now” fast access.

The Role of Time: The Paradox of Desire and Delay

Time is a luxury: an asset that we spend, waste, gain or save. Today’s belief that immediacy is a virtue, affects luxury: is it a luxury if I can have it now? A luxury opportunity is the maximisation of desire and delay: instantly satisfying desire while building the anticipation (and waiting-list status) via delay. Is waiting a privilege or a problem? There is fierce tension in the fashion business between instant accessibility and sustained desire: ready-to-buy versus willing-to-wait. Does receiving the item fast make it less of a luxury? François-Henri Pinault, CEO of Kering Group (Brioni, Gucci, Bottega Veneta) believes there is “allure in anticipation.” Couture designer icon, Karl Lagerfeld, “… insists that the desire with which a purchase is made is still a closely nurtured thing in which media coverage, campaigns and dialogue are needed before the item reaches the cash till.” The conversation raises the paradox of “now and later” or as Financial Times stated, “Egalité in Exclusivity.”

Can It Be My Luxury if It Is Not Mine?

Luxury is less linked to ownership today. Renting is convenient and provides enormous choice. People want the luxury experience without the ownership of luxury. People are increasingly accessing products/services through leasing and renting rather than owning. Bicycles, cars, formal designer wear and other fashion, services, skills for handling tasks, yachts, vacation islands, time-share villas and apartments, jewellery, and other luxury experiences all can be accessed without ownership. We opt for the best of participatory experience without explicit possession. Millennials began this focus on access without ownership, and it is altering the luxury business model. Luxury rentals, whether autos, yachts, clothing, villas or homes allow people to maintain their social status and keep up-to-date with consumption trends through a variety of offerings: these create unique, customised experiences. Luxury property and yacht rentals also offer the extraordinary luxury of personalised, secure privacy. According to recent research, luxury “access-based” experiences provide participation over possessiveness. HomeAway and Timy & Place (villas around the world), PlatinumYachting.com (yachting in Asia/South East Asia) are just some examples of businesses catering to “borrowing luxury” needs. The industry for access-based, consumption experiences is exploding (in the first 4 months of 2016, vacation rental start-ups generated US $100 million in venture capital funding) indicating a growing market for highly personalised, highly private yet extremely glamorous luxury experiences. However, there is room for branded luxury access over ownership experiences as the current marketplace is highly fractionated.
The Brand-Business Practice of Segmentation: Prestige and Luxury

Although economics play a role in luxury, other factors are important. Segmentation is an important brand-business practice for understanding luxury attitudes and behaviours, and for refining or redefining luxury strategies. Needs-driven occasion-based segmentation shows that luxury and prestige are different. Although not mutually exclusive, each delivers something distinct. A prestige brand has widely recognised prominence, worth, and/or importance, expressing money and power. A luxury brand has extravagance and great comfort. Prestige means, “I am important.” Luxury means, “I feel indulgent.” A Patek Philippe watch is prestigious; an Omega watch is luxury. “I feel indulgent.” A Patek Philippe watch is expensive. Luxury means, “I am important.”

The focus on the luxury brand experience – whether through ownership or rental – is great for brands. Brand experiences, in general, are generated by the feelings, perceptions, and behavioural responses induced by the functional, emotional and social benefits of the brand over the course of the entire brand journey. The brand’s design, identity, packaging, and communications all contribute to the brand experience. Even with all the inherent constraints, solutions must focus on protecting the brand’s equity at all costs. Brand experiences that deliver trustworthy promises are the best way to motivate and delight customers.

Research by Goldman Sachs indicates that for Millennials, owning a house is not a priority for 60% of the sample and owning a car is considered extremely important for only 15%. Based on numbers like these, some predict that car ownership will be an anomaly by mid-century. A recent PwC study estimates that access-based consumption revenues will rise from $15 billion globally in 2014 to over $300 billion by 2025.

Additionally, strategies and actions that are designed to address the conceptual nature of luxury must be focused. Is the goal to sell the brand widely or be exclusive? Is the goal to address people who want possession now or people who want to wait the status of waiting? Is this an ownership strategy or an access-based strategy? Does management want the brand to be consumed by many people or a few? Merely focusing on the economic aspect, high-end versus low-end, is a dead end. Luxury is a complicated, active, multi-faceted emotional, social, and functional arena for brands.

What Can Brands Do?

The brand challenge is to identify what luxury means to customers and what conflicting needs (occasions) must be optimised in order to create the most desirable and motivating luxury brand experiences. More than a high-end price point, luxury is multi-dimensional: different people of different ages in different economic environments have different attitudes, behaviours, needs and desires for different occasions.

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Surveillance creates databases. Keeping customers informed as to the type and use of surveillance, and who is using the data, is extremely important. Especially with luxury, brands (organisations) must use permission-based surveillance, reassuring customers with transparency. Marketers must realise that in an insecure world, feeling secure is a luxury. Disclosure from brands will increase trust and loyalty.

Holiday Inn® and IHG’s guest segmentation research has shown that families have so little time ‘together’ at home that vacations provide those very rare ‘connection moments.’ Those moments are their ‘luxury’ – a rare opportunity to engage and physically share experiences, laughter, and emotional connection with loved ones.

InterContinental® Hotels & Resorts is the world’s largest luxury hotel brand. It offers guests over 180 properties around the world to choose from – whether that be a luxury villa by the sea, or a stay in a suite covering 7,000 square feet. As a truly international brand with deep local knowledge in every corner of the world, guests can indulge in luxury experiences in and outside the hotel without the ownership of luxury. Especially relevant for the Age of I, InterContinental Hotels & Resorts also allows its guests to share their luxury experiences with others. InterContinental Hotels & Resorts launched a Social Gallery inviting guests to share their holiday photos and hotel experiences on social platforms by using #InterContinentallife. The result is a vast selection of rich user-generated photography from guests who have experienced the amenities of an InterContinental hotel or resort.

The Social Gallery is an authentic, honest representation of how guests live the InterContinental life. With consumer recommendation proven to be more powerful than traditional advertising, this serves as a strong asset for the brand, and demonstrates accessible luxury and endless opportunities to experience luxury travel as it should be. In the Age of I, InterContinental Hotels & Resorts offers guests the opportunity to have personalised luxury while living the InterContinental Life, all without ownership.

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3. The Paradox of Seeking a Better Me and a Better We: Responsible Individualism

Seeking a Better Me and a Better We

In the Age of I, the desire for both individuality and inclusivity produces a new paradox. People seek better lives while also seeking a better planet and the betterment of others. They want to be good to themselves while being good to others. People want to focus on self-improvement but want to improve the world; they want to give in to their desires but give back to others. They want brands that allow them to do both.

This is Responsible Individualism where individuals take responsibility for their own behaviours and take responsibility for the impact of those behaviours on others. Responsible Individualism is not only how we behave as individuals but also how we behave within a social context that has social meaning. People seek to integrate their need for personal achievements with public altruism: self-satisfaction and selflessness. People seek to create a “Better Me and a Better We” – they want personal and public betterment. Many brands recognize experiences that reflect this paradox.

Doing life-changing work for others is personally life changing: can I be selfish and selfless?

Danish fashion brand, Les Deux joins with its customers to transform lives of children in Zambia. “The time has come where it is our turn to give back to those in need. We are building a school in Zambia and making sure that kids have what they need in order to educate themselves. Every time you buy an item from Les Deux, we will give a child at the school a fresh t-shirt and make sure that all students at the school have a school kit when they start, including everything from pencils to malaria vaccine.”

The Paradox of Giving and Giving Back

With Responsible Individualism, it is not enough to just give; it is important to make a difference by giving back. Involvement is important, be a participator over a spectator. Is what I do for myself making a difference for others?

OneHope creates delightful products that inspire people to indulge and do good. With wine, gourmet coffee and gifts, OneHope has an inspired community of Cause Entrepreneurs who spread the message and make an impact. It is the merger of business and philanthropy. “OneHope now has $2 million in donations leading to 2,600 clinical trials for cancer patients, 13,000 forever homes for shelter animals, 1.1 million meals for children, 33,000 life-saving vaccines and much more...” all from people “indulging” themselves.

The Paradox of Seeking a Better Me and a Better We: Responsible Individualism

It’s not enough just to give, it’s important to make a difference by giving back. At IHG, colleagues from around the world join in on fundraising activities in aid of the IHG® Foundation, providing disaster relief to affected communities.
Better Me and Better Business
Data shows that employees who genuinely feel connected to their workplace business and brand are happier, and perform better while the organisation performs better: better me and better business. Happier and engaged individuals have nearly doubled the performance outcomes when compared to organisations where happiness and engagement were low. And, these companies of happier individuals were more innovative. As part of corporate meaningful membership, internal marketing must incorporate employee wellness, satisfaction and happiness.

Age Makes a Difference
Gen Z and Millennials have many similarities. They differ based on the generation that raised them, and the context in which they were raised. Millennials are more optimistic preferring to share their thoughts and experiences while Gen Z is more realistic about their lives and futures perceiving their parents (care givers) as role models. Reared during a recession, Gen Z are more cautious and less rebellious than Millennials. When it comes to improving self and world, Gen Z is thoughtful, recognising personal issues as well as community issues, and they want to participate in having a lasting impact on problems small and large. Fitting the paradox, Gen Z will take personal risk for things they believe in and are considered “we-centric”.

US Millennials and Gen Z prefer brands that support good causes. Ninety-two percent (92%) of 18-24 years old and 91% of those 25-34 years old say they are more likely to switch to a brand that actively supports a good cause versus 85% of the total sample, which included Gen X and Baby Boomers.

Socially Conscious Consumption Behaviours
A brand’s social purpose and practices must be as passionate as their customers’ purpose and practices. Brands can uniquely address these two conflicting needs of self-achievement and altruist selflessness. Customers believe they are supporting a social good, when buying from a “conscious” brand/company. People want to feel good so they seek to buy “good” whereby good self and social good become optimised: I feel good by buying good and I do good.

Data from UK, Germany, Hungary, Japan and other studies indicates: “Inclination to action, concern and ethical buying behaviour increase with age. Older adults are... more environmentally concerned, have stronger ethical beliefs, demonstrate a stronger moral orientation, and consume more ethical products than their younger counterparts. Older consumers are a significant force...”

Seventy-two percent (72%) of global consumers believe their purchases have a positive impact on social and environmental issues. Four in five global customers are willing to buy from an unknown brand if it has strong commitment to social responsibility. Ninety percent (90%) of global customers say they would switch to a brand associated with a good social cause.
What Can Brands Do?

A principled, social agenda is no longer just about environmental issues. Customers are increasingly interested in how marketers treat others internally and externally. Regardless of industry, customers have broadened their purposeful scope to include environmental and social goodness. Brands can satisfy the individual’s need for self-betterment and to be better global/local citizens. Age makes a difference: messages about actions must reflect cohort variances. Older age groups drive ethical purchasing. Brands must satisfy belief-based buying.

Recognise different segments of customers based on personal patterns of socially conscious consumption and behaviours. Insightful needs-driven occasion-based segmentation directs the focus of brand experiences that address people’s multiple desires for both personal and public betterment. Know the behaviours of all age segments when it comes to betterment. Internally, brands (organisations) need to celebrate individuals and their unique contributions while building strong, collaborative teams. The combination of Better Me and Better We increases both personal performance and business performance.

Build and fortify the corporate brand. In The Age of I, corporate brands have a larger, more important role to play. Corporate brands add credibility and integrity to all the brands in the portfolio. A strong corporate brand reinforces that the company is aligned with the values of today’s consumers. It can align the organisation around common values. Because of its positions on improving conditions internally and externally, it can attract the best talent and be seen as a desirable place to work. Additionally, transparent, acceptable global citizenship helps support product/service and geographic expansion. A strong corporate brand provides a “goodwill buffer” (Trust Capital) in the event there is a crisis or product mishap.

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4. The Paradox of Do It Myself and Do It For Me In My Way: Rethinking Consumer Control

Rethinking the Definition of Control

Technology, apps, mobility, digitalisation, robotics, constant contact, 24/7 time spans, and artificial intelligence create a central paradox: “Doing things for myself and expecting the machine to do it for me in my way.” This means rethinking the blend of digital/technological and physical/human. Brands must innovate around digital/technological but at the same time blend of digital/technological and physical/human. Brands must innovate around digital/technological but at the same time.

Who is Accountable: Me or Machine?

Invisible travellers: They go from home-printed boarding pass to in-flight Wi-Fi to app-ordered taxi to hotel kiosk to app-ordered food. Invisible Travellers are aided by invisible technologies, which are especially pervasive and unnoticed by many customers. Many first-time Gen Z, then short after Millennials are Invisible Travellers proferring the paradox of a personal yet person-less travel experience.

In contrast, Gen Z desire some human contact: although true digital natives, Gen Z also seek person-to-person contact. More and more businesses focus on younger people who are more comfortable with digital relationships. Banking has already adapted. Spanish CaixaBank launched a mobile-only service called imaginBank: low priced and only available by mobile app or social media. Non-human banking has gained traction: ATM’s, online banking including check deposits, debit cards and now wallet-apps.

Mobile payments are quicker than using a debit card or a chip-based card. Mobile wallets feel faster, more convenient and less awkward to use than a chip-based card. Already there are competitors in this nascent marketplace: Samsung Pay, Apple Pay, Android Pay.

To appeal to Gen Z and younger Millennials, some digitised businesses combine automation with human relationships. Reported in Financial Times, and in Fast Company, SoFi, a financial-tech services company, SoFi “hosts dinners and happy-hour mixers for its ‘members’ and recently tinka a group of singles skydiving. One Twitter wag called it ‘Tinder for banking.’”

The supplement, FT.com/Wealth reported, “Millennials matter to the wealth management industry. But different from Boomers and Gen X, Millennials find Robo-advising appealing. The report stated that younger clients do not want and cannot afford an annual meeting with an advisor talking about the relative pros and cons of emerging markets, bonds or structured products. They want simple guidance and 24-hour access. And Millennials do not want advice delivered in an office: they want an app. Examples of popular Robo-advisors are Betterment in the US and Nutmeg in the UK.”

As invisible technologies increase, automation takes the human out of experiences, especially service. One common service business definition is “a set of one-time consumable and perishable benefits. It relies on the human connection aspects of a relationship.” However, in our brave new world, non-human, biometric, sentient technologies, bots and robots provide many of the service activities. Assistance and helpfulness are important and make life easier, regardless of how it is delivered. But each brand experience is different requiring different levels of technological integration or none at all. Some believe that hospitality cannot and should not be automated. Others believe that automation improves the hospitality experience. Can machines and technologies “mean well” or do we care? Some brands are integrating machine-learning technology with real people to deliver exceptional brand experiences. Sometimes it is necessary to have a human on the other end.

Age Makes a Difference

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To appeal to Gen Z and younger Millennials, some digitised businesses combine automation with human relationships. Reported in Financial Times, and in Fast Company, SoFi, a financial-tech services business, combines person-less advice with physical gatherings of users into meaningful membership communities, building and enhancing the brand experience. Both person-less and highly personal, the tender uses technology to disrupt banking but also “weaves itself deeper into members’ personal lives” with social events, dating services, career advice and entrepreneurial connections.

SoFi “hosts dinners and happy-hour mixers for its ‘members’ and recently tinka a group of singles skydiving. One Twitter wag called it ‘Tinder for banking.’”

The supplement, FT.com/Wealth reported, “Millennials matter to the wealth management industry. But different from Boomers and Gen X, Millennials find Robo-advising appealing. The report stated that younger clients do not want and cannot afford an annual meeting with an advisor talking about the relative pros and cons of emerging markets, bonds or structured products. They want simple guidance and 24-hour access. And Millennials do not want advice delivered in an office: they want an app. Examples of popular Robo-advisors are Betterment in the US and Nutmeg in the UK.”

Personal and Person-less

As invisible technologies increase, automation takes the human out of experiences, especially service. One common service business definition is “a set of one-time consumable and perishable benefits. It relies on the human connection aspects of a relationship.” However, in our brave new world, non-human, biometric, sentient technologies, bots and robots provide many of the service activities. Assistance and helpfulness are important and make life easier, regardless of how it is delivered. But each brand experience is different requiring different levels of technological integration or none at all. Some believe that hospitality cannot and should not be automated. Others believe that automation improves the hospitality experience. Can machines and technologies “mean well” or do we care? Some brands are integrating machine-learning technology with real people to deliver exceptional brand experiences. Sometimes it is necessary to have a human on the other end.

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Where Does My Trust Reside: Being or Bot?

Trust is at the heart of all relationships: public or private, trust is foundational. Can we trust our feelings, our personal behaviours, likes and dislikes, our emotions, the range of human interactions to intelligent machines and algorithms? Extraordinary brand experiences contribute to Trustworthy Brand Value. Is trustworthiness related to degree of technology or to depth of human service? Can trust be digitised? Can hospitality be trusted if it is an algorithm?

The challenge for brands is whether trust can be de-humanised? To what degree? Brands must determine what is technology and what is human and ensure quality delivery of both. There are going to be areas where human autonomy is needed.

IHG® FACEBOOK MESSENGER BOT – HUMAN VS. ROBOT

Keeping ahead of trends and investing in technology is a key part of IHG’s digital strategy to deliver compelling and engaging digital content and ultimately build lifetime relationships with guests. At the same time, IHG understands the importance of humanised connections, offering the most innovative and efficient technological solutions at every stage of the guest experience, but at the same time, ensuring a human is never too far away at each touchpoint along the way.

IHG designs its interactions to provide customers with the information they want, when and where they want it. Most recently, IHG became the first hotel company (and one of the first companies) to develop a Facebook Messenger Bot to help automate customer service.

The Bot is primarily used as a pre-stay management tool – for tasks such as reservation confirmations; collecting guests’ Stay Preferences; and answering specific guest requests. Any open requests submitted to the Bot will automatically be directed to the Customer Care Team for response; there is always a human to talk to on the other end.

The Brooklyn Museum in New York has an app that allows visitors to chat with a museum guide. Chat about the art, and create a more personal engagement with the art. The app connects the museum-goer with a live person in the museum who is part of the Museum’s audience engagement team. The Brooklyn Museum sees this as personalised communication in real time. Called ASK, the app at the Brooklyn Museum is free once in the museum.58

The Paradox of Do It Myself and Do It For Me In My Way

Hotel Indigo Lower East Side, New York City, USA

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The Evolving Workplace

Many young people today will soon work in jobs that do not yet exist or in industries that have not yet been created. Ten years ago, people did not know about shared industries like Uber, BlaBlaCar, or Rent-The-Runway. Even with all of the automation and technological, digital workplace changes, people are still needed. They will need different skills but humans still matter.

There is a new collaborative workplace where people, technologies and robots work together in making things and providing services. Are machines “Tools for Conviviality”? Convivial means with life: is this technologically possible?

Trust is essential. People need to not only trust each other. They also need to trust their interactions with the digital world.

What Can Brands Do?

Continue to build and nurture a strong, adaptable, flexible intelligent and empathetic corporate culture.

Purveyors of home connectivity (smart homes) now realise that selling products that do things is not nearly as compelling as selling services providing ease of mind. For example, “Early on we found that if you called what we do ‘home automation,’ people liked it but would not spend money on it. But if you called it ‘peace of mind’ and anchored it in home security, then people knew they need to have that and would spend $35 to $45 a month on it,” Letha McLaren, CMO, Icontrol Networks, Inc.

Digital is more than an e-commerce channel: digital is a social force that diffuses control. Robotics make our lives and choices easier putting us at ease. Is the machine merely computing or actually thinking? Another paradox: digitised or humanised or both?

The Paradox of Do It Myself and Do It For Me In My Way: Rethinking Consumer Control

Brands must address the consumers’ desire for being in control while in many cases not being the controller. Brands must determine by customer set where the line is between machine and me. In the battle for the soul of control, the best brand experiences will be control delivered my way.

Trust is earned, not given. Customers must trust the technology to deliver the promised brand experience in a quality manner. Customers must trust the machine to perform the task and without depersonalising and dehumanising the task. Doubt damages trust.

In Europe, IHG is using Virtual Reality both as a design tool for new rooms, as well as a research tool for gathering guest insights to improve the guest experience as a whole. Using Virtual Reality in this way gives consumers the control they seek to develop their own brand product or experience but at the same time allows the brand to be in control by facilitating the experience and then ultimately, developing the new concept.

Brands including Holiday Inn® and Crowne Plaza® Hotels & Resorts are using this new innovation to drive more than just design. IHG is using this new technology to research, prototype and in the future, provide guest facing Virtual Reality content. In this way, the brand is building its future hand in hand with its guests, its staff and its hotel owners.
Six Best Practices for Addressing Paradoxes of the Age of I

It takes creativity, discipline, insight and focus to create compelling solutions that address consumer paradoxes of the Age of I. The four overarching paradoxes offer numerous brand-business opportunities. Addressing paradoxes and delivering trustworthy brand experiences will generate brand loyalty as the foundation for sustainable high quality revenue growth. Here are six new, must-do best practices for powerful paradox leadership in our fast-changing global, local and personal world.

1. Aim for Integration Rather than Balance

In a world of paradoxes, aiming for balance will not foster profitable success. Balance means viewing paradox promises as constant sum contests: 50% of one thing and 50% of another. More of one desire means accepting less of another. This is not today’s reality. Integration means making a better, new whole from the combination of two or more entities. Delivering a paradox promise means moving from the best compromise to delivering the best of both. Promising and delivering satisfying solutions for customers that integrate the best of both inclusivity and individuality is a winning, advantageous, commercial formula.

The online shoemaker, SamuelHubbard.com, sells a shoe called The Un-Sneaker™ – “Performance or Dress Shoe? Now you can have the extreme comfort of a performance shoe with the extreme style of a dress shoe. Why compromise?” Other examples of successful paradox promises that offer the best of both are Coke Zero – Great robust taste and Zero Calories; Gore-Tex fabrics – Breathable and Water Proof; Michael Kors – Luxury and Availability.

2. Use Needs-driven, Occasion-based Segmentation for Superior Business Management

Needs-driven occasion-based segmentation is a strategic brand-business practice that when properly conducted and managed helps define the brand-business landscape for future success. To address consumer paradoxes, needs-driven, occasion-based segmentation is a brand-business necessity helping identify what must be maximised. As a disciplined, brand-business practice, segmentation must avoid generic niceties and rather define specific, multi-dimensional needs and the occasions in which customers have those needs. The practice of strategic segmentation requires recognition that people’s needs change based on the occasion in which they have those needs.

Given the changes in our world, segmentation must be kept fresh and relevant. A recent discussion in Fast Company indicates that the “on-demand” nature of new businesses are “resetting” to reflect the continuing delivery of specific needs as opposed to single, immediate, one-off response. New businesses are finding that mere immediate response may work for a car service but does not work for childcare. The needs are very different.

As with any brand-business practice, the strategists are as important as the strategies. Truth is not revealed from data. It takes business-driven strategists to creatively interpret the data and effectively implement the action plans. Customers do not know or care about the segmentation research. They only know and care about what they experience.

Communicate with Conversation

Brand experiences are built on relationships with customers who feel connected to each other while expressing who they are as individuals. In the Age of I, the lost art of conversation is a luxury. Conversation comes from Latin (conversari) “keeping company with, living among, being familiar with.” Conversion is an engaging, connective, channel-agnostic interactive and integrative force. It can be vocal or digital. It is a learning experience. For those who need humanising, the human voice can be highly involving. For those who prefer digital dialogue, text messaging can be appealing and absorbing. But conversation is also about listening; it is a chance to hear what someone else has to say. Listening helps create trust; trust is a critical component of brand value.

Conversation is more than trivial, digital chat; it is a chance to truly, deeply connect. Conversation demands patience: something in short supply today. It helps us be more empathetic, imaginative, and insightful. Conversation generates the needed pauses that “always on” individuals desire. Within the brand experience, conversation can be turned into commerce if managed properly. Understand the consumer’s communication needs, listen to what is being said, and respond relevantly with imagination and feeling. This will make the brand experience more meaningful.
EVEN® HOTELS – ADDRESSING CONFLICTING NEEDS

EVEN Hotels stakes a claim for IHG in the wellness space. The brand provides the benefits of IHG scale with wellness personalisation for each guest, helping them stay healthy when they are away from home.

An industry first, this brand provides guests with a holistic wellness experience under one roof. However, this brand is anything but a single idea. It manages differentiating features that have distinctive functional, emotional and social benefits for different guests at different times, while at the same time maintaining one distinctive brand character.

From wellness-savvy staff, to guest room “Fitness Zones” with in-room trainers and fitness equipment, and an Athletic Studio in each property with the best in class equipment, EVEN Hotels helps guests stay physically active in their own way throughout their stay. The brand fulfils each guest’s needs for personalisation, while still staying true to the overall EVEN “wellness promise: “Eat Well, Rest Easy and Accomplish More.”

Manage the Brand’s Multi-Dimensionality

In the complex, paradoxical world of brand communities and co-creation, the idea of owning a single-minded, distilled word in the customer’s mind is an out-of-date business idea. Forcing a customer to trade-off benefits is not a formula for success. In The Age of I, where sharing and engagement within a branded experience community are crucial, distilling a brand into a single word is a formula for failure. People seek maximisation of conflicting needs. This requires giving the customer the best of both worlds.

The logic of the paradox premise means that a brand is not merely a single idea or word; a brand is a complex, multi-dimensional solution that includes differentiating features, functional, emotional and social benefits as well as a distinctive brand character. No single word can possibly relate a brand message to every customer that is relevant at the right time for the right reasons. The brand experience must engage its members with the right combination of elements, not a condensed, reduced singularity. Addressing customer needs in a paradox world requires understanding the complex elements of the brand, and then articulating a relevant, differentiating, motivating, multidimensional idea. It means extending this dimensional definition across all commercial and strategic platforms. How you run your brand is how you run your business.
Develop Ambidextrous Brand-Business Teams

Paradox promise solutions and management require a new way of thinking about the brand, its experience and the business ramifications. Ambidextrous brand-business teams address the collaborative paradox of individuals who think differently but also strategise and act unified on behalf of the brand. Each member has individual strengths, talents, and passions. Yet, the team can work in an integrated manner. Brands benefit from divergent thinkers. The friction that exists when pairing people who think differently generates original ideas. The paradox of genuine creative thought and disciplined thinking produces breakthrough strategies and tactics.

An ambidextrous brand-business team turns the uniqueness of the team members into cohesive, unified initiatives for enduring profitable growth. Its goal is to combine and complement the knowledge and talents of individuals into a “community” of shared ownership of ideas and actions. It is an open forum combining the diversity of individuals into a unified group. An ambidextrous brand-business team has its own collaborative identity that is a function of the combined individual identities: it is the best way to organise in The Age of I.

Address the Paradox of Brand Control

Who controls the brand? Some say that business does not own the brand, but customers own the brand, indicating that the external world of peer testimony, news, word-of-mouth, social media sites, and ratings websites control the brand. This reflects the new paradox of brand control: is brand control in the hands of the business or is it in the hands of the external world? The answer is both. Having active, participatory loyalists is essential for the health of the brand. Growing branded experience communities based on meaningful membership generates increased attitudinal brand loyalty and trustworthy brand value.

Brand owners deliver relevant and creative brand experiences to these brand stakeholders. Business must not give up control of the brand to the external world. Yet, the external world does impact and influence the brand reputation and perceived trust. Brand loyalists, acting both as individuals and as members of a brand community, respond and recommend. Sharing information online creates knowledge that is highly valuable. Meaningful membership communities make a difference to the brand. The better the brand interacts with customers, the greater the value to the customers and to the brand.

Corporations must invest time, money and effort into brand-building initiatives to create brand authority and specialness. Brands also need to invest in two-way connections with customers and other external influencers. External parties can strengthen or weaken the brand’s reputation. In a world of integration, building a relevant, differentiated brand experience and also investing in external reputation management builds enduring profitable growth.
Conclusion

In order to address consumer paradoxes of the Age of I, brands (organisations) must learn how to satisfy contradictory needs in compelling and exciting ways. Maximise, do not compromise. The traditional thinking that a brand must only be a single-dimension solution regardless of geography no longer makes sense. People do not want to give up certain elements of the brand experience to receive a compromised experience. They do not want to make concessions. Instead they want brands to create no trade-off brand experiences. Resilient, powerful brands that address the diversity of global consistency, local relevance and personal differentiation must address opposing needs. Business in The Age of I requires new ways of thinking and new actions. The goal of business is to satisfy customer needs profitably. Now is a transformative time where the strongest brands will promise and deliver the “best of both” when addressing conflicting, relevant customer needs. Crafting paradox promises means creating brand experiences, which optimise contradictory desires. In The Age of I, the challenge is to create no trade-off brand experiences as the basis of high-quality revenue growth. Business management and brand management are intertwined. How you run your brands is how you run your business.

The Paradoxes of the Age of I

Paradox 1: Separate but Connected
Paradox 2: Abundant Kandy
Paradox 3: Seeking a Better Me and a Better We
Paradox 4: Do It Myself and Do It For Me in My Way


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