The *Way* Home

How the most successful home and kitchen brands navigate their way into the homes of the premium-minded consumer.

MODE / INTEGRATED BRAND EXPERIENCE AGENCY / PUBLISHED 2019

The *Way* Home

How the most successful home brands navigate their way into the homes of premium-minded consumers.

INTRODUCTION

Even the most cursory look at the landscape of premium consumer home brands reveals a splintering category. Delineating between brands can be immensely challenging for even savvy shoppers, and discerning quality offerings from well-packaged mid-market stock even more complicated.

Long a staid category with a few dominant brands segmented across a handful of tiered retailers, the premium kitchen and home products category continues to experience a tremendous amount of change. As some traditional retailers consolidate — or disappear altogether — while others expand their mass market house brands, the consumer marketplace for premium products is feeling the effects of the noise that these changes generate.

Four Drivers

What defines a successful premium home or kitchen brand experience is changing, our study points to four distinct drivers of that change:

01

SHIFTS IN CONSUMER MINDSET

Premium has become an expectation and increasingly defined independent of category.

Among the strongest trends we've observed over the last decade of working with premium consumers to understand brands is the shift towards universal benchmarks: in the same way that Facebook or Google define usability standards for every other platform or that product design is graded against Apple regardless of category - Premium is bearing the same burden - "premium-ness" even in home goods is increasingly attainable, expected by today's consumers and is being defined by Whole Foods, Audi and Shinola, not the most expensive toaster in-stock at Williams Sonoma.

02

CHANGING CONTEXT IN THE HOME

The relationship consumers have with their home goods is changing.

American spending on home goods and renovations is on the rise. While other types of aspirational purchases continue to decline, consumers are investing in signature items that enhance their experiences at home, whether for entertainment, performance or convenience. Premium home goods are becoming more advanced offering everything from customization to voice control. The line between categories, technology, design and function is ever-blurred, entering every room, affecting door hardware to refrigerators and driving consumer interest and habits.

03

EVOLVING PATH-TO-PURCHASE

Savvy consumers are seeking out and procuring premium products in more ways than ever.

Google searches for premium appliances are up 224% over the last five years. Social channels are having a profound effect on how consumers are introduced to products they're purchasing for their homes and retailers—Best Buy most prominent among them —are meeting new demand with specialty retail experiences built around premium products and the connected home.

04

EXPANDING COMPETITIVE ECOSYSTEM

The ecosystem is becoming more complex as established, integrated brands compete with newer D2C-focused competitors.

Similar to recent incursions in adjacent spaces like furniture —where brands like Joybird and Article have stolen share of mind and wallet with fresh identities and D2C offerings —the kitchen, patio and other parts of the home are seeing fresh brands like Jura and Fire Magic compete with stalwarts like Braun and Weber.

KEY IDEA

It's never been more critical for Premium Home Brands to develop Integrated Brand Experiences that establish *clarity*, instill *confidence* and amplify their *unique value*.

Overview of Work

SCORING THE PREMIUM HOME CATEGORY

At the end of 2018, we undertook an exhaustive study of the brand identity, positioning, and communications of premium home and kitchen brands. This study looked at more than 180 product lines across nearly 140 brands in 16 categories, from Flatware to Smart Home Devices. In total, we examined each product line against nearly two dozen criteria — from qualitative evaluations like the extent to which a brand system communicated a 'premium' offering, to more quantitative measures like social media engagement and the brand's mobile website performance.

To complement these efforts, we assembled a Consumer Panel to review the digital, packaging, and collateral offerings of each product line. Their feedback, delivered both through online surveys and in-person sessions, delivered a trove of data on what defined 'premium' in home and kitchen goods, and how a brands' multi-channel experiences work (and sometimes don't work) as a system to cut through the noise in these crowded categories.

In total, our audit of the category delivered nearly 4,500 data points across the customer experience of these brands, allowing us to identify those brands which are truly resonant with consumers in search of premium products, and those with work to do. Perhaps more importantly, this data helps us understand where brands can best focus their efforts to enhance their relevance with this audience.

OUR EXPERIENCE

We've been working with category and retail leaders to evolve and grow their businesses for over 15 years. Our modern, hybrid team works collaboratively and strategically to help ambitious brands connect with their audiences cohesively across channels by rising above the noise consistently, beautifully and memorably. We do our best work building connections with consumers with a premium mindset who are looking to feed, furnish and fine tune their homes.

To see the entire study, and explore the data set, visit thewayhome.madebymode.com

Areas of Inquiry

Our evaluation process examined twenty three data points across four key categories for each brand. These areas were consistent across all 16 product categories, and reflect our strongest understanding of the ways in which experiences both large and small combine to form a cohesive brand image in the mind of the modern consumer.

BRAND SYSTEMS

This category was the most significant, comprising 40% of our overall scoring. Evaluation of Brand Systems included data and feedback from our expert team, our Audience Panel, and quantitative evaluations of third party data examining the following areas:

- How the brand's image matches the brand's positioning was of particular interest.
  Does the brand's visual identity convey a premium positioning? Does the brand look premium?
- Does the voice with which the brand speaks, across channels, convey a premium positioning?
- What do people have to say about the brand, when given the option? Do customer reviews for key products on premium retail websites support the brand's premium position?
- Has the brand become well-recommended in the category? Do the most-respected and objective review sites and publications include the brand on their 'best of' lists?

PHYSICAL EXTENSIONS

Given the high-touch nature of these product categories, we gave the same weight to a brand's physical extensions as to its digital extensions — 20% of the overall score. Again, scores were taken from all three sources, and reflected significant variations in scoring from brand to brand. We looked at each of the following criteria:

- How well do the brand's physical extensions — collateral, packaging, retail installations — convey a premium positioning?
- How available is the product line, physically, in several key metro areas across the U.S.?
- How detailed is the 'find a store' experience that the brand offers: does it allow a customer to find retailers by the availability of specific product lines, specific products, or more broadly those that carry the brand?

DIGITAL ECOSYSTEMS

This category comprised 20% of the overall score, and also includes data from each of our three sources: quantitative, Audience Panel, and expert team. As one might expect, there was a wide range of scoring within this category, though we saw no meaningful correlation between a brand's resources/capitalization and the scores awarded. Specifically, we examined the following topics:

- How well do the brand's website and social channels convey a premium positioning?
- Does the user experience of the brand's website meet the standards and demands of a savvy modern audience, and support easy wayfinding and intuitive taxonomies?
- How easy is it to find the brand through the most common online search terms for the category?
- How does the brand's website perform for mobile users, given the outsized importance of mobile's role with this audience?
- How available is the brand at the most important online retailers for each category?
- How does the brand's website perform against basic usability measures like speed and load/paint times?

CAMPAIGNS & CONTENT

Our fourth area of exploration involved looking at the content and social media posts developed by the brand across owned and paid channels to assess the 'premiumness' of the branded comms. This, too, counted for 20% of the overall score, and weighed the following criteria:

- To what extent does the content created by the brand support a premium positioning?
- What is the level of engagement that the audience has with the content and social channels put forward by the brand?
- What is the scale of the audiences that the brand has established for itself in these channels?

Our Findings

Premium categories are full of sub-premium identity systems, misaligned positioning, and conflation of product excellence with brand strength.

On a brand-by-brand basis, the study highlights anomalies and hiccups from otherwise high-scoring brands — Gaggenau's social channels or OXO's packaging, for example. More importantly, it highlights two key areas in which a considerable number of brands achieved low scores from both our expert team and our consumer panel, namely: a lack of cohesion across channels, and a lack of alignment between a brand's visual systems and its premium positioning.

PREMIUM CATEGORIES, SUB-PAR BRANDING

More than perhaps any other data points, our study highlighted a large number of brands who are competing in premium categories, but whose collateral, brand identity, website, retail experiences, and social media failed to communicate 'premium' to either our expert team or consumer panel. This was true across product categories, and true of both those brands that performed well on other criteria and those that performed poorly in other areas.

Categories and Average Scoring:

Large Appliances	**73.7**
Fans & Lighting	**73.6**
Windows & Doors	**72.5**
Faucets & Bath	**72.3**
Drinkware & Glasses	**71.6**
Flatware	**69.7**
Kitchen Knives	**68.4**
Cookware	**68.3**
Vacuums	**67.4**
Door Hardware	**66.9**
Small Kitchen Appliances	**66.3**
Smart Home Devices	**65.6**
Coffee	**65.0**
Grills	**64.9**
Wine Storage	**61.9**
Shelf Systems	**61.4**

DISSONANT POSITIONING

Also apparent across categories was a gap between the ways in which brands articulate and position themselves, and the ways in which that positioning is brought to life in the brands' physical and digital experiences. Our consumer panel, in particular, identified a significant number of brands whose positioning was misaligned with — or not evident in — the brand's collateral. As one member of our panel responded to a coffee brand — and an indication of the brand savvy of this premium audience — "From the packaging to the instagram photos, it seems that what the brand stands for changes between each medium".

RELIANCE ON PRODUCT REPUTATION

Through both our Expert and Consumer Panel audits of these brands, we found no discernible correlation between the score a brand received and the proxies by which we might measure product 'quality'. Neither the average review score nor the inclusion in top product review lists for a brand is correlated to overall score — the latter has a slight negative correlation, in fact. This is especially important in light of the almost certain cognitive bias in favor of brands with a strong quality reputation among both our Expert and Consumer Panels. For example, Technivorm's Moccamaster is one of the best-reviewed coffee makers by both expert and consumer reviewers, has high engagement with its (limited) social followers, and a website that performs well technically. As a brand, however, it received some of the lowest marks of any brand across categories in its ability to communicate a strong premium offering or convey a consistent brand image — both traits that will be essential to growing a small brand, with a great product, in a crowded category.

Key Takeaways

What high performing brands are doing well.

A handful of consistent themes were present across categories, uniting top-performing but otherwise disparate brands like Nespresso, Weber, Vitamix, and Masonite. Rather than across-the-board executional excellence, they instead focus on reaching this premium customer through five areas of focus:

01. Their brand voice and image are executed distinctively.

The top performing brands pull this across every consumer touchpoint. The top scoring brand regardless of category, Bertazzoni is a manufacturer of large appliances that conveys a consistent tone of voice and brand image across channels — whether communicating the function of their product range, the ways its' products fit into customers' lives, or the brand's century of Italian heritage and precision engineering. Similarly, Breville's coffee line employs a clear brand voice that's well-aligned with its positioning, and remains fairly consistent across platforms — albeit a voice that lacks Bertazzoni's distinctive point of view.

02. They build stories around the key pillars of the premium mindset

This can be a specific heritage of craft, a higher level of engineering, or purpose-driven design that leads to a higher level of product. Alessi, for example, leans heavily on its history and prominent product collaborations — much in the vein of a fashion brand — to carve out a distinct territory in crowded categories. This unique positioning was noted by both our Expert and Consumer panels. Door hardware brand Baldwin deftly connects heritage, construction, and performance of a seemingly-simple product, all while demonstrating how the design, materials, and function enhance the homes of discerning customers.

03. They maintain a consistent voice, while adjusting strategy for each channel.

In doing so, they apply what they understand about their relationships with different audiences to maximize the impact of their work with relevant targets. The digital and physical experiences delivered by leading faucet brand Delta strike a balance of form and function, while its instagram channel does an exceptional job of capitalizing on compelling content built around their customers' aspirational design sensibilities. Other brands had similar potential — cutlery manufacturer Messermeister delivers a strong brand experience on its website, but a social media strategy that could be significantly improved with a chef-inspired focus.

04. They create desire through experiences that speak to their customers' evolving relationships with their homes.

Through these, they increase their premium-ness, while continuing to be relevant and accessible. Nespresso and Emile Henry are strong examples of brands that use an attention to detail in brand image and identity to create desire for their products — all the while remaining approachable and accessible to a broad audience. Both maintain a delicate balance of product performance, wit, and ease of use in their experiences.

05. They balance access, function and experience.

These brands are shoppable across channels, provide enough substance to inspire, and maintain a critical level of accessibility. Vitamix — a revered, if not elegantly-designed, product line — delivers experiences that evoke quality and help guide the consumer's purchase. The brands' "Blender Recommender" is an inspired bit of utility, designed to make shopping easier. Lighting company Artemide, by contrast, delivers a beautiful product design experience through its website, but suffers from a confusing user experience that could be improved through intuitive navigation, organization, and enhanced depth of content.

See how you stack up.

The experience we've built at thewayhome.madebymode.com is designed for those who want to get a better sense of the ways in which premium brands shine through in this category. There, you can browse the scoring for all 138 audited brands to understand where each line succeeds and where each has room to improve — both independently and relative to the broader category.

If you're looking for an even deeper dive into, for example, the qualitative feedback from our consumer panel or documentation from our expert panel, please reach out to Tyler Hawes at tyler@madebymode.com for a detailed walkthrough of our notes.

For More Information:
Mode / Integrated Brand Experience Agency
Tyler Hawes
(704) 444-8034
tyler@madebymode.com
madebymode.com

Explore categories, see brand scoring, and review our methodology at:
thewayhome.madebymode.com