



Brand Strategy for Liberty London





Background

Liberty Department Store, located on Regent Street in London, is a landmark in Central London. With its distinctive Tudor-revival structure, it stands out from other buildings in the area as a quintessential British institution.

Founded by Arthur Lasenby Liberty in 1875, Liberty began operations by selling ornaments, fabric and objet d'art from far-away lands, including Japan and the East. In 1884, he introduced the costume department and soon, it became the place for the discerning and the fashionable customer to shop.

144 years later, it is one of the leading, upscale retail stores in London's West End, offering a range of merchandise from their signature designer fabrics to apparel, home furnishings and homeware, accessories, personal grooming products and gifts.

In 2010, Liberty had to be sold to a private equity company, BlueGem Capital, who have sold it to yet another private investment company called Glendower Capital early this year. Like most retailers, Liberty too is said to be facing challenges from online retail giants and competitors as well as Britain's faltering recovery from the 2008 financial crisis. The looming prospect of Brexit doesn't make life any easier for the iconic department store.



*Liberty Store on Regent Street, London; Image by Luis Villa del Campo
CC by SA 2.0 on Wikimedia Commons*



Liberty's brand heritage

While Liberty faces stiff competition from several high-end British retailers, it has certain strengths that it can draw on, in order to grow its business steadily.

- Iconic heritage as a retailer selling fabrics and objets d'art from overseas
- Uniquely British character, down to the Tudor-revival building
- Range of merchandise, especially its signature designer fabrics and textiles that have been used by fashion and costume designers, including Yves Saint Laurent
- Distinctive and only location in the heart of London
- Team of designers who are able to identify and work with the finest in the field, from anywhere in the world.



Liberty Store atrium; Image by Gryffindor CC by SA 3.0 on Wikimedia Commons



Competition

Liberty would count as its competitors many equally well-known and iconic British retail giants such as Selfridges, Harrods and Harvey Nichols. Because its clientele would include not just Britons, but well-heeled tourists and travelers to the UK, all three retailers would be important competition to consider.

While many areas of merchandise would overlap between all these retailers, there could be certain areas of difference, where Liberty could distinguish itself. Its signature fabrics, for one, could form the core which all other merchandise draw upon. It could also differentiate itself in the kinds of in-shop experiences it offers customers, since a considerable part of retail has gone online. And it could differentiate itself in the way that it builds relationships with customers through a customer loyalty programme.

As someone who has shopped at Liberty, Harrods and Selfridges many years ago on a visit to the UK, and after visiting the websites and viewing the recent advertising of some of these brands, here is what I think the competing brands stand for:

Harrods:

The gold standard in high-end British retailing; meant for the wealthy connoisseur

Selfridges:

The trendy and fashionable store for those who look to the future; meant for the young and digital generation; quite different from the image they had years ago and I am not sure the trendiness is reflected in the store's ambience and interiors

Harvey Nichols:

The store for the chic and sophisticated; focus on beauty and fashion.





The Liberty customer

While Liberty would welcome all high-spending customers, they could target a certain kind of individual, through their communication. This is where communication plays such an important role in creating a certain desired image for the Liberty customer.

Since Britain is already a large multicultural society and London its biggest metropolitan area is a magnet for educated, talented, wealthy, and cultured society from all over the world, Liberty would do well to attract this type of consumer. Someone who appreciates the fine things of life, and has travelled and read widely. An individual of impeccable taste, who appreciates and enjoys other cultures and can move easily between different international milieus.



An indicative snapshot of the eclectic and well-travelled Liberty customer; Images from Pixabay



Liberty's Brand Architecture

If Liberty has an iconic British designer store image, it is also true that it needs to accentuate certain dimensions of the brand and perhaps dispense with some others. Here, we look at what the dimensions of the Liberty brand are:

- The outward symbols, most famous of which are the Liberty Tudor-revival building, the deep purple colour of its shopping bags with the brand name in gold lettering. The brand name Liberty itself lettered in an unusual Celtic-style font, suggesting “British” and “designer” upfront. You could say that Liberty’s designer fabrics are so well-known that designer floral prints have also become a symbol of the brand
- The image of the brand as quintessentially British, bolstered by the well-travelled, well-read, urbane dimensions. Liberty as a brand is the elegant and eclectic person who has been influenced by many cultures and who you can have an intelligent conversation with, over a glass of wine.



The fabric section at Liberty; Image by James Petts, London, CC by SA 2.0 on Wikimedia Commons



The aspects of the Liberty brand that must be retained at all costs and strengthened are the core values, of course, and the urbaneness and elegance of being well-cultured. It must reflect the new multi-polar world order and the enriching influences of different cultures.

Of the outward symbols, Liberty might have to reconsider its coat of arms, if it still has one. It ought to be replaced with an image or icon that suggests “Liberty multiculturalism” and international in a contemporary manner. The Celtic-style logo is distinctive and helps set the brand apart, so it should be retained. The use of purple and gold should be limited to just the shopping bags (hopefully they are made of recycled paper now!), the website header and as subtle design elements in communication if and where necessary.





What should define the Liberty brand, going forward?

Liberty should project easy British elegance and multicultural values in everything the brand says and does. There are three ways in which the company can build on its strengths and grow the brand:

Liberty brings world design home

Its range already has hints of exclusivity through products that are “niche” and “artisanal”. Liberty should cast its nets wider across the world and source rare and exclusive merchandise from designers that emphasise this very focus. From designers in Japan, Thailand and India, to those in African and Latin American countries as well, Liberty could bring customers new and enriching ideas in fashion and homeware. This would also help to keep the brand fresh in people’s minds and in their lives.

Liberty takes its signature designs beyond

Customers would not be buying fabrics most of the time, especially the tourists. Which is why it makes sense to let the beauty of Liberty’s floral and graphic prints bloom, let them truly breathe. If Liberty could offer Britons and tourists the chance to own a beautiful dress or scarf, say, that uses one of their signature prints, they would surely welcome the idea. In that sense, Liberty has the opportunity to take its signature prints beyond fabric and furnishings to apparel and accessories. These signature fabrics and prints could also then find their way to the gifts section, through a range of innovatively designed gift ideas.

It would help showcase Liberty’s signature prints – a key brand differentiator – in new and myriad ways. And, they must highlight this in their communication, both in-store and online.



Infographic depicting Liberty's product range and relevance to consumer segments

Liberty brings you exotic designer experiences

Along with sourcing more exotic and niche merchandise from overseas, Liberty could organize exclusive designer experiences for its customers in-store from time to time. A Brazilian designer-themed evening, or a Nigerian print-focused event would help to showcase new designer talent to Liberty's customers and strengthen Liberty's brand image of multicultural eclecticism.





What should the Liberty brand stand for?

By focusing on British multiculturalism and eclectic tastes, in its retail experience as well as in its brand communication, Liberty should come to be seen as an emporium of all that is tasteful, eclectic and international. I see Liberty as an emporium of world exotica.

In short, Liberty = Exotiquarium

Tone and style

British, goes without saying. But I would add eclectic, tasteful, surprising and contemporary. Like I said, someone intelligent you'd like to have a drink with.



Liberty at night during Christmas shopping season 2012; Image by James Petts, London, CC by SA 2.0 on Wikimedia Commons



Some immediate tasks to consider

- **Brand identity redesign**

With a new visual element added to the Celtic-style logo, to emphasise the multicultural and international aspects in a British way

- **New website design**

With a cleaner design that has more breathing room and which invites visitors to read and browse. The brand's heritage, buried in the footer under "Shopping at Liberty" ought to feature at the top of the home page as a separate tab. Also, a more elegant and contemporary font style to be used in brand communication

- **Store rearrangements**

The iconic store is already a perfect setting for the exotiquarium idea, with its many rooms all leading off from balconies that look over a central atrium. The balconies should be cleared of any merchandise and planters and left free for shoppers to walk through. Merchandise displays in the various rooms should make shoppers feel as if they are walking through an art gallery, or emporium – free of clutter and with good lighting.

- **Relaunch communication**

Liberty should relaunch with a new campaign, to announce its new brand image and to welcome shoppers to the store. A few ideas follow in a companion document.



The atrium and the balconies overlooking it; Image by Gryffindor CC by SA 3.0 on Wikimedia Commons



*Detail of William Morris' design for "Cabbage and Vine"
tapestry circa 1879 courtesy Wikimedia Commons*

"Nothing should be made by man's labour which is not worth making; or which must be made by labour degrading to the makers... The aim of art is to destroy the curse of labour by making work the pleasurable satisfaction of our impulse towards energy, and giving to that energy hope of producing something worth the exercise."

- William Morris, textile designer, poet, writer and champion of Britain's Arts and Crafts Movement who helped revive British traditional textile arts in the 19th century

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