

Lab

OBSERVATIONS

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CULTURAL RELEVANCE



WHO CREATES CULTURAL RELEVANCE?



Every established brand wants to be relevant. Especially when it has been around for a while.

It has history. Recognition, loyal customers, iconic products and an archive full of stories younger brands would kill for. We tend to call that heritage.

And in brand strategy, heritage is often treated almost automatically as an advantage. But I'm increasingly questioning that assumption. Because heritage belongs to the company.

Cultural relevance doesn't.

A company can own its history and its archive. It can preserve them and celebrate them. What it cannot do, is to decide whether a new generation will care at all.

I started to wonder: Why does a sandal associated with comfort and rather unfashionable people suddenly become one of the most desirable objects in fashion? Why does a subculture around old sports cars become so powerful that the manufacturer eventually starts adopting its codes? Can we deliberately take an established German luggage manufacturer and push it into contemporary culture?

And what happens when a 50-year-old sofa suddenly becomes more culturally relevant than the brand that makes it?

In this issue we will learn that there is no single playbook behind these stories. In one case, relevance seems to happen almost accidentally. In another, it emerges outside the company and is eventually embraced by it. Sometimes it is deliberately orchestrated. And sometimes one iconic product develops a cultural life almost of its own.

Which raised a bigger question: Can brands actually create cultural relevance? Or can they only recognise, enable and amplify it?

I wanted to look at four very different cases:

Birkenstock.

Porsche.

Rimowa.

Ligne Roset's Togo.

and ON Clouds

I wanted to understand where their renewed relevance actually came from, what the companies did when it appeared - and what we might learn from it. Because perhaps the biggest risk for a heritage brand isn't losing its history.

It's believing that history alone gives people a reason to care.

ACCIDENTAL RELEVANCE



Birkenstock did not become culturally relevant because someone in marketing had a brilliant idea. Quite the opposite.



For most of its history, Birkenstock stood for function, foot health and a certain refusal to participate in fashion at all.

Then culture moved towards the brand.

First it was hippies, environmentalists, later women rejecting the idea that looking good had to hurt. Designers, architects and creatives followed.

And eventually, fashion arrived. When **Phoebe Philo** sent fur-covered sandals down the runway for **Céline** in 2012, the fashion world suddenly looked at Birkenstock differently. The product had barely changed, but its cultural meaning started shifting.

Birkenstock did not create this moment. But they recognised it. The brand began collaborating with **J.Crew**, **Valentino**, **Dior** and **Manolo Blahnik**. They created 1774 as a space for more elevated expressions of the product. They entered fashion without trying to become a fashion brand. That distinction matters.

**BIRKENSTOCK DID NOT REDESIGN
ITSELF TO FIT THE ZEITGEIST.
IT ALLOWED THE ZEITGEIST TO
REINTERPRET BIRKENSTOCK.**

The same sandal could now be worn by a nurse, a fashion editor or someone walking through an airport in all over in "The Row". None of them weakened the others. That is rare.

Many brands panic when they unexpectedly become culturally relevant. They overreact. They chase the new audience and slowly erase the reason that audience came in the first place.

Birkenstock did something smarter. It used the attention without surrendering the product. Cultural relevance cannot always be planned. Sometimes it happens outside the company - in a subculture, on a runway or through a shift in how people want to live.

The strategic question is whether the brand recognises the moment. And whether it can use it without destroying what made it relevant.



How **Porsche**
discovered and

ADOPTED RELEVANCE

Of course, Porsche has always been relevant. But not necessarily in the way it is today.

For a long time, Porsche stood for engineering, performance and a very particular kind of German success. The 911 was an icon, but the brand surrounding it could also feel rather predictable: affluent men, immaculate cars, golf clubs and polished dealerships.

Then something happened outside Porsche.

Old 911s started appearing in a different cultural context. They were modified instead of preserved. Driven instead of collected. Photographed in industrial spaces rather than in front of luxury hotels.

People like Magnus Walker turned imperfect, highly personal Porsches into symbols of creative independence. Singer reimagined the classic 911 with a level of design and craftsmanship that changed how the entire industry looked at restomods. Luftgekühlt transformed a gathering of air-cooled enthusiasts into one of the most visually influential automotive events in the world.

None of this was created by Porsche.

That is precisely what makes the case so interesting: The brand was being rewritten from the outside



A new generation had discovered Porsche – but on its own terms.

It wasn't primarily interested in the latest model, the fastest lap time or the official specification. It was interested in character. In patina. In old racing liveries, strange colours and analogue interiors. In cars that told stories about their owners.

Porsche suddenly existed in the same visual universe as independent fashion labels, architecture magazines, coffee-table books and contemporary art.

The product had not changed.

Its cultural meaning had.

This can be uncomfortable for a company. Especially for one whose identity has traditionally been protected by engineers, historians and strict ideas of authenticity. The easiest reaction would have been to keep the new culture at a distance. To classify modified cars as incorrect. To treat events like Luftgekühlt as fan activity. To dismiss restomods as an unofficial use of the brand's intellectual property.

Porsche did something smarter.

It paid attention.



Photo: Aime Leon Dore / New York

FROM TOLERANCE TO PARTICIPATION

Porsche gradually began to move closer to the culture that had formed around it.

Luftgekühlt became part of Porsche's own storytelling. A once-small independent gathering founded by Patrick Long and Howie Idelson is now covered through the official Porsche channels as a masterclass in automotive storytelling. Its 2025 edition brought together around 400 cars and 9,200 visitors. It still feels community-led, but it is no longer culturally separate from the brand.

The partnership with Aimé Leon Dore went further. Instead of simply putting two logos on a capsule collection, the fashion brand was allowed to reinterpret historic Porsche models through its own New York lens. By 2024, the partnership had produced its fifth restored classic Porsche – accompanied by fashion, objects and an entirely different visual world.

And Porsche itself started building products that reflected the new reading of its heritage.

The 911 Dakar did not emerge from a conventional luxury-car logic. Neither did the 911 S/T, the return of historic colours, Pepita interiors or the renewed Sonderwunsch programme. These are products for customers who do not simply want the newest Porsche. They want a Porsche that feels personal, storied and culturally specific.

The company moved from protecting its history to making that history playable.



Today, Porsche operates in two parallel worlds.

One is still the high-performance automotive company: new technology, faster cars, electrification and measurable progress.

The other is a cultural brand built around heritage, individuality and community.

This second Porsche exists at Luftgekühlt, Rennsport Reunion and the F.A.T. Ice Race. It lives in collaborations, restored cars and heavily curated Instagram feeds. It sells jackets and luggage, but more importantly, it sells participation in a culture.

At Rennsport Reunion 7, more than 91,000 people gathered around over 300 racing cars. That is not merely a heritage programme. It is a brand festival at a scale few automotive companies could create.

And crucially, this world does not feel like a nostalgic museum.

It feels current.

Porsche understood that heritage becomes culturally powerful when people are allowed to reinterpret it. The brand did not invent the entire movement, but it gave the movement space – and eventually built products, experiences and commercial programmes around it.

ADOPTED DOES NOT MEAN INTERNALIZED

But Porsche has not fully absorbed this new cultural relevance.

The brand is at its best when it allows external people to lead. Events like Luftgekühlt work because their creators understand the culture from within. Porsche gives them access, credibility and reach – without immediately turning everything into a corporate brand activation.

As soon as the happening leaves the international stage, however, the beach flags arrive. Cocktail tables are dressed in fitted covers. Someone from marketing makes sure the logo is visible from every angle.

What felt culturally relevant a moment ago starts to look like a dealership event.

Speaking of dealerships: Have you ever walked into a Porsche dealership? Did it feel like walking into Aimé Leon Dore in New York? Did someone like Magnus Walker show you around?

Certainly not. And perhaps that would be going too far. But the brutal reality is that the buying experience is still firmly rooted in the old world – including many of the stereotypes Porsche's new cultural relevance appears to have overcome.

This is the real challenge of adopted relevance: recognising a new cultural meaning is much easier than allowing it to transform the organisation behind the brand.

Porsche has adopted a new relevance. But most customers still meet the old Porsche.



ORCHESTRATED RELEVANCE

How **Rimowa**
designed relevance



A GREAT PRODUCT, STUCK IN THE WRONG CATEGORY

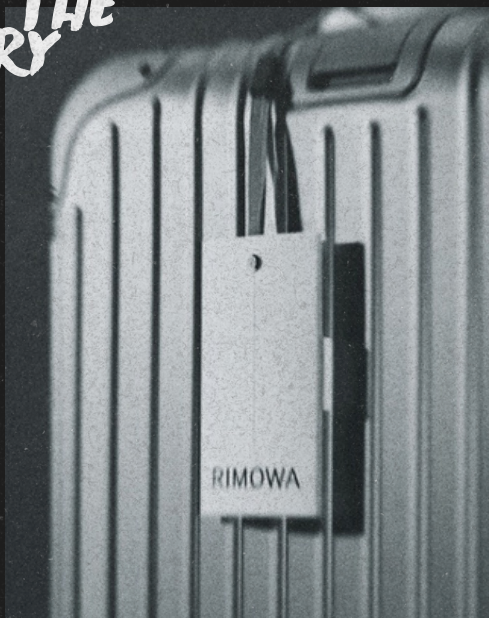
Rimowa did not accidentally become relevant. It was not rediscovered by a subculture, like Birkenstock. It did not have its meaning rewritten from the outside, like Porsche.

Rimowa's relevance was orchestrated. And perhaps that makes it the most interesting case of all. Because orchestrating relevance is what almost every established brand wants to do and what very few manage without looking desperate.

Before the transformation, Rimowa was not a weak brand. It had everything strategists usually dream of: more than a century of history, German engineering, a distinctive product and a design code visible from across an airport terminal. The grooved aluminium shell was already iconic. The cases were trusted by pilots, photographers and frequent travellers. They were expensive, functional and unmistakable.

Rimowa had substance. What it did not yet have was cultural relevance.

For most people, it was still a premium luggage manufacturer. Something bought for its durability rather than its desirability. You could appreciate a Rimowa without wanting to become part of its world.



The product was distinctive.
The brand around it was not.

This changed when **LVMH** acquired an 80 percent stake in the company for €640 million in 2016 and installed the then 24-year-old **Alexandre Arnault** as co-CEO. Rimowa became the group's first German Maison. At the time, annual revenue was expected to exceed €400 million.

This was not the rescue of a struggling company. It was the acquisition of a highly successful product brand with enormous unused cultural potential.

FROM LUGGAGE TO CULTURAL OBJECT

The strategic shift was simple, at least in theory: Rimowa had to stop behaving like a luggage company and start behaving like a luxury brand.

That did not mean disguising the product. Quite the opposite. The transformation built almost entirely on what was already there.

The aluminium. The grooves. The dents. The German engineering. The connection to aviation. Even the industrial coldness of the product became desirable once it was placed in a different context.

A new visual identity reduced the brand to its most useful codes. Stores placed Rimowa next to the world's leading luxury houses.

Wholesale distribution was cut back while direct retail was expanded. The product was no longer simply presented wherever luggage was sold. It was given control over its own environment.

That distinction matters.

Products are compared by specification. Luxury objects are understood through context. Rimowa changed the context.



PRODUCTS
ARE COMPARED
BY SPECIFICATION.

LUXURY OBJECTS
ARE UNDERSTOOD
THROUGH
CONTEXT.

THEN CAME THE COLLABORATIONS



Fendi, Supreme, Off-White, Dior, Porsche, ALD or celebs like Rhianna. On paper, this sounds like the most predictable playbook of modern brand building: take an established product, add someone else's logo and manufacture scarcity.

But Rimowa used collaborations more intelligently than that. Each partner transferred a different form of relevance onto the same object. Fendi placed it inside fashion. Supreme gave it streetwear credibility. Virgil Abloh turned it into a conceptual design object.

The suitcase remained recognisably Rimowa. But every collaboration gave a new audience permission to see it differently.

This is the difference between borrowing attention and transferring meaning. The transparent Off-White suitcase was not simply a standard product with Off-White branding. It questioned the privacy of luggage itself. Supreme's red aluminium case turned a piece of travel equipment into a collectable. These products were made for social media, but they also worked as objects.

They created conversation without abandoning the core design. And they did something even more important: they transformed the standard silver suitcase.

Once Rimowa had appeared next to Supreme, Dior and Virgil Abloh, even the unbranded aluminium Original carried some of that cultural energy. Most customers never bought a collaboration. They did not have to. The halo had already reached the core collection. Rimowa itself described the result quite openly: people started collecting the cases as more than objects of utility.



THE PRODUCT, WAS NEVER THE PROBLEM

This is where the Rimowa case differs from many attempted brand transformations.

The new relevance was manufactured.

The credibility was not.

Rimowa already had it all, the orchestration simply taught a new audience how to see them.

Even the scratches became part of the luxury proposition. For most premium products, visible wear reduces value. On a Rimowa, it can increase character. The pristine object slowly becomes personal. Travel leaves evidence. This gives the product something most contemporary luxury objects lack: a life after the unboxing.

The lifetime guarantee introduced in 2022 strengthened exactly this idea. Rimowa was no longer selling a case for the next trip, but a companion for decades of them.

It connected the new luxury positioning back to the old engineering credibility. That connection is crucial. Without it, the collaborations might have created hype. With it, they created relevance.

Orchestrated relevance is often misunderstood as a communications exercise. It is not.

Rimowa did not become more relevant because it ran younger campaigns.

The company changed how and where the brand was experienced.

Distribution moved away from the luggage department and into controlled retail environments. The new identity made the old product codes feel contemporary without replacing them. Only then did communication make the transformation visible.

This is why the result felt more convincing than the usual heritage-brand refresh. The new relevance was not applied to the surface. It was built into the system.

The orchestration was precise enough to make the transformation appear almost inevitable.

Looking back, of course the aluminium case belongs next to Dior. Of course Virgil Abloh wanted to work with it. Of course it is a design icon. But none of this was obvious before someone decided to make it obvious.

LVMH did not invent Rimowa's relevance. It recognised that everything required to build it was already there and then placed the brand exactly where culture could see it.

PRODUCT-LED RELEVANCE

The Togo Sofa was never designed for Instagram. It was designed in 1973. Radically designed though. Just folds of foam, fabric and an almost absurdly relaxed silhouette.

For decades, it was simply one of Ligne Roset's most recognisable products. Then something happened:

Vintage Togos started appearing in the homes of a new generation of creatives, collectors and designers. Then they flooded social media and eventually appeared in editorial interiors. Original pieces in faded leather and slightly strange '70s colours suddenly felt more desirable than many newly designed sofas.

A fifty-year-old product had become very contemporary. But what about the brand behind it?

Ask a design-conscious 20-something about Ligne Roset and there is a reasonable chance you will be met with a "no idea" expression. Show the same person a picture of a Togo and the situation will likely change. And perhaps release some of the pressure.

That reverses the usual logic of branding.

Normally, a strong brand lends relevance to its products. Here, one product lends relevance to the brand.

Togo became a cultural entry point into Ligne Roset for an audience that might otherwise never have engaged with the company.

And Ligne Roset did not have to redesign it, simplify it or create a younger version. The product was already there.



THE SECONDARY MARKET HELPED

For many brands, the vintage market is treated almost as competition.

For LR and Togo, it became part of the mythology.

Old Togos showed that the product could age. They introduced colours and materials no longer present in current collections. They appeared in interiors that had nothing to do with Ligne Roset's own visual universe.

And importantly, they travelled through culture without the brand having to place them there.

A battered vintage Togo in the apartment of someone interesting can sometimes do more for desirability than the perfectly photographed new one in a showroom. The product had escaped the brand's control. In this case, that was probably a gift.



There is an important distinction here. Togo is not simply an old bestseller. Many companies have old bestsellers. Very few of them become culturally relevant objects again.

Togo has developed an identity strong enough to exist independently from Ligne Roset. People will recognise a Togo without seeing a logo.

But will this also elevate the sales of the remaining collection?

COMPETING RELEVANCE



ON did almost everything right. It built a genuinely differentiated product. It created a recognizable visual language. It turned a technical running shoe from Switzerland into one of the fastest-growing footwear brands in the world.

And then something interesting happened: Running itself became cultural currency. Run clubs replaced parts of nightlife. Performance gear entered everyday wardrobes. Technical shoes became fashion objects. ON was perfectly positioned for it.

There was only one complication. The people who had loved ON long before the fashion crowd arrived never left. They were not necessarily runners. They were people who had discovered that ON shoes were light, comfortable and easy to walk in. People for whom cushioning mattered more than colorways. And quite a few of them are considerably older than the new audience ON is trying to attract. That creates a fascinating brand problem.

Because relevance is rarely universal. A product can be highly relevant to two groups for completely different reasons. But those meanings do not necessarily coexist peacefully. For one customer, ON might represent running culture, technical aesthetics and contemporary taste. For another, it is simply an exceptionally comfortable shoe.

Neither interpretation is wrong. But one can undermine the other.

Fashion works through social signalling. What we wear says something about the group we belong to – or would like to belong to. Which leaves ON with an unusual challenge:

How to stay relevant to a younger, culturally driven audience while the exact same product remains highly relevant to their parents and grandparents.



CULTURAL RELEVANCE CAN'T BE OWNED BY A BRAND

These five stories do not lead to a formula. They lead to a tension. Brands can influence how they are seen. They can enter new contexts, collaborate with the right people and create objects that become culturally significant.

But they cannot fully control what those objects come to mean. A brand may be discovered by culture, adopt a movement that began outside the company or orchestrate its own relevance with remarkable precision.

Sometimes a single product becomes more relevant than the brand behind it. And sometimes several meanings begin to compete. What all these cases have in common is the transfer of meaning between the brand and the people around it. This is where cultural relevance happens.

The mistake is to confuse it with attention. Attention can be bought. Visibility can be measured. Relevance is granted by others.

Once that happens, the role of the brand is not necessarily to take control. It is to understand where the relevance came from, what keeps it alive and how far it can be pushed before it becomes something else.

Not every brand needs to become culturally relevant though. But every brand should understand what makes it meaningful and to whom. Perhaps the most important question is therefore not:

How do we become more relevant?

But:

Who gives our brand relevance today and what happens if they stop?





This publishing and its observations
are brought to you by Markus Schiffer,
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I work with owners and leadership teams
when brand, business and culture are no
longer moving in the same direction. If
this editorial raised questions about your
own brand, let's talk.

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