SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

The psychology of luxury travel: The key to attracting affluent customers

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In his role as founder of digital marketing agency Jadewolf, David Nickel, helps luxury travel brands generate qualified leads and direct bookings. His secret: A scalable luxury persona.

When a legacy brand with half a century of history looks to improve its digital marketing, it may be tempting to think success is as simple as running a few online ads. For safari specialists, Ker & Downey Africa, it was not as their unique capability to create and host bespoke, luxury safaris was unclear from their marketing.

Set packages for a specific amount of people over a set number of days was the company's original offering to prospective customers. This was coupled with incongruent language like "best price guaranteed" and "price match".

The average consumer seeks out the best deal possible. The premium consumer is willing to pay a little bit more for extra value — but there is a limit where higher prices result in diminishing returns. Luxury is about a personalised one-of-a-kind experience where monetary value is priceless.

So when price and value are no object, what do marketers have left to "sell"? It's all about inspiration.

Like with any demographic, luxury shoppers require a dedicated approach to drive the consumer from consideration to purchase.

Luxury purchases are rooted in emotion. For some, it's about having time to spend with their loved ones. For others, it's about pursuing a lifelong passion. Two travel companies may have the same offering, but the one that can make the luxury consumer feel something beyond the offer is likely to win the sale.

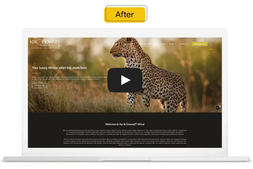
The way to go about this is to apply the luxury consumer persona to everything they do. Like with any demographic, luxury shoppers require a dedicated approach to drive the consumer from consideration to purchase. A good place to start is to get a solid understanding of the customer from key decision-makers within the brand. Work with sales, marketing, and management teams to develop the brand's unique luxury persona. This persona includes a number of things:

- Demographics: age, place of residence, gender, family status, net worth, source of income
- Media consumption preferences: typically used devices, apps, social media networks, sources of news and inspiration
- Psychographics: emotional motivators and blockers
- Nuances: cultural and traditional identifiers

The data for these personas is created with a combination of client first-party data, our own agency's data, and market research. Once you have a persona set up for a particular market, it's time to scale.

For Ker & Downey Africa, the first market of interest was the U.S. The first step towards reaching luxury consumers in this market was eliminating all of the budget tier packages the company previously had on offer. If there are no budget tier options to choose from, it signals to luxury consumers that this may be the best place for them to find that one-of-a-kind experience.

Next, we sharpened the campaign's geographic reach from simply the U.S. in general to the affluent area codes in states like California, Texas, New York, and Florida, for example. Now that we had a good sense of who we wanted to reach and ensured that we had the right offering for them, it was time to move on to communicating to them in a language they understand.



A 22-second video showing Ker & Downey Africa's website before and after it applied the luxury consumer persona to its ads.

We turned our attention to Ker & Downey Africa's existing Search campaigns. Based on our persona, we identified keywords that were most congruent with the luxury offering and enhanced those. For example, we changed their ad copy to include mentions of things like "bespoke, tailor-made experiences", "50 years of boots on the ground experience in Africa", and "passionate luxury safari experts" to communicate the right values.

Incongruent terms like "price guarantee", "best priced luxury safari", "cheapest luxury safari", and the like were added as negative keywords to the campaign to ensure that we were reaching our luxury persona alone.

Additional optimisations included adding affinity audiences like luxury specific customers, adding income parameters (available in the U.S.), and excluding bargain shoppers.

The optimisations worked. Sales increased from an average of 30 low to medium quality leads — a mix of bargain, premium, and some luxury shoppers — before the campaign to over 100 highly qualified luxury travel leads a month.

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As described in the intro, the success of this campaign comes down to the synergy between client and agency teams. Ker & Downey Africa CEO, Jeff Squire explains: "The collaboration between our sales team and Jadewolf clearly demonstrates that it is possible to build a boutique African safari business online – something that we doubted could be achieved before the engagement."

"The key elements of success from our perspective are the focus and alignment that David and team brought to the entire marketing and sales function, and the transparent and close working relationship developed with our in-house management team," Squire continues.

With strong collaboration and a clear luxury consumer persona in place, the scalability is endless. Even when you look to reach customers in regions where income targeting isn't possible, the same persona-based messaging works with tweaks to reflect nuances like culture and background.

Looking to the future, Ker & Downey Africa has its sights set on scaling the luxury personas to markets in Europe. A large part of the company's 50-year history is rooted in safari travels for the British Royal Family. Tapping into this legacy will be key to localising our luxury persona for some markets in Europe.

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David Nickel

Jadewolf co-founder