

WILD COLLABS & CULTURE-LED MARKETING



AUDEMARS PIGUET X SWATCH "ROYAL POP"

Last week people were sleeping outside Swatch stores to bag their place in the queue, and over the weekend multiple stores across the UK, US and Europe had to close amid a consumer frenzy for their latest design - a £335 pocket watch made in partnership with Audemars Piguet - one of the most untouchable names in Swiss watchmaking.

As the Audemars Piguet x Swatch "Royal Pop" collab launched last week, the watch world lost its mind. Not because the product is revolutionary - it's a colourful bioceramic pocket watch, inspired by Pop Art, priced at a fraction of what an AP normally costs - but because of the unpredictable nature of his collab.

It's in these seemingly unpredictable brand mash ups – and the gap between what a brand historically wouldn't have done and what they've actually done now - where some really interesting brand strategy is happening.



THE UNEXPECTED COLLAB IS HAVING AN (ONGOING) MOMENT

Unexpected collabs have been a thing for a while now. But across the past few weeks there have been a few notable ones...



Mars partnered with NYX cosmetics - a confectionery giant reaching sideways into Beauty to find cultural relevance that advertising alone wouldn't be able to buy.



Salomon teamed up with Carpet Company, a LA skate collective, to make a trainer described as "the madness of our brain."



Luxury fashion brands descended on the **Venice Biennale** not to sell clothes, but to colonise art world prestige.

On the surface, these don't make obvious category sense. But all of them generated massive conversation that went above and beyond what paid media could deliver. **This culture-led approach to marketing is a structural shift in how brands are now building meaning.**

WHAT'S DRIVING IT?

Three things are converging.

1

Youth audiences are harder to reach through traditional channels. Brands in traditionally older-skewing categories such as Swiss watchmaking, confectionery, and spirits need to double down on generational relevance. Collaborations with subcultures or lateral brands are a short cut to tapping into younger audiences. AP's CEO said the Royal Pop "invites younger generations to experience mechanical watchmaking differently." It becomes a category survival strategy.

2

Scarcity has replaced price as the luxury signal. The MoonSwatch playbook (Omega x Swatch in 2022) showed that making something accessible doesn't necessarily dilute prestige, it can amplify it. It's the queue that becomes the luxury signifier - one per person, in-store only, no online release - Royal Pop sold out in hours not because it was super expensive or high end – it was because you can't easily get one.

3

The surprise is the product. The release goes beyond a new watch, it's a cultural moment built on tension. AP would never do this historically. That in itself became the headline and the earned media, and the more unexpected the pairing, the higher the impact.

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR BRANDS: SHIFTING CATEGORY BOUNDARIES & EXPANDED AUDIENCES

The collab format has been around long enough that "unexpected collaboration" is itself now an expected format. The bar keeps rising so to genuinely break through, you need real creative tension - not a safe partnership with a brand that makes obvious sense, but one that makes people sit up and pay attention. Increasingly it's the creative tension and discomfort that is the strategy behind these pairings.

For established brands in mature categories, this could be a route to genuine cultural salience.

The best collabs don't just generate buzz, they can reframe what a brand is for. For example, after Royal Pop, AP isn't just for collectors with bottomless pockets, and Mars x NYX now goes beyond selling chocolate. These sorts of collabs shift category boundaries and expand audiences. So a good place to start is to think creative tension first.

And as we saw over the weekend with Swatch – if you're going to go big, be prepared for the frenzy 🤪🤪





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