



# Legendary luxury brands: inventing the future by reaching to the past

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Received: 6 September 2021 / Accepted: 16 September 2021 .....  
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## Abstract

Unlike many other brands, luxury brands can enjoy remarkably enduring success. This paper presents an interview with a senior executive responsible for marketing Maison Louis Roederer’s champagnes, including the legendary Cristal, in the United States for the last 20 years. We explore the differences between luxury and mass-market brands, the role of creative vision, how brands remain relevant through innovation while remaining faithful to their history, and how luxury brands create passionate buyers who seek to be a part of the brand, not simply consumers of the brand. We conclude with a discussion of the implications for market orientation, understanding consumers as fans, and other future research topics.

**Keywords** Luxury · Branding · Market orientation · Competitive advantage

## Introduction

As Tsar Alexander II of Russia rode in a carriage with Napoleon III of France during the 1867 World’s Fair, Antoni Berezowski approached the two emperors, aimed a double-barreled pistol at the Tsar and pulled the trigger. Berezowski’s gun misfired, allowing the Tsar to survive the second attempt on his life in as many years. Fearing a future assassin might poison his champagne or hide an explosive device in the dimple of a wine bottle, according to legend, the Tsar asked wine supplier to the Imperial Court, Maison Louis Roederer, to produce champagne in flat-bottomed bottles made of clear rather than traditional green glass. Roederer commissioned a Flemish craftsman to create a crystal champagne bottle and, with a distinctive new bottle, Roederer introduced the first prestige cuvée, Cristal, in 1876. Four years later, as the Tsar stepped outside a bulletproof carriage given to him by Napoleon III, a bomber succeeded where two previous assailants had failed, but Louis Roederer chose to continue producing Cristal in clear, flat-bottom bottles as the Tsar had requested. Nearly a century and a half later, demand for Cristal continues to exceed each year’s limited production.

The enduring success of Cristal is remarkable. Although some market pioneers enjoy long-lived success (e.g., Carpenter, 2021), success for many firms is fleeting, as Blockbuster, Blackberry, and Kodak illustrate so well. Apple, General Electric, and General Motors and others have defied the odds, thriving for years or even decades. For 20 consecutive years, General Motors generated more revenue and provided greater returns to investors than any other company on earth. Thirty-five years after the peak of its success, however, General Motors filed for bankruptcy protection. Adapting to change and remaining successful is an enduring challenge for every company (Carpenter et al., 2014, Gebhardt et al., 2006). Successful luxury firms, however, demonstrate a remarkable longevity. Thierry Hermès opened his workshop to make leather riding gear in 1837, LVMH’s Hennessy began distilling cognac in 1765, and 245 years after it was founded Louis Roederer continues to earn top scores from critics and command prices above \$250 for a single bottle of Cristal.

This article presents an interview with Xavier Barlier, a leading wine-industry executive about the role of marketing in the enduring success of Champagne Louis Roederer and in luxury brands more generally. For the last 20 years, Xavier Barlier has been senior vice president of marketing and communication of Maison, Marques and Domaines (or MMD) based in Oakland, California. Owned by Maison Louis Roederer, the French parent company of Champagne Louis Roederer, MMD markets the wines of Louis Roederer in the United States. Maison Louis Roederer also owns five wineries in the United States—Roederer Estate, Scharffenberger

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Cellars, Merry Edwards, Diamond Creek, and Domaine Anderson. MMD markets wines from these five estates, in addition to marketing a select portfolio of wines from other producers in California, Italy, France, Portugal and South Africa, including the famed Petrus of Bordeaux and Dominus Estate of Napa Valley. He has served as chairman of the Wine Market Council, a trade organization that provides trends, insight and intelligence essential to the industry. Before joining MMD, Xavier Barlier was director of corporate alliances and co-branded marketing at Disneyland Paris in France. He began his career with Champagne Moët et Chandon and managed public relations for the French automaker Renault.

## The interview

We began our discussion focusing Xavier's experience before joining MMD and the role of brands in the success of Disney and Renault.

### Great brands

**GC:** Disney and Renault are great companies with great brands. What was key in making those brands great, from your perspective?

**XB:** During my time at Disney and Renault, both had a strong focus on their craft, clarity on their *raison d'être*—staying true to their roots—to the business they're in, and to the role they want to play in the life of people, their consumers, and their fans. For Renault, the vision was to design and manufacture vehicles that accompany you in your life. Renault, in my opinion, balances function, emotion, and economics.

First, by design, Renault was a functional vehicle. Renault was established in 1898, and was one of the very first car manufacturers after Mercedes Benz. It was always an innovative company in terms of concept and in terms of technology. For example, Renault was the first car manufacturer to offer a sedan that has a hatchback, the Renault 16.

The reception at first was mixed; people were taken aback. A sedan by definition had a three-box body: the front is for the engine, the middle *habitacle* [or cockpit], the place for the passengers, and the rear is the trunk. There was a disconnect between the idea of a hatchback, which would indicate a functional vehicle, and a luxury vehicle. The rest is history. The car became, eventually, very successful for many years. I owned one, and it was an incredible car, a great drive, very functional and beautifully designed.

Second, Renault was also about emotions. The cars drive very well. There was always a concern, *préoccupation*, regarding how the vehicle drives ... I remember spend-

ing time with engineers on test tracks. They would ask me, "How do you feel as a regular guy, you know, driving the car?" To their satisfaction, I would say, "Well, I love driving the car."

The pleasure of driving or *plaisir de conduire* was a very important attribute of the brand image. Also important, were emotions—in terms of design—what I would call the "French flair," a design unlike any other manufacturer. Renault believed that to be successful they had to claim their French identity.

Third, economics—Renault had to be a car that offered great value for money. If you buy our car, we will over deliver for its price point. In other words, in a functional way as well as in an emotional way and in an economic way its purchasing price would be plenty justified. Overtime, the mileage would also be good, and the maintenance, the service of the car would be minimal.

### Luxury brands

**GC:** What is the difference between a brand in champagne or luxury wine brand compared to the Renault brand, which offers a blend of functional, emotional, and economic value?

**XB:** Luxury wines and champagne address higher-order needs in consumers' lives. By definition, they must be perfect. The definition of a luxury wine is perfection, and perfection has many attributes.

The wine, obviously, has to delight the palate, offer a compelling story and age well. But what is also very unique about great wines, it is that you cannot duplicate or make them again. A great wine is singular, unique. You can potentially make a 1962 Ferrari GTO or 1957 Jaguar Type D again. Actually, luxury car makers like Aston Martin are remanufacturing per order classic models at the cost of half a million or a million dollars. But you cannot make a 1996 Cristal again. It is the expression of the year 1996 by exceptional vineyards planted decades ago, of the sunshine, the wind and the rain of the vintage. A luxury wine captures a moment in time. It is ephemeral. Once it's gone, it's gone forever.

How do you define a delicious wine? How do you make a delicious champagne? It depends on emotion—the moment the consumer or the journalist experiences it. One of the reasons why Cristal has been so successful for 150 years is, first and foremost, because it's simply delicious in all circumstances; it's delicious when it is released, five or 10 years after you've kept it in your cellars. It is delicious after you buy a 30-year-old bottle from a collector or from reputable wine merchants. This is a wine, a champagne, that has

a very long lifespan. This is one of the most important attributes of a luxury wine.

There is also what we call at Louis Roederer the window of beauty, *la fenêtre de beauté*. The window of beauty for Cristal, for instance, is we believe between 20 to 25 years; a '96 Cristal right now is probably at its very best. This is why we are re-releasing library wines from older vintages, wines that have been kept in the cellars of Louis Roederer for 20, 25 or more years.

### Enduring wines

**GC:** So what makes it possible to produce wines with such a long life?

**XB:** It starts in the vineyards, in select locations, parcels, or plots, near the best villages. There are grand *terroirs*, specific sites that are extraordinary. Then you need to know what varieties are best suited—Pinot Noir, Pinot Meunier, or Chardonnay—and you need to know how to plant them properly. Then the magic happens and you harvest grapes with great potential.

The prerequisite is also to practice what we call at Louis Roederer *haute couture* viticulture, meticulous, inspired and the most natural possible. We practice a minimalistic viticulture, not using pesticides or herbicides to avoid any “makeup” on the juice or must.

The better the viticulture, the healthier the grapes, and consequently the more natural the expression of the grapes. This is why a family-owned company, without a concern over quarterly returns, has a significant strategic advantage because they can think long term. The learning curve in wine is very slow. There's only one harvest a year. If you make a mistake when you plant your vineyards or when you select your sites, you're going to be stuck with it for a long time. A house like Louis Roederer, which has been in existence since 1776, has invaluable experience, a vast knowledge of its vineyards. The acquisition started in 1842, and they have kept all the books, all the records of everything, extremely detailed.

Louis Roederer owns 600 acres of vineyards, in 410 parcels, in prime locations. We have the records of every parcel, like 410 individuals, like in baseball. How many strikes? How many home runs? And it's a wealth of information, when you want to replant the vineyards, when you want to do things differently. [Our winemaker] Jean-Baptiste Lécaillon has decades and decades of records especially for the vineyards of Verzy, Verzenay that the family acquired starting in the mid-1800s. It's a treasure that contributes significantly to the know-how of the house.

### Creative vision

**GC:** What about the vision of the winemaker? It seems like the site gives you the raw ingredients, but the winemaker must have a vision of what he or she can do with the fruit from a site. So how does this all come together in your experience to create such an enduringly successful brand?

**XB:** What is very important is how viticulture and winemaking work together. Louis Roederer is fairly unique because the head of winemaking, Jean-Baptiste Lécaillon, is also the head of the vineyards. As a valedictorian in both viticulture and winemaking, he earned this responsibility by arguing that “I can't carry out my vision if I don't have control of the vineyards.”

The decision to give Jean-Baptiste control over wine making and the vineyard reflects a clear mandate from the board. It is essential for Jean-Baptiste to succeed. The board must also provide the ongoing support and the necessary resources, consistent with the mandate they have given him. And the support from Frédéric Rouzaud has to be unwavering—and it has been.

The vision of the winemaker stems from necessity, initiative, and also opportunities. The point is to stay relevant to the market, which requires change. For instance, French cuisine changed in the '60s and '70s from comfort food to the cuisine of the three-star Michelin that was much more refined. The wines had to change. They had to be more elegant to pair with more sophisticated recipes that are lighter, more precise.

In the 19th century Cristal was very sweet, with about 150 grams of residual sugar per liter. Of course the wines were also much more acidic. Our champagnes were like [the sweet wine from Bordeaux] Château d'Yquem with bubbles. After World War II, consumers became both wealthier and more concerned about health. By the end of the century, Cristal contains barely 10 grams per liter.

The climate crisis makes change a necessity. Today, we harvest earlier, the berries are sweeter and smaller because of the organic viticulture we practice. So as a result the vision of the winemaker is essential. He or she has to produce good wine every year, considering the long term impact of climate change, including higher temperatures and more rain.

Next consider their personal initiative, as winemakers are human beings, with convictions, beliefs, and desires. Jean-Baptiste is a man of strong convictions, like all the pioneers. From the beginning, he was steadfast on practicing the most advanced viticulture that was technically available. Jean-Claude Rouzaud, the former president of Maison Louis Roederer, supported

Jean-Baptiste and the current president, Frédéric Rouzaud, has encouraged him to be even more daring and pioneering, and provided him the financial resources to do it. Last but not least, progress in biology created opportunities that started in the 1970s. We now better understand fermentation and the role of yeasts. By the same token, progress in technology has made new equipment available such as temperature controlled stainless steel tanks. We now have sensors in the vineyards, and the analysis of these data provides useful guidelines to the winemaker during the year. Technology is everywhere in the vineyards and in the cellars.

### Méthode champenoise

Although technology plays a larger role in making champagne, the basic method—*méthode Champenoise*—has remained unchanged. First, the harvested grapes are pressed producing juice that is fermented in a tank, a wooden cask or even a concrete “egg,” yielding an acidic, still wine. Grapes grown in different plots and different grapes are typically vinified separately in luxury wines.

After the fermentation ends, the winemaker blends the individual wines from different plots and different grapes, which produces the final *cuvée* of champagne. To the final blend, the winemaker adds a mixture of yeast and sugar (*liqueur de tirage*), bottles the wine, and seals it with a cap. Placed in a cool cellar, the wines ferment a second time, producing alcohol and carbon dioxide. Eventually, the yeast cells die and the second fermentation ends. The wine continues to age, placed nearly upside down and turned each day  $\frac{1}{4}$  or  $\frac{1}{8}$ th of a full rotation. Through this process known as *riddling*, dead yeast cells collect in the neck of the bottle, creating a so-called plug.

In the final stage of the process, each bottle remains upside down and is plunged in an ice-bath, which freezes the sediment; lifting the bottle from the ice bath and removing the cap, carbon dioxide forces expel (or *disgorge*) the plug, along with a small amount of wine. A mixture of wine and cane sugar, *liqueur d'expédition*, fills the bottle. The sweetness of the *liqueur d'expédition* determines the sweetness of the champagne, which is designated based on the number of grams of residual sugar per liter. Doux is the sweetest with 50 g of residual sugar, Semi Dry, Dry, Extra Dry, Brut, Extra Brut, contain progressively less sugar. Brut Nature contains 3 g or less of residual sugar and is the driest. Finally, a cork is inserted and secured with a wire cage or *muselet*.

### Innovation

**GC:** You've talked about the '60s when food changed and champagne becoming less sweet over the 20th century. You showed me Brut Nature, which has virtually

zero residual sugar. Who leads that change? Does the winemaker who guides the firm?

**XB:** It happens gradually. It starts as a research and development project, as an initiative to better understand the terroir, and the desire to push the envelope of viticulture. Brut Nature was made possible by biodynamic viticulture practiced in the vineyards of the village of Cumières.

Usually in Champagne, we harvest Chardonnay, Pinot Noir and Pinot Meunier separately and at different times. We then blend the wines to make champagne. For Brut Nature, however, we harvest everything the same day—the so-called day of the fruit—and we blend everything together at the same time, very un-Champagne. I like to call Brut Nature the *enfant terrible* of Louis Roederer, and not terrible because it's a bad child, but terrible in the French sense: he or she is different, very singular.

With Brut Nature, we offer our fans a different and surprising expression of the brand. It is not a champagne that will please everyone's palate, although it is delicious it is also very dry. It's a champagne for people who have a profound interest in the diversity of champagne and who have some education, a little bit like modern art or opera that requires some level of education for appreciation, a passion for wine, for something completely different.

### Vintage champagne

Champagne producers often release vintage and non-vintage wines. Vintage wines are unique, varying from year to year with the weather, the age of the vines, and other factors. For centuries, champagne houses have also produced non-vintage champagnes, which express the unique style of the house, rather than the characteristics of a particular vintage. Since Roederer introduced its non-vintage champagne, Brut Premier, in 1986, it served as the consistent expression of Louis Roederer's house style and its entry-level wine. In 2021, Louis Roederer announced that it was replacing its lauded Brut Premier with a new *cuvée* called Collection. Neither a vintage nor a non-vintage blend, Collection is a multi-vintage champagne. Each year, the house will release a new champagne, blended from multiple vintages using one vintage as a base. This year's wine released this year will be known as Collection 242, which marks the firm's 242 years of blending champagne. It is based on the 2017 vintage and it will include a blend of previous year's vintages as well.

**GC:** Would you continue the discussion of innovation and tell us a more about Collection 242, which seems a natural progression that's been underway for decades?

**XB:** I'm really, really happy that you perceive it as a natural progression because this is what it is. Our Brut Premier that debuted in the 1980s was very successful in the market and garnered a lot of accolades, including being the best Champagne in the world in 2018 (in magnum) according to Tom Stevenson, one of the major Champagne authorities in the world. So why would you replace an award-winning product?

The first reason, because it's genetic. In the DNA of a luxury brand there is a lingering feeling of being unsatisfied or always an eagerness to do better. It is also an endemic intellectual process. Successful luxury companies are in a constant state of *évolution intellectuelle et créative*—intellectual and creative evolution. They are like explorers, seeking new frontiers. This is very much in the DNA of Louis Roederer. I'll give you three examples.

The first one is Collection 242. There was the sense that Brut Premier, although very successful and very well perceived in the market, was not quite at the level of our other champagnes. We believed that we could potentially make a better champagne that would match the quality of our vintage champagnes. So we created a multi-vintage champagne based on wine from the current vintage and from a number of past vintages. Each wine will be basically 55% of current harvest blended with 45% of wines aged in various vessels (stainless steel tanks, wood casks, concrete vats ...) in the proprietary cellars of Louis Roederer. Each year the wine will be a different expression of the house style.

We have also launched new still wines. The idea came from Frédéric, who for many years, wanted to produce a still wine from specific parcels that would be an homage to his great grandmother, Camille Olry Roederer. But why bother making still wines from Champagne, known as Côteaux Champenois, when there is a very limited market for such wines? Because this is another expression of the family vineyards and its know-how. It is also the opportunity for the brand to learn and to enrich its narrative, namely because a great champagne is first a *grand vin*. We wanted to add a new chapter to our story. We're in a different creative game.

### Creative process

**GC:** Could you talk about the creative process that takes a firm over 100 years ago from basically Château d'Yquem with bubbles to Brut Nature to Collection 242 and Camille? Talk about your role in that innovation and how your role differs at Champagne Louis Roederer versus Renault.

**XB:** It's very different from Renault and Disneyland Paris because marketing is never a part of the strategic thinking at Roederer. The wine is king. For instance, I wasn't even aware of the Camille project until a few months before its launch. For 12 years, they kept it secret. We are really, in that sense, entirely product centric. Just like an artist who would never allow the art dealer in his or her studio. You know, while she's painting or while he's sculpting. "You will know soon enough when I'm finished. I will then let you take a look at it."

While working for Disneyland Paris, I was invited to visit Walt Disney Imagineering in Glendale on a few occasions, and it was a great privilege. It is kind of the creative Pentagon, the *Imagineers'* Fort Knox where they create the future projects, the next rides, using new technology. It is simply an extraordinary venue, full of exceptional people.

In my capacity as a director of Strategic Alliances, I was invited to take a look at some future projects. I was part of the thinking because there was this business perspective to integrate a partner and its brand organically and seamlessly into our brand story.

At Champagne Louis Roederer it is completely different. There is a firewall between the nucleus of the company and me, and they certainly are not interested in my input as a marketer because I potentially could push back and say, "Wow, this new wine is going to be a tough sell. But it will provide a new chapter for our story."

It's a bit like Formula One racing at Renault. There was a lot of push back from various internal forces against the involvement in racing, namely because of the financial cost, but Renault said, "Well, we've always been in racing since our founding in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, we were the first to win a race; racing is in our DNA, so we're going to do it." And the rest is history; Renault won Le Mans and several Formula One World Championships.

For Louis Roederer, pushing the envelope, coming up with new ideas is in our DNA. "We don't want any consumer input," pretty much like Steve Jobs famously said. The value is in the continuous learning, in the excitement of the teams, and the boosting of the creative spirit of the company. The value is also in offering our fans an idiosyncratic product, something completely different.

I think luxury is also about extravagance. Brut Nature and its packaging are a good example. It is an extravagant champagne, off the beaten path; it challenges the status quo, and is outside of our comfort zone. And I believe that Louis Roederer is successful because as

an organization it gives its leaders and its teams the freedom to be a little bit crazy sometimes.

### Customers or fans?

**GC:** You've used a very interesting term for customers: fans. Can you talk more about how the distinction between customers and fans?

**XB:** Customers in my view are occasional. For instance, I'm a customer of Gérard Bertrand Rosé. Once in a while I buy a bottle, but I'm not a fan as such. I'm a customer. I like the brand, I like the product, but I don't have my heart into it. I don't have a passion. I'm not looking for more information. I'm not trying to be emotionally connected with the brand. A fan is very different. A fan is part of your brand. If you're a fan of Disney, you are emotionally connected and want to be part of Disney. You wear the costume of your favorite character; you are in the story. You want to feel that you are an *acteur de la marque*, an actor of the brand. And it's a genius of The Walt Disney Company that they make you feel that you are part of their stories.

Physically distanced from Champagne, you can be part of Jean-Baptiste's world. You can follow his footsteps everyday on Twitter. By the same token, 30 years ago, I was part of Renault F1 which is now Alpine F1, and I am still a fan. They won their first Grand Prix last weekend. I still check Twitter regularly to feel that I'm part of the team. As a fan, I can be disappointed too. This is the challenge for the brand not to disappoint.

### Remaining relevant

**GC:** How do you sustain the enterprise you've described? Keeping fans engaged requires a constant stream of creative innovations. It seems so very different than your comments about balancing economics and functional and emotional at Renault. After nearly 250 years, how do you keep the brand relevant?

**XB:** There are really two challenges. The first one is to keep your fans involved in the narrative of your brand, to keep your fans happy, satisfied. You need to amaze, delight, and surprise them. This is why I find a strong rationale for the launch of "Hommage à Camille" Côteaux Champenois, the new still wines of Louis Roederer. This applies as well to our new champagne, Collection 242. It's a different offering, a different proposition. It is exciting.

From a pure marketing standpoint, I had no say in the creation of that champagne but I think that it is a

fantastic marketing idea. The frame of the narrative will be the same every year, but the content will be different.

Collection 242 brings complexity and weight to the brand story; it is very important, and it's a defining moment. It is the flagship of the brand, the wine we produce the most of every year. We need to provide our fans with new and exciting experiences to keep them engaged. We need to surprise them.

With Collection 242 we also hope to win the heart of a new generation. We have a very strong fan base, but the challenge is to reach out to younger generations of wine enthusiasts. This is something that Disney does extraordinarily well. The company offers a product such as a theme park that is cross generational and always in development. You can go on your own, you can go with your partner in life, you can bring your kids, and you can bring your parents. The grandparents can bring their grandchildren. It is a great experience time and time again. To engage, to win the heart of a new generation, they also have very successfully created Disney+, and now their content, their creative assets are distributed very conveniently, and profitably, on these new platforms. It is absolute genius.

So how do we do that at Louis Roederer? How do we engage our new fans? We surprise them, we invite them on our journey, and we create new emotions. Luxury cannot be routine. As a brand, we must inspire, authentically, personally and in a way that reflects the uniqueness of Champagne Louis Roederer. In the words of Jean-Baptiste Lécaillon, "we must continually invent the champagne of tomorrow by reaching to the past."

## Reflections

### Market orientation

Our discussion provides a new perspective on the orientation of firms toward customers. One long-standing stream of research proposes that firms succeed with customers by being market driven. According to this perspective, firms learn about customer needs, share that information among members of the firm and then respond to customers (e.g., Kohli & Jaworski, 1990). Firms that pursue a *market-driving* approach seek to *influence* consumers, competitors, or reshape the structure of the market to gain competitive advantage (e.g., Jaworski et al., 2000, Kumar et al., 2000, Humphreys & Carpenter, 2018). For example, Apple, Tesla, and Uber, among others have reshaped markets through disruptive innovations.

Xavier Barlier suggests that Louis Roederer engages both orientations simultaneously. The bottle that inspired Cristal was a response to a request by the Tsar. As food preferences changed after World War II, Louis Roederer offered lighter, drier, more precise wines to accompany new lighter, healthier foods. The winemaker at Louis Roederer, however, did so without input from consumers, like an artist working in a studio. Following a vision, he crafted wines that remain true to the heritage of Louis Roederer. The evolution of the wines continued with Brut Nature, as sugar levels fell to virtually zero, and continued with Collection 242 and even with its new still wines, Camille. In all these cases, Roederer sought to “surprise” its customers, open a new chapter in its story, rather than simply respond to consumers.

This interplay between market orientations suggests a new and intriguing avenue for research. The market-driving approach suggests that firms have no influence over consumer tastes. The market-driven approach suggests that firms have great influence over what consumers want. Louis Roederer’s experience suggests that, in the larger scheme, firms have limited but nevertheless significant influence. Roederer could hardly battle consumer trends towards lighter, healthier, fresher foods, but it can establish the benchmark for champagne to accompany the nouvelle cuisine. How firms blend both approaches, responding in some cases and exercising power in others, appears to be a very intriguing question.

### Creative vision

Our conversation raises the question of the role of creative vision in a firm’s quest to shape a market. Earlier research on market-driving strategies tends to focus on technological innovation (e.g., Jaworski et al., 2000, Kumar et al., 2000), and the success of Apple, Amazon and Uber reinforce that focus. Other firms shape markets without technological change (e.g., Humphreys & Carpenter, 2018), as Starbucks and DeBeers illustrate. These firms rely on social influence instead of technological change, as appears to be the case at Roederer. Change appears to be guided by the vision of an individual or team leading the creative process, such as Jean-Baptiste Lécaillon. Much thinking in marketing has considered the power of the consumer insight and how firms can build enormously successful businesses by gaining such insight. We know much less about the power of creative insight. The enduring success of Louis Roederer suggest we have much to learn.

### Enduring success

The goal of business, Peter Drucker wrote, is to create a customer. The marketing concept rests on Drucker’s wisdom, and for many firms it has proven invaluable. Our conversation about Champagne Louis Roederer suggests that firms can aspire to a deeper, more meaningful relationship with its customers. A firm can create fans, individuals who aspire to know the story of the brand, to engage with the brand, even become part of the story of the brand. Scholars have devoted great effort to understanding customer satisfaction, brand loyalty, and the meaning of brands to consumers (e.g., Holt, 2004; Kozinets, 2001; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995). We understand better the fan’s devotion to *Star Trek* and its quest for utopia, the allure of the outlaw bike symbolized by Harley-Davidson, and the iconic nature of Levi’s jeans. But less attention has been devoted to understanding how firms draw individuals to be part of the story. After more than a century and half, Cristal continues to attract new, devoted, enthusiastic fans. Understanding what draws people to become *acteurs de le marque* could help reveal the secrets of luxury brands’ enduring success.

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