

MULTICHANNEL

Professionalized sales associates may reduce conflict in-store, online

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Promotional image for Nordstrom's Instalog

By JEN KING

NEW YORK – Seamless integration across channels is key to eliminating the conflict between digital and physical interactions, according to panelists Oct. 13 at Luxury Interactive 2014.

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Luxury Daily

During the “Eliminating Channel Conflicts Between In-store and Online” panel discussion, the participating executives discussed how their brands have been affected by the divide, the challenges presented and possible solutions for creating a better consumer experience. All were in agreement that the role of the sales associate needs to be updated to amend the conflict and build more concrete relationships driven by consumer data.

"There is a major disconnect between what sales people experience with channels online and offline, and consumers experience online offline," said Milton Pedraza, CEO of [Luxury Institute](#), New York. "It's not only the consumer who has the channel conflict, it's the sales associate.

"[The sales associate] might not be aware of what is available so they cant optimize their experience therefore they cannot optimize the experience for the consumer," he said. "It's

a major disconnect can be solved digitally, very quickly, but the culture of brands make it such that the channels operate differently and by other people and interest. This is where you see a lot of conflict."

Conflicting channels

Although the channel challenges presented to marketers do not rest solely upon the shoulders of sales associates at luxury brands, this role can be reevaluated to help create personalized experiences to build loyalty through data metrics and human interaction.

Elevating the role of the sales associate to more of a brand gatekeeper rather than just the person who completes a transaction will ensure a consumer has consistent experiences across channels. But, in the current marketplace, the lapse between in-store and online touch points jeopardizes the ideal consumer experience.

Also, only 24 percent of consumers feel that in-store associates are able to give the best product information ([see story](#)). Often conflicts arise because consumers expect the same level of experience offline as they do online, causing a source of frustration.

Another issue that arises is that sales associates do not have proper grasp of what is available online.

To combat this issue, Courtney Montgomery, chief Web officer of Nicole Miller, explained that the brand tries to limit confusion between consumers and sales associates by creating a support network for online and offline. On its Web site, Nicole Miller works to direct the consumer to where a piece is so that the purchase can be made in whichever channel is most comfortable.



From left to right: Courtney Montgomery of Nicole Miller, Scott Lux of Charity Buzz, Milton Pedraza of Luxury Institute and Kerri Pollard of CJ Affiliate by Conversant at Luxury Interactive 2014

Mr. Pedraza noted that Luxury Institute projects that 90 percent of purchases are made in-store, but wonders if sales associates will still exist by 2017 and if they do exist if they will

be automated? Thus, to be relevant the role of sales associates must change to be more “professionalize[d].”

The relationship forged between a store associate and consumers may also spur sales because of the honest opinion or style advice they can provide. Essentially, the relationship extends beyond a traditional cashier and to some degree Web site ecommerce fulfills this role.

Data collected in-stores can also help to eliminate the channel conflict. If sales associates have the proper tools to collect daily metrics such as how many consumers were engaged, new and existing clients and purchases made, performances may improve because the figures will be apparent.

Stores and sales associates cannot be taken for granted and should be embraced as a relationship building center. Using the data collected helps in knowing consumers better and caters to how they would like to interact with brand.

Tech goodies

Conversions will increase when the channels are integrated into one experience. Digital assets that move in-store will affect measurements and how associates interact with these touch points and the consumer.

For example, department store chain Bloomingdale’s opened its first fully mobile store in Palo Alto, CA, Oct. 10 to appeal to the “digitally sophisticated” tech community in Silicon Valley.

Featuring smart dressing rooms, mobile checkout, consumer-facing tablets and sales associates armed with mobile devices, the store in the Stanford Shopping Center heightens the omnichannel experience for shoppers. This neighborhood is a good testing ground for new retail technologies, which Bloomingdale’s may want to carry over to other locations ([see story](#)).

The consumer climate expects a new degree of interaction both in-stores and offline that is unprecedented.

"I think it's getting to a point where the consumer now has this exception because there is so much online activity in terms of when they're looking for a product," said Kerri Pollard, president of [CJ Affiliate by Conversant](#), New York.

"They almost expect that same level of experience offline as well," she said. "I think there's a bit of frustration when they don't have that from the sales associate in the offline shopping experience."

Final Take

Jen King, lead reporter on Luxury Daily, New York

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