

COLUMNS

Will retailers finally catch up to customers in 2017?

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By **Martin Shanker**

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Last year was the year of the gap for United States luxury retailers. Did you see it widen? Have you felt the deepening disconnect between retail customers and sales associates? Were your walk-ins so far ahead of you on their customer journey that you could not catch up before they walked out?

If 2015 was the worst year for traditional retail since 2009, last year was confirmation that something is wrong (subliminal whisper: sales approach). Something has changed: the customer. Is there anything that can close the chasm? Yes.

I have seen a radical shift in the power dynamic between customer and sales associate over the last decade.

In short, customers have it, while sales associates do not. Customers hold their own velvet rope, choosing to admit or reject sales associates to their experience.

Some stores have adapted and thrived. Some limit their fixes to point-of-sale technology and data-driven solutions. Still others manage decline and wish 2007 would magically return.

But the customer of a decade ago is gone.

Seller beware

Let us be realistic: 2017 will likely bring fewer customers into stores, for all the technological and cultural reasons we know so well, along with volatility in currencies and a sustained drop-off in international tourism.

Count on fewer support resources, too. At the sales level, we cannot control any of that.

Meanwhile, "No, thank you" echoes off the walls. It is surprising how few sales associates know what these words mean.

"No, thank you" is a symptom of something much bigger than lack of interest. It is a response to intrusive behavior, ill-timed conversational gambits, prodding questions, all the old-school selling techniques. Translate it to, "You don't get me."

Luxury sales teams must develop their understanding of the customer journey, learn new relationship-building skills and eliminate old behavior that turn off store guests.

After all, customers do not need you or at least, they no longer think they do. And what they think or do not think turns directly into dollars they spend or do not spend.

Good news

Customers are more primed to buy than ever, because they are farther along on the journey when they walk in.

Some customers know even more than you do about what you sell. They are the savviest, most independent shoppers in history. That is precisely why historically effective sales approaches now fail.

This is all just evolution at work.

Customers have evolved faster than sales associates, who tend to keep trying what once worked well.

More good news: stores can evolve, too.

We can recalibrate our side of the relationship to meet customers where they are. This could be a time of retail reinvention, if we make it The Year of No "No, Thank You."

Evolved sales associate

Adaptation for sales associate is behavioral, but also conceptual.

Redefine the job. It is not to romance product or wield a battery of questions.

Consider: at a networking event or singles gathering, would you come right out of the gate with a deluge of information or prying inquiry? Not if you want a relationship.

The job is to facilitate feeling, thought and connection mostly through listening.

To help customers feel free, think new, imagine the pleasure and utility of ownership, and appreciate the value of their relationship to you.

What is that value? To provide an experience available nowhere else. Not just a tech experience, or a bridging of online and IRL. After all, 40 percent of luxury brands are not available online. Those that are must still offer a human experience of a higher order.

We no longer work on a sales floor, but in the field of awareness. We are here to notice everything.

Allow people to reveal themselves. Understand if they are after exclusivity or belonging. Connect to what matters to another human being. To be relevant. The evolved sales associate interprets dreams.

Be assured, these are informed dreams. This year's customers are not the habitus of 1997's high-end stores. Boomer, Xer, or millennial increasingly the latter they are focused. Backed by research, consumer reviews, peer recommendations. Armed with skepticism and a smartphone.

If a journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step, yours comes at about milepost 500 for them.

IT IS A shock to old-schoolers to learn that they do not choose customers. Customers choose them.

By eliminating forced conversations or product lectures, we create space for that choice.

We give up trying to control the customer and instead learn to collaborate in the experience.

We hand over the microphone. Listen. Can you hear it? That is the gap closing and maybe more wallets opening. Maybe 2017 can be better than we knew.

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1 thought on "Will retailers finally catch up to customers in 2017?"

1. [LisaMarie Dias](#) says:

[February 22, 2017 at 8:51 am](#)

Useful insights – thank you!

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