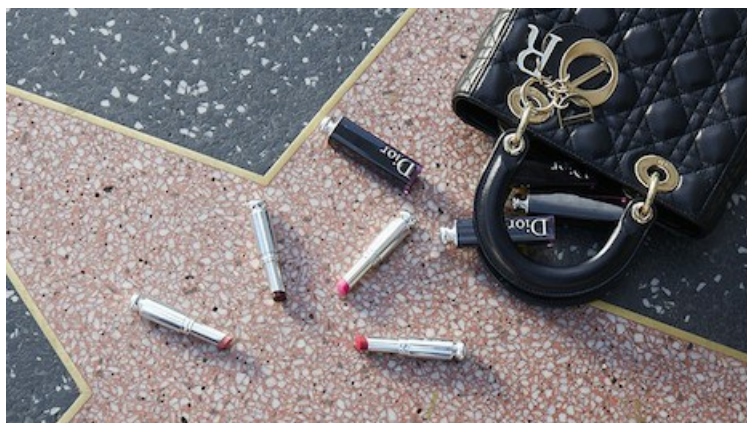


RETAIL

5 tips for luxury brands to get ecommerce returns right

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Returns are an inevitable part of the ecommerce process

By DANNY PARISI

With the rise of ever-present mobile devices, ecommerce is becoming even more common.

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Along with ecommerce comes the customer expectation of returns. Nowadays, customers want to be able to return products quickly and easily something that luxury brands will have to contend with if they want to keep the fastest-growing part of the retail business. Here are five tips on how luxury brands can nail ecommerce returns from experts in the industry.

"Luxury retail has always prided itself on providing a level of customer service far above the service provided by traditional retailers," said Perry Kramer, vice president and practice lead at [Boston Retail Partners](#). "For as long as most of us can remember, the sale and return process in luxury retail has been based on personal relationships and a little black book of clients.

"Retailers such as Cartier and others luxury retailers are selling very high-value items online and now accepting returns in the stores from customers that may have never stepped foot in their stores," he said. "Consumers' understanding that they will be able to return items in a pleasant environment and treated with the highest level of respect is a key component of their customer journey."

Transparency

One of the most important things that luxury brands can do to make sure their customers are getting the most out of ecommerce returns is also one of the simplest: be upfront about how to return items.

"Luxury retailers should make the returns process easy and transparent to strengthen their relationship with customers," said Jeff Neville, vice president of Boston Retail Partners. "Retailers should allow customers to return products across all channels, regardless of where they made the initial purchase."

Making the return process easy to understand will build trust in the brand.

"For returning online purchases, offering free shipping and pre-printed labels will go a long way in keeping

customers happy," Mr. Neville said.

Convenient

Returns have to be convenient.

Customers expect a certain level of accessibility and ease to ecommerce transactions. Brands cannot afford to make the process of returning items more difficult than it already is.

"From a transparency perspective, it is helpful to make the return policy and directions easy to find in several places, in the box and online," Mr. Neville said. "Communicating frequently with the customer on the status of their return, receipt of goods and credit processing is key to keeping customers satisfied."

Chanel is one brand that offers prepaid return labels on its products

Understand value

While implementing these changes may seem arduous for luxury brands, a key aspect of getting them right is understanding what value they can bring to the brand in addition to the customer.

While it takes more work for brands to make returns easier and more accessible, the potential benefits are strong enough to make it worthwhile.

"Both mobile and traditional ecommerce allow consumers to window shop online stores and their various product offerings with ease, but with that, comes the expectation that returns happen just as seamlessly," said Mary Beth Keelty, chief marketing officer of the [PMX Agency](#).

"Offers such as free return shipping and quick returns processing are the new norm for today's savvy shopper, and while that may be an expensive endeavor for the retailer, there is a likelihood that it actually builds customer retention and sales over the long term," she said.

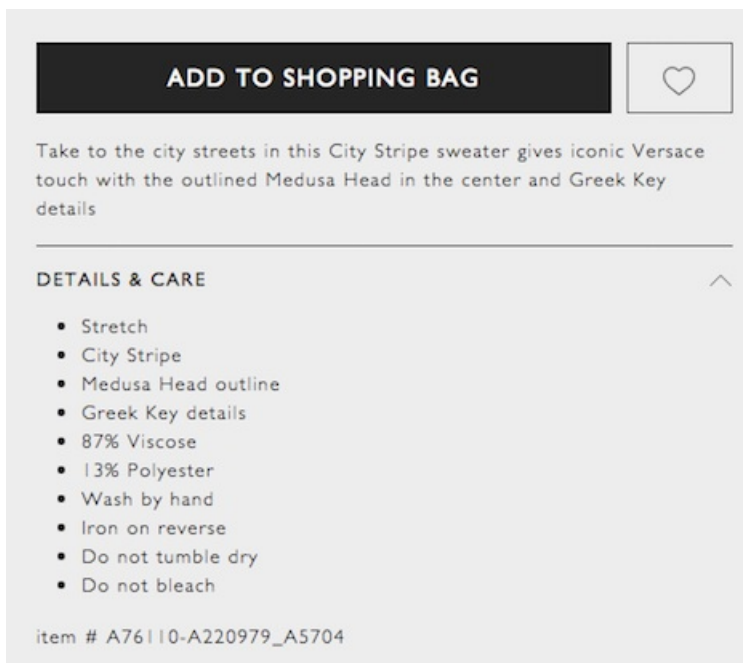
"The overall experience is equally significant as the product when it comes to the luxury space, and so when a brand does not deliver on a core ecommerce process like returns, it risks losing the perception and, even more importantly, the relationship it has worked diligently to build with its luxury customer."

Offer more information to stem returns

One of the best ways for brands to get returns right is to reduce the amount of returns coming in so that they can focus more on the ones that do.

For instance, brands can offer more data about the products such as size, fit and exact dimensions before the customer orders them to lessen the likelihood of wrong items being bought.

"While there will always be customers who prefer to buy at their heart's content even though they may only keep one or two items, it does not mean that brands shouldn't first focus on ensuring the product experience online is enriching, informative and easily accessible," PMX Agency's Ms. Keelty said. "Returns often occur because the product didn't ultimately live up to its online presence, or may have been entirely different all together."



Versace offers extra information on the fit and materials of its products

"Luxury brands must view their Web sites like shoppers might view and experience their stores," she said. "They need to think creatively about replicating the brick-and-mortar experience, allowing customers to visualize the fit and style of a product, and imagine the fabrics."

Consistent experience

Luxury consumers are particularly critical of the online shopping experience, especially when brands have set the standards very high in-store and across other channels, Ms. Keely pointed out.

"Customers are rarely buying just the luxury product," BRP's Perry Kramer said. "They are purchasing the entire experience and they expect that same experience at every touch point in-store, in the call center, in the call center chat room and online. That same exceptionally personal and pampered experience needs to be omnipresent.

"Returns are a very important part of the luxury experience as it is a unique opportunity to shine in what could be a difficult customer engagement," he said. "Luxury consumers are expecting the highest quality product and fit.

"Rarely is there a thought about what the return policy is before they purchase, as they have a simple expectation that they will be satisfied at every point in the customer journey."

Part of retail, especially holidays

Ecommerce is here to stay, and returns are an inextricable part of the online shopping process.

They may be arduous, but returns are key to keeping a thriving online commerce business going. So it is of paramount importance that luxury brands meet this need.

And while returns are expected year-round, the holiday season is when the deluge begins.

In the days and weeks after the holidays, retailers will be swamped with returns, which is often considered a negative aspect of the shopping season.

But returns also offer an opportunity to cross-sell or upsell customers online, via a phone enquiry about the returns process or if the product is bought online or on mobile and returned in-store.

RETURNS ARE INEVITABLE, but being prepared to provide a positive return process can benefit a brand in the long term.

As shoppers come into stores looking to trade in merchandise, it gives retailers an opportunity to reach clients who are possibly first-time customers, as well as potentially and carefully convince them to trade up for a larger purchase ([see more](#)).

"Luxury retailers have done a better job of mapping out the complete customer journey, including the return process, than the retail industry as a whole," Boston Retail Partners' Mr. Kramer said. "In general, it is a little easier for luxury

retailers as they have simpler processes, lower transactional volumes, and almost always know their customer to some degree.

"Knowing your customer and engaging them in a personalized way at each point in the customer journey is a key to sustained success in retail, especially luxury retail," he said.

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