

RETAIL

## Courtesy, product knowledge are most-valuable traits of luxury sales associates

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*Competent sales associates are worth just as much as flashy digital tools. Image credit: Hugo Boss*

By DANNY PARISI

While digital tools may be appealing, a new report from the Luxury Institute shows that many consumers value the personalized touch of a human sales associate to guide them through the shopping process.

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Half of all affluent consumers surveyed by the Luxury Institute said that sales associates give a relationship-driven experience that is inimitable by online tools and ecommerce. While luxury brands should certainly not neglect the benefits that technology can bring, it is just as important to remember to keep the human element in-store.

"Luxury firms today are trying all they can to drive top-line growth, including adapting elements of artificial intelligence into their sales process, but ironically it's the application of new technology that makes the front-line human element even more critical," said Milton Pedraza, CEO of **Luxury Institute**, New York. "The replacement of robotic work underscores a rapidly emerging need for a humanistic, enlightened, high-performance worker who transcends gender, organizational type, or corporate hierarchy, one that I call the '**platinum collar worker**,' because like the precious metal, platinum collar workers are catalytic, and help to create conditions for humanistic high performance within their companies, while remaining pure in ethics, and purpose."

### Customer service

Among affluent customers, the luxury shopping experience is about more than just finding the best item and making a purchase. Instead, it is about the feeling of being catered to and that the brand truly values the consumer's patronage.

For that reason, the Luxury Institute's annual "State of the Luxury Industry" report looked at the ways in which the personal connection made between a customer and a sales associate affects the overall customer experience.



*Retailers need to make sure their employees are trained and competent. Image credit: Luxury Institute*

Per the report, a majority of affluent consumers, 53 percent, said that superior customer service is essential to a luxury shopping experience. This aspect is second only to superior quality of product, which was listed as the number one trait of a luxury shopping journey.

Among sales associates, affluent consumers value courteousness and knowledge of the product as the two most essential traits, with 57 and 55 percent, respectively.

Additionally, 42 percent of consumers said jewelry and watches was the luxury sector with the best, and most helpful, in-person sales associates and the best in-store customer service. Travel and hospitality came in a close second with 37 percent.

#### Platinum collar

Understanding a customer's intent is the best way to prepare and provide customer service as soon as he contacts the company, according to the CEO of [24]7.

Speaking at Forrester's CXNYC event in New York on June 20, the CEO spoke about how companies can improve their customer engagement and service. The secret lies in correctly predicting what customers are going to want before they ask for it and in moving away from a channel-centric engagement system and towards an intent-driven one ([see story](#)).

One effective way of doing this is to intelligently combine digital tools with human interaction without neglecting either of the two.

Combining these aspects has led luxury retailers to embrace more multichannel tools as a way bringing those customers in and giving them a more seamless experience.

One strategy that Neiman Marcus has embraced is giving all of its sales associates the digital tools to usher customers through the in-store purchasing process with the same level of care and personalization that they get from online shopping ([see story](#)).



*Neiman Marcus' online store. Image credit: Neiman Marcus*

The real value in digital in-store tools is freeing up responsibilities so that human employees can spend more time interacting with the customer.

Mr. Pedraza calls these types of workers "platinum collar workers" as opposed to blue collar or white collar workers, and created a platform called EIX as a means of training these types of employees. With the advent of artificial intelligence automating much of a luxury brand's traditional day-to-day practices, these platinum collar workers can focus on improving company culture and enhancing a brand's moral standing ([see story](#)).

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