

RETAIL

The new white-glove service

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White-glove service is expected to be less stuff and more emotionally attuned to the needs of the current generation of affluent consumers, per the deliberations of the Inner Circle CEO Roundtable hosted May 23, 2018 at the Four Seasons Hotel New York Downtown by the Luxury Marketing Council. Image credit: Mickey Alam Khan

By **Gregory J. Furman** and **Christopher Olshan**

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NEW YORK On May 23, at an Inner Circle CEO Roundtable hosted by the Four Seasons Hotel New York Downtown in Wolfgang Puck's only Manhattan restaurant, 22 Luxury Marketing Council members explored the changing definition of white-glove service. Under discussion:

- What white-glove service was and is now
- How the ultimate customers' expectations of service are dramatically changing from more formal, traditional, old-world expectations to contemporary, personalized services that are both more relaxed, casual, less a source of boast-demand, and perceived and felt as an accurate reflection of their the most sophisticated customers' tastes, wants and needs today

Attendees included senior executives from Aspire Lifestyles, WDA BrandMarketing Solutions, New Haven Consulting Group, Keller Williams/The Edry Group, The Luxury Marketing Council, IPZUSA, Silvertone Consulting, Insights Atelier, Wolford America Inc., Elite Traveler, The Four Seasons Hotel New York Downtown, Icon Images, Sub-Zero Group East LLC, Gruppo Italia, American Heart Association, Knot Standard, Springut Law, Pernod Ricard and *Luxury Daily*.



Calling attention to the new interpretation of white-glove service

First, a summary of the group's thoughts on the rapidly changing definitions of white-glove service: What remains

unchanged, the old world approach and the new world approach.

Unchanging

- Over the top, elegant, rare, thoughtful
- Something the most sophisticated customers intuitively understand and demand
- Meticulous
- Detail oriented
- Personally bespoke to needs, wants and buying histories of best customers
- Gracious
- Intelligent reading of body language: when to engage and when not to no hovering, please
- Deep knowledge of brand's product or services and benefits and competitors' equivalent, ability to explain value and educate in a plain-English, non-condescending way
- Ability to articulate why luxury services and products are true luxury: in the words of Neiman Marcus founder Stanley Marcus, luxury is "the best that the mind of man can imagine and the hand of man create." Fact: when the best customer gets the price value equation, price is no object
- Humanity, high touch, warmth, empathy communicated from the first eye contact, body language in the first blink eye before a single word is spoken

Old world

- A butler with long tailcoat and white gloves at one's beck and call
- Somewhat slavish
- Same level of service to the richest everywhere, whether or not of value to the ultimate client, running the risk of being possibly off-putting if over-managed, too eager to please or unintelligently intrusive
- Runs risk of appearing sycophantic, pushy, subservient, unctuous, fawning.
- Intrusive, even overbearing, to the point of being uncomfortable for the client
- Not truly personal with a clone approach, not understanding the style of clients, their history of interests and needs and, most importantly, who they are
- Not seeking or even vaguely interested or, worse yet, unable to educate and inform in a sophisticated, non-condescending way
- Cold, removed, distant missing empathy and failing to leverage or genuinely and accurately know, and attend to the history of the client's preferences and personalities
- Potentially and too often factually stalker-ish, even creepy leaving client with a feeling of being haunted by those whose job it is to serve with no intelligence or sophistication and a backup of blind attentiveness
- Formal without genuine warmth, interest or little or no knowledge of the client
- Respectful, but technically so; no effort to go beyond the letter to the spirit of human, personal service lacking warmth, big time
- Too often, robotic, based on an eyeball inventory: the salesperson calibrates the client's net-worth based on the salesperson's limited judgment of appearances and then proceeds to serve the client proportionately based on the salesperson's mostly seriously flawed judgment. Note: Fewer and fewer of the richest, most sophisticated consumers dress to shop anymore. The richest, more often than ever, are the least concerned about what they are wearing, even when shopping at the best establishments

New world

- Confidentiality, privacy and security are the top concerns
- Delivery of white-glove service is ensuring that the best customer feels that the level of service he or she is receiving exceeds their expectations, pleased that the service professionals took the time to explain the product

or service in an intelligent way and confident that CRM/database is being properly used to serve them better than ever before as their relationship with the store deepens and becomes more profitable for all

- Customer confidence in brand's abilities to use and manage their purchase data in their own best interests, providing clear and demonstrable value
- Trust that the brand will not abuse the intelligence that they gather on their best customers
- Proof of concept in positive sales experiences where the best customers see knowledge about them, and that their buying habits are being sensitively and intelligently managed and used by the brand's sales professionals and marketers
- That disruptive technologies should disrupt and be used intelligently in the best interests of the best customer
- That the brand goes out of its way to connect like-minded customers with one another and build a community of enthusiasts and ambassadors for brands that they love
- Scrupulously avoiding too-frequent, over-aggressive or spam promotions not tailored to the best customers' real interests
- Providing the customer with the ability to contact a human via whatever technology the best customer is using, offering immediate and intelligent personal contact
- Understanding the exact needs of customers as they change and grow
- Tailoring service to the personality of the customer
- Abandoning all affectations and old-world brand arrogance for example, "We tell them what to wear"
- Training sales professionals and empowering them to say yes. And, in the words of public relations pioneer Edward L Demming, striving to "Banish fear!" Enabling your team to trust their instincts as to the right resolution of service issues
- Remembering the importance of the public perception of the brand and how it influences the way that the best customers think about, and behave toward, the brand.
- Communicating the best corporate citizenship programs to the team, customers and the world
- Instilling a feeling of "at-home" and the comfort of being at home, first for your team who will share that with your best customers
- Not at all about stuff, but about curated unique experiences shared with family and friends and the memories of these experiences

As luxury brands focus on today's best customers and, more importantly, the millennials 86 million in the United States who by 2020 will account for more than 50 percent of all luxury spending in North America luxury brands need to fully understand that today the brand is just the price of admission.

How a brand serves its best customers and handles issues when service is not up to the customer's standards determines whether a customer will buy or go to a competitor.

Critically, dissatisfied customers the ones that complain the most and the loudest are as important as a luxury brand's best, most loyal customers.

New technology enables luxury brands to micro-segment their customers more surgically than ever before.

The U.S. is currently much more liberal in brands' use of customer data than any other country in the world.

THE WINDOW OF opportunity to reach best customers on a highly bespoke basis, tailored to buying history, interests, income and lifestyle, remains open. For how long? Anyone's guess.

The smartest luxury brands will take advantage of this in ways that endear them to their customers by providing special offers and news that they can use on trends on a regular and highly customized basis.

In this connection, the new white-glove service as an important strategy goes to the top of the list for top marketing management of the world's most prestigious brands.



Greg Furman



Christopher M. Olshan is CEO of The Luxury Marketing Council

*Gregory J. Furman is founder/chairman and Christopher Olshan is CEO, both of the **Luxury Marketing Council**, New York. Mr. Olshan is also founder and head distiller of Conestoga, PA-based **Surly Penguin**. Reach them at gfurman@luxurycouncil.com and colshan@luxurycouncil.com, respectively.*

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