

RETAIL

Frontline associates need to become fluent in brand language

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Sales associates need to speak a brand's marketing language. Image credit: Printemps

By SARAH JONES

NEW YORK Marketers carefully craft messaging around the brands they oversee, but this work can be undone if the teams that interact directly with customers are not adequately trained in the positioning.

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At LuxeCX/AMCX 2019, a speaker from Gaggenau noted that while companies may develop a specific vocabulary to talk about products or the brand itself, often this information is not trickling down to the customer service staff. This can lead to a breakdown in continuity and potentially turn customers away.

"Whatever you are doing from a brand and marketing perspective to engage your customers in this new experience transformation, translate that now to your employees, to your frontline ambassadors," said Victoria Macdonald, senior product trainer at [Gaggenau](#).

"On one end of the bookend of the journey is that sales associate," she said. "You've done such a great marketing job bringing them into your store, and that sales associate can put an end to that right then and there. Journey over.

"Or they have purchased, but they're not going to return because they had such a horrible customer service experience on the opposite end."

LuxeCX/AMCX 2019 was produced by Luxury Daily and sister title American Marketer, with venue sponsor UBS

On the same page

One of the hurdles preventing sales staff from understanding the luxury buyer is the fact that they do not see themselves as high-end consumers. To work through this outsider feeling and what Ms. Macdonald refers to as "reverse snobbery," luxury brands can offer immersive educational experiences for employees.

For instance, during her time at BMW, sales teams would go for a stay at a Ritz-Carlton property to get a first-hand look at five-star service.

At Gaggenau, this immersion translates to informative workshops and tastings. The brand brings sommeliers in to talk about proper wine preservation, while other workshops do a comparison of coffee made on another system

versus a Gaggenau machine.

[View this post on Instagram](#)

Quality coffee is an integral part of our culture. Our fully automatic espresso machine offers interchangeable bean containers allowing you to switch between your ideal roasts or different tastes.

A post shared by Gaggenau Official (@gaggenauofficial) on Aug 1, 2019 at 2:02am PDT

Instagram post from Gaggenau

Giving staff an opening into the luxury world builds empathy.

Frontline staff also need to be given a primer on positioning. Marketers should share information about how they are describing the brand and products to create cohesion.

While marketing gets consumers into a store, the connection and purchase journey can be continued or broken based on the conversations that shoppers have with sales associates.

For instance, Gaggenau's appliances sit away from the cabinetry, which the marketing team describes as framing the kitchen. However, a customer service representative without that background knowledge might say it sticks out.

Giving other examples, Ms. Macdonald noted that at her former employer Tiffany, the brand's focus on marking milestones and commitment would also play out in greetings. For instance, a store associate may ask a customer, "What are you celebrating today?"



Tiffany's brand positioning is tied to celebrations. Image credit: Tiffany & Co.

Also important is creating a space for customer service employees to be somewhat independent and adaptive to situations. Enabling them to develop their own best practices allows them to feel more passionate about their position and the brand.

For instance, instead of constructing a script for particular scenarios, brands could instead look to their service teams to problem solve.

These tips and tricks can then be shared from employees through internal social media, helping to build a team environment.

Customer service

The way in which consumers interact with sales associates is evolving, calling for more relationship building to maintain the relevance of the crucial frontline store staff.

Today, about nine in 10 consumers research online before heading to a store, rendering informational store associate conversations less effective or necessary. During a keynote at Luxury FirstLook 2019, the CEO of Shanker Inc. explained that to remain relevant, store associates need to undergo a cultural transformation that helps close the gap between them and their clientele ([see story](#)).

Luxury brands attract consumers with rare and excellent products, but maintain loyalty and grow their client base through customer service.

It sounds simple, but the very nature of customer service has changed in recent years, as consumers become more knowledgeable and discerning and personalized in-store experiences have become the expectation. Technology has altered how sales associates engage with customers, but meaningful relationships that boost brand loyalty are still formed through human interactions, which can be developed and mastered with proper training ([see story](#)).

"You want your customers to be passionate about your brand," Ms. Macdonald said. "You have to get your employees to be passionate about your brand, too."