

RETAIL

UK's Harrods tests personal shopper services as retail stores remain closed

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Harrods Knightsbridge London store. Image credit: Harrods

By DIANNA DILWORTH

British department store Harrods has debuted a new personal shopper program this week that enables affluent consumers to call up personal shoppers in stores and place orders directly.

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The idea of the new service is to boost in-store sales even as stores remain closed during the COVID-19 lockdowns. Salespeople are calling and video chatting with loyal VIP customers and walking them through personal sales which can be mailed out or picked up.

"Our focus is on opening our doors to customers again and supporting the British and local London economy to get back on its feet," said Michael Ward, managing director at Harrods, London, in a statement.



Harrods London. Image credit: Harrods

Personal shopping

The new Harrods personal shopper service opened this week at the Knightsbridge store in London. The store temporarily closed on March 25, with a reopening scheduled not yet announced.

Ecommerce sales have increased during the lockdowns, but not enough to keep up with the losses associated with retail store closures.

The new program will help bring a small number of furloughed employees back to work and enable them to connect with loyal customers on a one-to-one basis.

"It is a simple, smart way that luxury stores can use technology and personal service to create a solution to a problem that is not going to go away too soon," said Allen Adamson, cofounder at [Metaforce](#), New York, and professor at NYU. "I'm surprised more people haven't done it sooner."

While the program will not recover all in-store sales, every little bit helps.

"It is like how restaurants are offering takeout," Mr. Adamson said. "It will not recover all of the sales, as a big part of shopping is the experience and getting out of the house, but it is a good bridge offer for a segment of the population."

The personal shopping service also gives consumers something more than simply shopping online.

"Shopping online is very one-way, even with chat," Mr. Adamson said. "It is very hard to buy expensive items online. But if a salesperson is going to create a guided experience using technology, then that is more impactful."

"And it can help keep the best salespeople employed, which is equally important, because the quality of the staff is an asset of a luxury store that they cannot afford to lose," he said.

The personal shopping program launches as retail numbers in the United Kingdom have been pretty.

Retail sales in the U.K. decreased by 19.1 percent, and dropped by a whopping 40.3 percent in April as compared to the same time frame in 2019.

Harrods' new personal shopper program offers an example of what retailers can do to help boost sales even as stores in many parts of the world remain closed. This could also hint at how sales will work even as stores open and consumers remain skeptical about coming in to shop.

"Sometimes a low-tech solution is the best solution," Mr. Adamson said. "And because everyone has a phone and knows how to use FaceTime and Zoom nowadays, it is a simple duct-tape solution that could triage business."

"It has a dual impact in both protecting valuable employees to some degree, while offering a relevant service to valuable customers," he said. "Personal shopping was likely seen by many as an unnecessary luxury, but this situation makes it completely necessary."



Gucci counter at Harrods. Image credit: Harrods

Tech update

Still, the question remains if personal shopping as a traditional channel will be updated for a younger, more digital audience.

"Phone calls seem old school," said Sucharita Kodali, vice president and principal analyst at Forrester. "Text shopping or live chat may actually resonate more for younger customers. Shoppable video, that could be one-to-one or one-to-many, could make more sense in the future as well when we want to be contactless."

"I think it's a matter of time," she said. "Young people who are not camera-shy and enjoy making online content will

likely drive this in the future. Sales in person is a different skill versus selling by video or text. It's a matter of time before more people become skilled at it.

"Retailers that have furloughed employees should be creating stables of video content now. I'm sure few have thought about it because they think it doesn't scale or that it's outside their traditional framework of how to sell."

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