

RETAIL

Shortening the recovery time for luxury retail: Re-boarding the workforce

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Cartier is known for its exquisite customer service in-person and on phone. Seen: The Princess Grace Salon in the Cartier Mansion on Fifth Avenue in New York. Image credit: Cartier

By [Martin Shanker](#)

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Let me state it plainly: The luxury retailers that want to get it right post-COVID-19 crisis will have to focus on re-boarding their sales teams now.

Luxury companies are implementing new procedures to deal with public health, safety requirements and comfort for their clients. It is a monumental task and an important one, but retailers are typically operationally savvy. Yes, it will be challenging and must be done, but it will not be what drives sales.

What will be more challenging is what we call "re-boarding of the sales team." Specifically, engraining the new mindset, skills and behaviors that associates and managers must have going forward to avoid being dragged down by the challenges of doing business during a crisis and hampered by fear.

On board?

From my experience in working with luxury sales teams around the world, I am a student of human behavior.

This is an opportunity for behavior change, even if the circumstances are unusual.

This experience tells me that the three most important areas for immediate focus and ongoing attention for a successful restart of sales are to:

1. Inspire the returning team with a new mindset for their work and by handling individual, unique needs
2. Deepen existing client relationships and develop new client relationships without overwhelming an already-overwhelmed client population
3. Achieve sales budgets in a time of unprecedented concern for spending

Like others, I am using my time differently.

I would have been visiting eight countries on business in the past two months. Even though many retailers remain

closed, I have continued remotely training and coaching sales teams in the United States, Europe and Asia.

I have seen firsthand some of the challenges that sales teams are facing.

More importantly, I see key strategies and best practices that, if implemented, would move luxury retailers through the predictable phases of this crisis from recovery to growth.

The good news is that if luxury retailers are prepared in a few critical areas, they will be able to make up lost sales.

There is no precedent in modern times for re-boarding an entire workforce that has been out of their workplace for upwards of three months, and we know that some sectors will take even longer to return than luxury retail.

Because of the changing way that clients shop today in the midst of a health crisis, sales associates will need to adjust their selling skills and behaviors if they are to:

- Overcome their own reluctance to "close" on sales because they are concerned that clients will perceive them as being pushy. Even the highest performing associates need to be supported to have a positive mindset about closing. Now, when there are examples all-around of hardship possibly among their family and friends their desire to "close" will be tested.
- Achieve a positive mindset. If a client has entered the store, it is a signal she is ready to dream and enjoy life. A skillful sales associate will compassionately help clients pivot from negative to positive topics, creating the very experience the client was seeking.
- Learn how to effectively communicate and demonstrate empathy and feelings to clients while wearing masks. This skill will be particularly important in new client relationships. Tone, body language, humor and emotional acumen will be essential to build rapport when clients are seeing a physical barrier between sales associates and themselves.
- Reimagine how to inspire clients to "dream" rather than being overly concerned that luxury items are not essential today. High-net-worth clients may be more ready to purchase than sales associates perceive them to be. If the client is in the store, it signals she is eager to enjoy and dream.
- Enrich client relationships. This crisis has revealed to retailers and sales associates alike an opportunity to deepen relationships. In the coaching I do, I notice many sales associates stay in regular contact with a small percentage of their total number of clients. Why, when relationships are most craved, are sales associates missing this important opportunity? There is power in developing relationships *before* they are needed. Digital CRM does not create as high a level of intimacy and connection that sales associates can create. Where there are authentic relationships with an associate, clients will be quicker to return to visit the store. And, unless associates can engage with clients on topics other than product when the client is in the store, it is not a full and authentic relationship.
- Sell virtually. This crisis has shown us how much we rely on being face-to-face. Yet, we have also found new ways to do business that we were convinced needed to happen in person. Yet, with new skills, sales associates can sell virtually by appointment, while creating an authentic experience that drives sales.
- Resilience. It is a manager's role to help associates self-regulate and pivot from negative to positive thinking. Some managers are natural cheerleaders. Yet, more than cheerleading will be necessary. Sales managers with the right skills will help associates to stay calm, engaged and productive. This is such an important topic, that I will focus on it in the coming weeks.

THERE IS GOOD reason to believe that luxury retailers who want to get it right post-crisis will focus on making sure that these skills are in place for their luxury sales teams and will have a faster return-to-sales curve than those who place their emphasis only on operational issues.

Re-boarding is truly one of the missing crisis-recovery strategies any luxury retailer can undertake.



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