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Maintaining a high-touch experience in the new normal

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The world has changed. All at once, a troika of disruptions the global COVID-19 pandemic, racial tensions in the United States and environmental changes threatening to **reshape markets** has created a new normal.

This, understandably, has changed the mindset and buying patterns of many, but especially millennials and Gen Z, now the **largest segment** of luxury product buyers.

Luxury brands can connect with these consumers by paying attention to what has not changed, including the desire for brands to focus on quality, sustainability and ethics along with delivering a high-touch experience in person and online.

So what is different?

First, instead of an experience focused primarily around the physical store, the optimal approach now blends physical and digital spaces.

The second is that experiences will be less frequent and require an even higher degree of personalization.

Delivering high-touch experiences in this new environment means luxury brands must direct their efforts and investments to three pillars: personalizing in-person interactions, leveraging digital touch points as an extension of personal relationships and elevating new forms of shopping such as curbside pickup.

Making in-person interactions more personal

As a measure of safety and compliance with local government regulations, stores will need to operate with limited capacity initially. This means either managing queues or offering appointment-based shopping.

For luxury retailers, this enables associates to provide more personalized shopping experiences.

More personalized shopping does not necessarily mean walking customers through a store as a personal guide in fact it could mean the opposite.

For example, as brands get to know their clientele better, they will understand which customers prefer to browse alone and who wants an associate to work with them. They will also have greater insight into the consumer's fashion sense, shopping habits and lifestyle preferences.

All of this information, if entered into a customer database, can be used by store associates, customer service reps and marketing teams to personalize every brand touch point.

These preferences will be important for digital touch points, which need to be as high touch as in-person interactions.

Digital as an extension of the personal relationship

With less frequent trips to the store, digital interactions with mobile sites and apps, text messages, emails and social media will be essential in keeping consumers engaged.

Targeted content, combined with a contextual understanding of customers' needs, will form the backbone of this effort to personalize digital touch points.

Associates must be armed with tools to message customers, setup appointments, send calendar invitations and text message reminders.

Additionally, loyalty programs will need to be expanded to hold richer customer data. And rewards programs can finally be modeled on what is important to customers instead of generic "points for perks."

Making new forms of shopping more high touch

With stores closed the over past few months, customers have adopted new ways to shop.

For instance, according to a [study](#) by the National Retail Federation, 90 percent of people who have tried curbside pickup found the experience convenient. This suggests consumers will continue to use the practice.

While efficiency and cost structure to enable this at scale must be sorted out, this is an opportunity to extend white-glove service offered inside stores to the outdoors.

Using features such as GPS tracking to notify personnel when a customer is getting close to the store can ensure their order is ready for pickup when they arrive.

Most customers expect to spend at least 20 minutes picking up an order in store. Anything a brand can do to beat that expectation improves the chances the consumer will shop with them again.

Making the pickup special with a personal greeting or including samples or a gift for your most valuable customers reinforces loyalty and brand affinity.

Finally, branded pickup areas or express lanes for loyalty members can make a transactional experience feel special.

AS WE CONTINUE to work through these turbulent times, the values and preferences of our customers will continue to change, making the idealized luxury customer experience a moving target.

In this environment, luxury retailers must continue to experiment, innovate and try new things to connect with consumers in ways that are meaningful, authentic and aligned with core values. This is a challenging job, but it will certainly pay dividends long term.

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