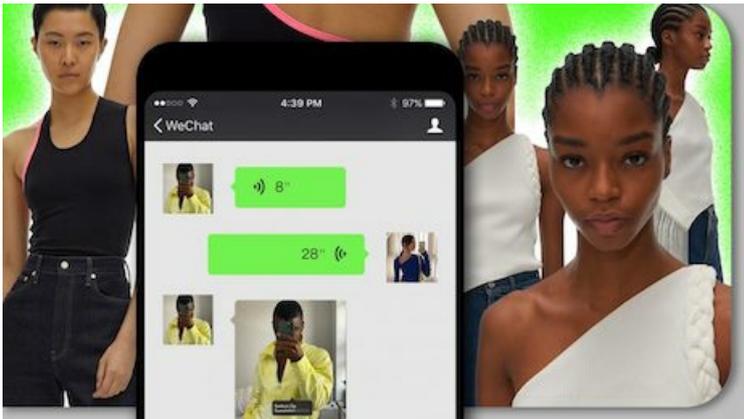


RETAIL

Are sales associates the new luxury KOLs post-COVID-19?

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By connecting with sales associates on WeChat, consumers are getting exposure to a new form of effective advertising during the COVID-19 outbreak. Image credit: Shutterstock

By [Ruonan Zheng](#)

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Back in June, Cheryl Chen, a 27-year-old Chinese bag fanatic who was eyeing this summer's It bag the [Burberry pocket bag](#) stepped into the China World Trade Center in Beijing after befriending a sales associate on WeChat, so she could find out more about the bag.

From there, the sales associate actively pursued her by offering timely updates on available colors. Ms. Chen had a hard time resisting and bought the bag.

Now, after being seduced by images on the same sales associate's [WeChat Moments](#), Ms. Chen is looking to purchase a big monogrammed Burberry tote as her new back-to-the-office bag.

By connecting with sales associates on WeChat, consumers such as Ms. Chen are exposed to a new form of advertising. They can browse WeChat Moments a page similar to Instagram where sales associates often post the latest styles, celebrity sightings, [KOL](#) postings, and even pictures of themselves trying on products in a "natural" setting.

If consumers are interested, they can consult these sales associates right away on everything from pricing and discounts to available colors.

Jing Daily learned that many of these sales associates are leveraging WeChat by sending content or products to interested consumers, and it has proven to be a highly-effective strategy both during and after the [COVID-19](#) outbreak.

"Since the outbreak, our store's sales from WeChat have been double the amount of our offline sales," said one sales assistant for a high-end, Taiwanese women's fashion brand in a mid-May survey conducted by the digital agency CDGL Strategic Communications.

"I find that the key is not the content that we share, but the fact that we stay relevant by maintaining our visibility." She also added that her WeChat group is made up of approximately 70 people.

Elsewhere during the lockdown in Shanghai, the high-end luxury mall iAMP pushed out a WeChat article that allowed consumers to scan a [QR code](#) to start a one-on-one conversation with a sales associate.

These days, sales associates are an important link to a consumer's purchase journey. Because of the impact of COVID-19, these employees have taken on the role of making short videos or livestreams to make customer interactions more engaging and transparent.

"With [livestream](#), consumers have a lot more power and control, and they can ask questions like, 'Can I see inside the bag?' or 'Can you style that bag with a white top?'" said Jonathan Smith, founder/CEO of digital marketing agency Hot Pot China.

And thanks to new technology, sales associates can engage with clients at any time of day or night.

KOL-in the making

"This is Nana from Prada China World Trade Center, here are some accessories for your summer look," said one sales associate, as she laid six hair bands and a variety of clips on the counter.

Meanwhile, another sales associate is trying on each item while the first narrates, saying, "This hair clip was spotted on [the K-pop girl band] Blackpink's Lisa before."

"How much are they?" says one Netizen in the comments section under this [Little Red Book](#) short video.

"Are there any mid-year discounts for members?" asks another.

These three-minute videos offer an attractive pitch to consumers who may have tight budgets but still are looking to own small luxury items.

Zhou Ting, head of research of Shanghai-based Yaoke Research Institute, explained that it is a natural progression for sales associates to come out from behind the counter and take on KOL roles. They are experts in their company's products and are persuasive and credible in a way that is different from traditional fashion bloggers.

So should more luxury brands recognize this potential and promote their sales associates to be their KOLs?

Not everyone is optimistic about the idea.

"I don't see this happening in the long-term, to be honest," said retail consultant Terry Tian, who has extensive working experience in the luxury retail sector.

"At the end of the day, they are still promoting the brand they work for, so they don't necessarily have the objectivity that consumers look for in KOLs," he said. "KOLs and sales associates also have different [types of] expertise.

"Brands are not [MCN](#) [multi-channel network] agencies. They would rather have their associates remain in an employee-employer relationship, and not every sales associate has the potential to become a KOL and might prefer making commissions."

While luxury brands are hesitant to adopt, large beauty and skincare companies have experimented with this model before.

Unilever hosted programs that recruited recent college graduates to become KOLs. The consumer packaged goods marketer felt that by leveraging the brand's traffic and resources, the students could build up their livestreamer personas while selling the company's product in creative, interactive ways.

Though it might take a while for luxury brands to build up a system like this, Mr. Tian suggested that it is not impossible, since trends are leading in that direction.

To WeChat or not that is the question

Empowering sales associates to become KOLs is all about trust and whether both parties can commit to this long-term investment.

Brands are worried that if sales associates gain access to their network on WeChat, the network will go with them to the next role once they leave.

Also, sales associates are primarily interested in maximizing their commissions, while maintaining the brand image is less of a concern.

Brands are conscious about the highly personal aspect of WeChat sales, and even though it has proving to be a

successful tool, staff from different brands have received varying levels of guidance from headquarters.

However, with or without a brand's guidance, fashion sales associates are adopting WeChat messaging in ways that range from private solo conversations to group chats of up to 500, as they are a powerful tool for building brand loyalty, especially post-COVID-19.

"In order to support sales staff in maximizing results and delivering a consistent brand image, brands should develop clear staff-to-consumer guidelines and communication strategies for WeChat," per the CDGL survey.

Similarly, when it comes to livestreaming, maintaining the brand image should be the priority.

"It's critical to have the right brand guidelines and strategies in place before livestreaming," Hot Pot China's Mr. Smith said. "If it isn't aligning with brand values, it's a turnoff not just from a sales aspect, but also for the brand long-term."

But truthfully, many KOLs already take on a sales associate role, whether it is as a fashion blogger who runs a bag drop or a livestreamer who tries on hundreds of lipsticks to better sell those products.

So does a brand really need sales associates to become KOLs, or is hiring savvy KOLs enough?

Either way, sales associates are the first point of contact representing the brand to consumers, so every interaction matters.

So instead of simply investing in hired KOLs, perhaps brands should look to sales associates to help them maintain brand loyalty and survive the post-COVID-19 era.

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