

RETAIL

Superheroes of the holidays: sales associates

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Sales associates can make or break the retail experience. Image credit: Neiman Marcus

By NORA HOWE

Retail associates should mean more to a customer's journey than just overseeing a point of sale and many retailers may be missing crucial branding opportunities with sales staff this holiday season, according to market researcher [Ipsos](#).

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Going into the new year, consumers will expect more from sales associates across a variety of product categories, but recent data shows that when consumers shop in-store, associates often have a limited understanding of products or are unable to assist customers. These kinds of interactions can deter shoppers from making informed purchases, or ultimately sever the relationships between brand and consumer.

Making associates essential

For shoppers who want guidance, sales associates can engage with them in a number of ways.

From demoing products and offering more details to weighing the pros and cons of different products and suggesting scenarios in which a customer could use them. Logistically, sales associates can also help assist with various fulfillment options.



Product knowledge and training may ensure greater consumer confidence. Image credit: Bloomingdale's

Almost half of consumers, 49 percent, find retail sales associates' recommendations helpful, suggesting an opportunity for significant improvement in training, quality and more.

More than a third, 35 percent, of consumers say they find retail sales associates' recommendations biased, again, suggesting an opportunity for training improvement.

Twenty-six percent say that often ask sales associates for help when shopping.

According to Ipsos, however, most retail sales associates are not meeting consumer expectations. They oftentimes diminish their own product knowledge, resulting in a lack of consumer confidence.



Shoppers can make appointments for consultations at the new De Beers store. Image credit: De Beers

This suggests an opening for brands and retailers to learn from these experiences over the past two years and offer more assistance, especially to consumers who believe they do not need assistance or think they do not need assistance or that they must browse without assistance.

During an especially challenging time for employers, from labor shortages to COVID-19 safety concerns, Ipsos recommends that retailers try to help customers understand they do not have to shop alone.

Elevating the in-store experience

With another year of pandemic holidays, retailers aimed to provide customers with entertaining and engaging in-store experiences.

Online luxury retailer Saks took steps to bring customers a memorable holiday season, including new unique experiences and services.

According to the retailer's Luxury Pulse survey, this year consumers planned to shop earlier, dress for casual gatherings and give the gift of fashion. To meet these demands, Saks brought a robust selection of luxury merchandise to its site and seamless shopping services to provide ease this holiday season.

The retailer made a significant inventory investment to ensure it was able to meet anticipated high fashion demand throughout the holiday season.

To help customers navigate holiday shopping, Saks released its annual holiday gift guide, which featured a curated selection of women's, men's and kids' apparel and accessories, jewelry, beauty and fragrance and home categories ([see story](#)).

Various luxury brands have been pushing new brick-and-mortar concepts, including diamond company De Beers.

De Beers' new London store was inspired by its commitment to "Building Forever," and meets LEED environmental standards in line with its sustainability views ([see story](#)).