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Where luxury retailers need to look for digital talent

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If you are a luxury retailer fishing for new talent to lead your digital strategy, prepare to widen your net.

By now, most premium brands are well aware that they need to create a seamless, omnichannel experience for their customers, whether they are shopping online, through their smartphones, digital tablets, or inside the bricks-and-mortar store.

These high-end retailers must have the same look and feel, yet translate across different markets and cultures, both virtually and physically. They need to be able to captivate their millennial consumers, wherever they are.

The retailers must also be able to communicate with a much broader, global market, across shopping channels, and that requires a team which possesses a rare combination of technological skills and cultural fluency.

But finding the right people to lead in this digital revolution is fraught with challenges.

Infinite pool?

Due to the relative newness of these retail strategies, the talent pool is shallow and unless employers are willing to look outside the usual hunting grounds for retail executives, or

consider younger candidates with more diverse backgrounds, they will continue to struggle to build a digital team that can meet the challenges of today's rapidly evolving marketplace.

Luxury brands, especially, which already have a finite number of experienced candidates to choose from, have to be more willing to reach out beyond their usual networks.

These brands need experienced recruiters to help them consider candidates from companies within other industries – such as American Express or Samsung – businesses that already have proven track records as strong players in the digital space.

Other viable places to poach from include big retailers, electronics companies and successful chains, which fall just outside the luxury space, yet boast successful, large-scale digital operations.

At a time when retailers cannot afford to learn as they go, recruits from companies ahead of the digital curve bring a level of expertise necessary to craft a cutting-edge digital strategy from scratch.

The number and breadth of digital positions that need to be filled is constantly growing.

Whereas most retailers traditionally relied on outside advertising agencies to handle their whole media strategy, they are now taking some of those media dollars in house and relying on their internal marketing teams to oversee digital media to maintain better control on how they communicate with their online and mobile customers.

These retailers are looking for writers, designers, content experts, consumer data analysts and overall strategists with the necessary vision and management ability to build a digital presence worthy of the luxury brand name it represents.

Right place

Luxury retailers are also looking to build digital teams dedicated to a particular global region.

Even within in North America, online merchandising content, and the way a product is presented visually, needs to reflect the local needs of the customers.

In Canada, for example, a luxury retailer's Web site will feature items for colder weather and larger sizes than its site in Brazil. It is why retailers such as Coach, Gucci and Burberry have many different country Web sites, with product information available in multiple languages.

Once they have located their candidate, luxury retail employers must compete with everyone else looking to staff up.

Demand is high and continues to grow. One luxury accessories brand has gone from 10 employees in their ecommerce division in 2009, to more than 50 people across three countries today.

Large retailers, such as an iconic U.S. one which went from zero investment in its digital

team to \$200 million within a year, are also on a talent-feeding frenzy.

From the lowest levels to top digital marketing executives charged with building new teams and reporting to the C-suite, everyone is looking to hire, and it is, without question, a jobseeker's market.

As a result, top talent expectations are high, and a more competitive base salary is not enough to attract the right people.

These savvy jobseekers are fully aware of the poor track records of many established retailers, and want assurances that their digital plans will receive the full support of their new employers.

The jobseekers are seeking exciting growth opportunities, and are extremely wary of employers who only pay lip service to the need for a comprehensive digital strategy.

If they are hired to assemble a team from nothing, finding everyone from the Web design to customer relations management, it is a huge undertaking that is doomed to fail if the rest of management is not on board.

While luxury retailers need to keep a more open mind by lowering the experience requirements or looking outside their categories, hiring from a pure-play company such as Amazon or a large volume retailer such as Target will not cut it either.

Job candidates need to identify strongly with the brand and be a fit within the luxury retailer's particular culture.

Digital executives need to be able to communicate that love for the brand to the customer on a luxury level. They also need experience in representing a brand that manufactures its own products, so they can understand the merchandise they are selling in the digital space at the deepest level.

WHEN IT COMES to the digital retail space, it is time to debunk some of the myths embedded in corporate hiring policies and get less picky about length of experience and industry pedigrees.

But three job requirements remain constant: passion, knowledge and an unwavering commitment to the brand.

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