COLUMNS

Still luxury, even after the sale

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By Helen McCall

As luxury brands continue to search for new ways to differentiate, the focus of the brand-customer relationship is now extended beyond pre-purchase encounters and shopping experiences to come after the sale.

There are vital tools brands can deploy post-sale to achieve a full and loyal customer relationship: spending time to check customer satisfaction with both the product and the experience; communicating brand and new product news in a relevant and personal way; and working sensitively and efficiently to solve any queries or issues.

Pre-sale, purchase and aftercare are the new holy trinity of the luxury retail experience, and the brands that activate this will see results.

Dunhill, not uphill
For those brands looking to shore up the post-purchase customer relationship with great aftercare, the toolkit is straightforward. It is mandatory to apply the same meticulous attention to the details of post-purchase communication and customer support as is afforded to the sales and retail experience.

Knowing each customer as an individual and ensuring you keep this information fresh and the relationship live will support ongoing communications.

But, above all, brands need to ensure that after purchase, the customer experience is commensurate with what the customer has come to expect from them. This will ensure the relationship pays for itself in times to come.

For example, Alfred Dunhill's Homes around the world, such as Bourdon House in London's Mayfair district, blend product and materials in a relaxed retail environment, putting the focus firmly on the creative mix with experiences such as a whisky bar, screening room, barber and caf.

After a purchase, customer data is used to inform and fire an integrated, video-heavy BTL communications strategy comprising social, email, direct mail and events, which are all, in themselves, pieces of the brand. You do not have to be in a buying mood for the brand to want to interact but as it is there for the relationship it is also there when it is time to buy.

There are places where post-sales customer care often falls down. The road can potentially become rocky when product faults cannot be dealt with immediately or to the customer's satisfaction.

Examples of customer queries being passed and lost to "head office" or of product faults going unfixed and non-refunded these are the stories which are most amplified in social media and can be most damaging to brand and sales.

And, of course, there are challenges with executing such a customer care-focused strategy.

Take care

Good aftercare requires resourcing, with strong service personnel empowered to make good decisions on a personal customer level so that if mistakes happen, complaints can be turned into success stories.

Also, planning a communications strategy that differentiates existing customers, right down to a personal level, requires its own thinking and resources.

But the results of activating a more care-focused strategy can be measured immediately.

Registration for warranties to protect high-value goods has often been overlooked but should be an integral part of the process, providing measurable and useable data. Starting a conversation with a compelling narrative at this early post-purchase stage keeps your brand front of mind for subsequent purchases and gifts.

It is an old adage, but nonetheless "it costs more to get a new customer than to keep an existing one." There is no doubt that existing customers pay back in advocacy, in growing revenue streams and in being enthusiastic early adopters of new product or brand ventures.

A luxury approach to after-sales care is one of the best ways to engender that sort of loyalty.

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