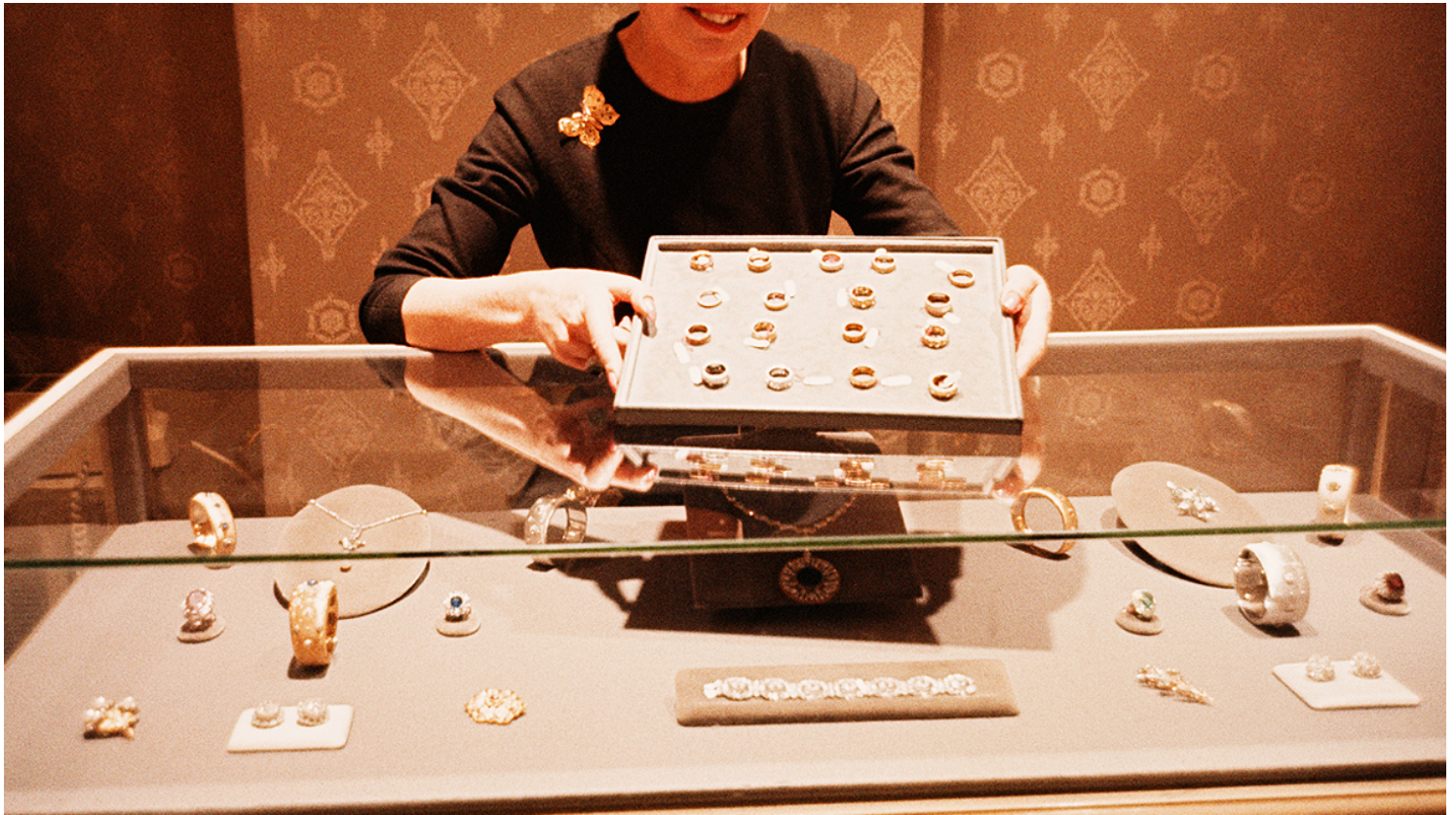


What Retail Sales Associates Still Do Better than Websites



At least one group of people is probably not feeling joy this holiday season – retail sales associates. Not only did many of them have to work on Thanksgiving Day, and most have to handle the hassles of crowd control, inventory and pricing mishaps, and harried shoppers – but they’re no longer considered very trustworthy or helpful.

According to Integer Group, family, friends, and online reviewers are considered trustworthy at [twice the rate of sales associates](#). And according to Motorola, nearly [half of consumers believe](#) they can more readily locate product information on their personal mobile devices rather than asking a store associate for assistance. What’s more, retail store managers agree. [Sixty-one percent](#) said they believe shoppers are better connected to product information than their in-store associates.

What does this suggest about the future of the sales associate role? Will sales associates follow in the footsteps of increasingly rare milkmen, toll booth collectors, and gas pump attendants? Will customers grow so accustomed to doing without them that they become confused or even irritated when they have to interact with them? Perhaps in high-end retail and in complex purchase categories such as appliances or home furnishings customers can still expect to be waited on by salespeople – and derive a lot of value out of a traditional sales associate interaction. But what about mainstream stores — is there still a role for sales associates in specialty mall shops, big box retailers, and mass merchants?

In these settings, salespeople no longer play the role of a product expert or information gate keeper who serves as an intermediary between the shopper and a purchase. But they can still help customers in valuable ways by serving as:

- **A decision validator** – reducing the perceived risk of purchases by assuring buyers they’ve made a good decision. This role can be very important when the purchase is a gift, a brand is less familiar, or the product price is higher than expected or than the norm for the category. Sales associates who play this role well go beyond the simple gratuitous “excellent choice” affirmation that waiters in old-school restaurants often use. They add a personal insight about why the selection is a smart one, drawing from their own experience with the product or insights they’ve gleaned from other customers.
- **A choice navigator** – improving customers’ decisions among many options. Oftentimes shoppers now enter a store already having decided to buy the product, so the objective of the sales associate is not to close the sale. Any attempts to sell end up frustrating the customer and the salesperson. Instead he or she can add value for customers by reducing decision frustration and increasing satisfaction by helping customers understand product options and the pros/cons of each. Since this service is particularly valuable when the number of choices seem overwhelming or when the differences between the options may be difficult to discern, sales associates in computers, mobile devices, and other electronics categories often fulfill this role. Mercedes-Benz equipped its commercial salespeople with a “Fleet & Business Comparison Tool” that made it so easy for them to show and tell customers the differences between its offerings that the company ultimately rolled it out to end users.
- **A needs identifier** – helping customers uncover unfelt or latent needs. Customers are now empowered to make product decisions using a plethora of information at their disposal, but sometimes their research may lead them to identify the wrong purchase. People may not realize that they actually need a different product, configuration, or add-on in order to get the solution they are seeking. Salespeople must be careful in assisting customers in this way so as not to seem nosy, bothersome, or overly sales-y to customers who think they know best. But skillful inquiry and intuition allow sales associates to change or add to a customer’s purchase in order to ensure they get what they actually need.
- **A community builder** – connecting customers to each other and to the brand. Following the lead of Harley-Davidson’s owners groups and Linux user groups, many companies are trying to extend and deepen their relationships with customers by developing communities around their brands. Salespeople are some of the best ambassadors for those communities. They can help customers identify common interests and values and suggest ways for people to become more involved with each other and with the brand’s programs. They can invite customers to events, include them in social conversations, and suggest activities that bond them together. Examples include Lululemon’s sales associates inviting customers to [in-store yoga classes](#) and a Starbucks barista creating [a Vine channel](#) to inspire single parents.
- **An insights collector** – gleaning customer insights for the company. As many B2B companies will attest, a sales force can be a valuable customer research tool. Savvy retailers are now recognizing this potential and they’re actively soliciting insights from their salespeople. Sales associates’ ongoing, face-to-face interactions with customers are often more timely and accurate — and less expensive — means for understanding trends. The success of fast fashion brands including Zara and Forever 21 has been attributed in part to the systems and practices they’ve implemented that collect salespeople’s insights about what customers are asking for and buying and feed them back to corporate decision-makers.

These new roles require substantive changes in the way salespeople are recruited, trained, and compensated. In fact, perhaps the name of the role itself needs to change. Instead of a label that focuses on selling, perhaps “customer associate” might be more appropriate.

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