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Who is the Shopping Confidante Online?

The state of fashion retail (shoes, dresses, cosmetics, etc.) is known to have the sales girl. A modern example would be Claire Danes, who played alongside Steve Martin the 2005 movie Shop Girl. Lord and Taylor, in its hay day, had bellhops dressed in rich red and gold buttons that gave customers a sense that this store is expensive. The salespersons natural habitat is in retail stores. This habitat is now on shaky ground. Individual stylists and fashion bloggers are becoming more trusted for fashion advice nowadays. The Internet retail component of fashion retail is becoming more dominating as can be seen with the current decline of retail stores that is directly related to increased internet sales.

The days when Sears catalogs came into every home in the United States during the 1930s and 1940s, are long gone. Sears and JC Penney catered to families and were once the place you bought everything you needed. These markets do not matter anymore. Then why, do niche markets matter now?

Penn State Professor William Kelly's Paper, on Pareto's Principle for college classes, points out the eighty/twenty rule for business. Example: "Eighty percent of your business sales come from twenty percent of the offerings you have." This may be true for marketing retail in a store; Pareto's Principle of eighty/twenty rule fails in regards to Internet retail. Amazon, one of the big heavy weights for online retail, has found that roughly 60% of their sales come from 40% of their products. However, what else is making Amazon do so well if the 80/20 does not apply to internet sales?

There are three things to note about Amazon. One, they have niche markets often containing products you cannot find elsewhere. Two, they use algorithms to point out to related purchases via their suggestion button, "we are pretty sure you are going to like this too." Three, Amazon can charge more for these niche products, because like number one above, these products cannot be found anywhere else. These algorithms, showing related items, replace the instinctive psychology of the best retail talents of a salesperson. An algorithm knows what kind of similar person once bought something comparable to you and the algorithms apply that

similarity to the next corresponding online shopper. The guesswork of denied sales for showing assortments of products is gone. Amazon is doing really well because the related products algorithm does increase sales and the fact they can charge more for niche products because they cannot be bought anywhere else.

Definition of niche market for online environment is a market where products may only be purchased online. These products are further refined generally as a select group of specific products that a consumer desires. Customers purchasing from a niche market will most likely pay much more for these products, because, where else can they buy these “special products”...nowhere else.

High-end fashion retail is about the special products that have the added facet of uniqueness. The more special a product is, the more expensive it is going to be. Handmade lace is expensive, hand sewn-in sequins are expensive, products that have more artisanship and skilled placed in the product are more expensive. High-end fashion products show their worth on the price tag. Not all products need this level of artisanship to be expensive. Rare products will rightly have the many zeroes behind them also.

You already know this. However, more importantly, why do I mention it?

Stylists and the sales representative want to make you feel like you have the inside information on current fashion. Good stylists and sales representatives are knowledgeable about what it takes to have you look great and they also know what the latest fashions are. There are different ways of going about the personalized sales process. Everyday sales representatives create a sense of urgency during the purchase. An example statement of limited time of availability by an amateur salesperson is, “This is the last of these shirts we have in the store, what are you going to do about it? Why wouldn’t you take it when it looks ‘that good’ on you?” The good salespeople have patience and an aura of “You can trust me.” They are willing to build a long-term relationship with you. They are more like a stylist in a sense of adding more value in your life that could relate to them being a good friend (Rosman 1). Stylists are paid to make you look and feel good (paid to validate you and your purchases). A stylist, the salesperson who is your friend, can “make anywhere from \$2,400 a year to \$300,000 a year” (Seventeen 1). The article in the Wall Street Journal, Shopping Confidante, discusses how Keaton Row, “an online service that plays matchmaker between stylists and shoppers” is one of the arenas that is trying to

bridge the gap with salesperson to the customer on the Internet. It comes down to this for the clients: Would Keaton Row be wanted if it just a really good algorithm?

People are going to trust a person over the computer. It has yet to come to the point in society's history where humans make all their decisions only after consulting a computer (this is concerning everyday living and everyday people's lives). Trust is a feeling. Feelings are subjective. Art is subjective. I could go on for pages and pages about the discussion of "What is Art" that design students have to go through. The point of the discussion for students is to realize that the closest thing to define art is that it involves a level of artisanship. This includes the amount of time it takes to learn the skill to make art and how limited the number of other people there are that can do the same thing. Clothes are considered art in some circles. Consider the skill it takes for hand-sewn lace versus the utility of wearing clothes. The level of craft involved in creating an outfit cannot be the only contributing factor in what makes an outfit beautiful.

Color Me Beautiful by Carole Jackson, the book about styling one's wardrobe with color, was popular at its time of print. It discusses how one's natural skin tone can make one look prettier in one set of colors versus another set of colors. This knowledge is subjective to what one person thinks certain colors looks better on a person than another person does. In general, a high-end fashion salesperson's knowledge is thought to be significantly greater than your own when you shop for clothes in their store. This accepted expertise allows them to recommend you clothes or accessories with confidence. Could a lack of subjective knowledge about clothes really be compensated for the fact that a salesperson has a great skill in selling? The answer is, Yes! Remember that selling is about feelings, not so much the practical and objective.

Logic would reason that an algorithm would do a better job at finding what you like. It is mathematical, and considering it places significance on previous purchases, it is a good predictor of what you like. Algorithms may show you things you like, but they fail to show something that would necessarily look good on you. The algorithm's priority is to determine what you like versus what enhances your appearance and improves your self-confidence. The problem is that the algorithm is still substantially impersonal and some people still want a personal experience. Shoppers will shop more so online once they feel comfortable enough finding products for themselves while using algorithms. This time is coming soon for all consumers.

The people who are concerned with what they wear generally have goals about buying things that make them look good. This is a subjective feeling. A sales representative is going to

be able to feel empathy with customers and relate to them on a feelings level. The factor of simply liking something goes a long way. If a customer “likes” a sales representative, trust can grow. *Scientific American Mind* had an article where it described the biggest qualities that made someone likeable were empathy and reliability. If online stores allowed platforms for their sales persons to act upon these two characteristics, a true conversation between customer and store could really begin.

The issue becomes when relationships are built...then what?

Sales representatives for stores need to keep in touch over their customers. Everything from planning events, keeping in touch with clients, to the ability to converse with customers with more dialogs online which will allow sales to increase. People, who have the most influence on our lives, are not the people who we think are our closest friends, but the people who we see every day. This is still new territory where a variety of creative ideas will define the new definition of online shopping with a “stylist”.

Shopping websites see the need for constant communication between salespeople and their clients. Net-A-Porter’s Annelise Peterson is trying to create rapture with their website and their customers by having events while also providing personal shoppers to help customers. What if these stylists had hundreds of clients? Stylists could begin to make revenue for a new online store immediately if this were the case.

This also means that retail stores need to keep their sales representatives working for them. A Shopping Confidante article mentions that one sales person created clientele of her own at a store where she worked. She opened up a new store of her own and took all her previous clients with her (Rosman 1). Imagine this situation being bigger than a few clients. What if the situation involved a sales representative converting hundreds of clients from one store to another store?

I believe that stylists will eventually need to have contracts and agreements with the retailers that they work for if online personal shopping will take place. Retailers have taken the time to train sales representatives, given the space for sales representatives to meet clients, and have given them the experience of being a stylist.

The environment of options will change as well. Certain product offering will be only found in online stores from certain and limited retailers (as For Rent: Trendy Jeans, Cars, Appliances by Ruth Bender) as this has already begun. This forces the customer to use the

Internet if they want a certain product. This could have repercussions for stores as they learn how to effectively use this combined approach. There will be mistakes made along the way, however if the retailers fail to try, it will be worst because someone else will replace them. Companies that try to avoid selling products to their customers online will miss the benefits of avoiding taxes in certain countries (in the United Kingdom VAT taxes do not apply to shipping to the United States). Countries' laws are still trying to play catch-up with the Internet. The possibilities of doing things creatively online are still available as the Internet retail has yet to be fully defined.

A recommendation for higher-end luxury stores would be to create locations in major cities to take customers measurements. Altering the more personalized products for the perfect fit creates a more satisfied customer. The more personalized the product is the more expensive it will be (example: customize certain outfits with different fabrics) which brings more satisfaction to the retailer.

Online sales representatives will need to move to an interactive established platform to provide their services to their clients. Consumers are already online shopping in great numbers and the fashion industry needs to find an effective forum for consumers to shop online with the fashion industry before they lose their niche to someone else, like an "Amazon" for fashion.

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