

STYLE

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Luxury stores try harder

In a bid to win back customers, high-end brands and department stores are putting an emphasis on service

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If the doorman at Bergdorf Goodman seems a little more cheerful than usual this holiday season, or a salesman at Prada or Hermès offers to find a pair of shoes in your size without rolling an eye, do not act so surprised. Retailers are being extra nice, and not just to the regulars.

"They're offering a glass of champagne as you enter David Yurman," said Kate Kreindler, a suburban student, referring to the high-priced jewelry store on Madison Avenue. She noticed she was receiving more-attentive service while shopping on that luxury strip on Monday.

A few steps away at Dennis Basso, a fur store, Basso himself was greeting customers. "It can't hurt," he said. "Stores that don't normally have great customer service are trying harder. They're reaching out and giving that special treatment to the..." and here, he paused for emphasis, "... Christmas shopper."

It may be a curious silver lining of the recession, but even a casual browser can expect to be treated like a VIP in high-end stores on Madison and Fifth avenues once famed for snooty attitudes and imposing facades. Almost every person who has stepped through the gilded revolving doors of Bergdorf recently, whether a

tourist or, on Dec. 17, the actress Susan Lucci in a salmon-pink mink, has been given a hero's welcome, with an honor guard of dotting sales associates.

And, yes, those doormen really are cheerier. Jim Gold, the chief executive of the store, said he replaced the security company that hires them "when we found the ones we were using weren't as friendly as we wanted them to be."

The store now devotes its staff meetings every Saturday morning, before it opens, to the subject of customer service. Although Bergdorf was already known for attentive details like sending thank-you notes to customers, several shoppers reported receiving them recently for buying as little as an US\$18 bottle of nail polish or a lipstick.

With signs that this holiday shopping season will not be much better than the last, retailers of all stripes are looking for new ways to make shopping more pleasant. There are improvements not only at fancy stores, but also at mall chains like J. Crew, Gap and Macy's.

Many retailers have been soliciting feedback in person and online as they try to improve the overall shopping experience, after the deep discounts of 2008 left them walking a tightrope with consumers. While desperate to win back customers, the stores are also trying to persuade them not to expect such big sales this year.

"Every customer is valuable," said Ron Frasca, the chief merchant of Saks Fifth Avenue, "and they're even more valuable today because there are fewer of them."

But stores have a long way to go. Recent surveys from



A shop assistant holds a bottle of perfume on sale in an Hermès branch in Paris.

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several research firms show that consumers continue to rate fashion retailers poorly on customer service.

"Retailers are notoriously bad at understanding what the consumer wants," said Robert K. Passikoff, the president of Brand Keys, a market research company based in New York. "They've learned they have to execute better inventory control, but it's still a 'We'll put it out and they'll buy it' mentality."

A report entitled the Retail Service Quality Index, released Dec. 1, rated the service in luxury stores like Nordstrom, Bergdorf and Saks as no better than what was found in home improvement stores like Lowe's and Ace Hardware. Rick Miller, a consulting analyst with the Salt & Pepper Group in Boston, who studied service at 50 chains over four months this year to produce that index, said it was clear that luxury stores were trying harder, but that too often sales associates did not recognize customers who needed help, or the associates could not provide useful information.

"Retailers are very good at the sales transaction," Miller said, "but they are not very good at building sales relationships. If I am not going to get service that is any different walking into Wal-

Mart as walking into Nordstrom, why would I go to Nordstrom?"

Still, stores are trying. At Macy's, where the sales floor at this time of year looks something like a commodities exchange, executives recognized that people seeking to return an unwanted gift — an ugly wallet, a goofy sweater — do not want to offend the gift-giver by asking for the receipt, and are frustrated that without one, many stores refund only the lowest price of the sale season. So Macy's associates recently began affixing a small return sticker to each purchase, with a bar code that tells the amount that was paid.

Lord & Taylor has been coaching sales people to be less intimidating. When approaching a customer, they are not to ask, "May I help you?" Instead, they might remark on what the customer is looking at, saying something like: "That's a great sweater. By the way, we have it in three additional colors." Brendan L. Hoffman, the chief executive of Lord & Taylor, said that the company also tried to offset the impact of fewer full-time sales people by hiring more seasonal help this month and training those employees more rigorously.

"As the business gets more challenging, customer service is one of the first places we're going to look to improve," Hoffman said. "It's kind of like mom and apple pie."

Retailers have also augmented their customer loyalty programs, in which they offer points for purchases that later can translate into gift cards or extra discounts. Bergdorf sent out US\$100 gift cards, no strings attached, to some of its best customers this fall. But less-frequent shoppers,

too, are finding that the symbolic velvet ropes of Madison Avenue have fallen, even at Hermès, one of the most prestigious brands in luxury fashion and, as such, one that previously could afford to tell customers they had to join a waiting list if they wanted to buy a certain purse.

"That's the kind of store where they really don't care if they don't have what you are looking for," said Jody Black, a Manhattan mother of three. "You walk in there and you don't even know it's a recession."

So, when she was looking for a handbag at the Hermès store on Madison Avenue in November, Black was pleasantly surprised when a saleswoman tracked down the exact bag at another store in Texas and had it shipped to New York. When it arrived, Black realized it was a little too big for her taste, so the saleswoman found her another one in California. It was just right. And when Black happened to go back to the store last week, she said, there was yet another surprise.

"The same saleswoman came right over and asked, 'How are you enjoying the bag?'" she said. "I was totally impressed."



◀ Fashion designer Zac Posen paints a dress on a live model inside the display window of the Bergdorf Goodman store for the Fashion's Night Out event in New York during the opening of New York Fashion Week.
▶ Shoppers cross the street outside Saks Fifth Avenue last month in New York.

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