

# The Luxury Service Blueprint: Crafting Excellence

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# Editorial

When visiting a luxury retail establishment, what do you expect as a customer? A personalized one-on-one walkthrough of the latest product line, perhaps. Or an offering of champagne, sparkling water, or wine as you peruse. What about your experience outside of the physical store? Maybe the expectation is a dedicated sales associate ready to reach out about the latest product lines and help schedule in-person try-ons of hand-selected items tailored to the customer. Or exclusive access to online purchases prior to anticipated lines being released to the general public.

Those are a few aspects brands are expected to consider when defining their customer experience processes and guidelines. Brands that understand their primary customer demographics and associated preferences can craft a narrative for customers. This dictates the continued loyalty they could garner through differentiation from direct competitors. The luxury market is competitive and only the most dedicated brands with the best service model can capture significant market share.

The purpose of this insight paper is to define a “best-in-class” service experience, driven by expertise in the luxury market, customer experience, and service strategy. By identifying common customer personas and their known preferences in the experience space, we can craft that top-tier model brands should deploy. The blend of the 3 primary facets in the operational space—people, process, and technology—drive the design of the ideal model. And, to conclude, there are numerous benefits that are realized through integrating the ultimate service model.



# The Customer Service Experience

**First impressions matter**, especially when it comes to the customer service experience. From how a customer is engaged in a brick-and-mortar store experience to a digital interaction, brands look to build best-in-class service offerings to set them apart from the competition. Sia Partners executive, Tom DeCarlo, an expert in the client services, technology, and operations space, stated, “Service does not begin until you hang up the phone, as that is when true client experience starts.” The post-interaction process is vital in the delivery of customer experience, especially in the luxury sector where customers value and expect a seamless and personalized follow-through.

The quality of the service experience is influential for a brand’s reputation,

customer loyalty, and potential sales. Brands with premier service offerings target strong customer relationships and curate a memorable end-to-end experience, driving customer loyalty, positive word-of-mouth, and referrals.

## **What are the components that drive customer experience?**

There is no one-size-fits-all model, but there are certain foundational components that are essential to a seamless customer experience.

## **Components that Drive Customer Experience**

**1. People:** The people component involves the regional and global teams overseeing end-to-end customer care and experience. The core functional areas within which teams

operate are the following: Customer Support, Customer Relationship Management, and Customer Experience Management

• **Customer Support:** *Operating as the frontline ambassadors of the brand, customer support provides ongoing post-purchase or technical assistance, addressing all inquiries related to a customer’s purchase. By offering personalized interactions and genuine care, they foster trust and loyalty, turning potentially negative situations into opportunities for positive brand engagement. This group can include contact center representatives managing interactions online and over the phone.*

• **Customer Relationship Management:** *Individuals within this function enable customers to have success-*



ful purchasing experiences. Beyond transactional support, the goal is to develop close interpersonal relationships with customers. This group include sales associates who are tasked with delivering consistent and quality service.

• **Customer Experience Management:** This function crafts a tailored strategy and approach aimed at delivering superior support to customers throughout their purchasing journey. This process ensures that both in-store and online experiences align with the company's brand and culture, maintaining high-quality and exclusivity.

**2. Process:** The process component involves the key activities and methodologies retail interactions and management to ensure efficient operations. The overall customer experience process begins with understanding and defining the customer through customer segmentation. Knowledge of customer profiles determines all subsequent activities, as it is centric to executing customer experience. From this foundation, brands can establish protocols and standards for employees, ensuring consistency and excellence in customer experience delivery to the targeted customer base.

• **In-store:** Curating the in-store experience involves promoting a targeted workflow that adheres to specific customer preferences and behaviors, fostering a top-tier experience for all customers globally. This process begins with the initial customer greeting, which is a critical touchpoint that can significantly influence the customer's perception of the brand. Employee training is essential, ensuring staff have comprehensive product knowledge and can provide personalized assistance. Additionally, aspects such as store design and layout, as well as effective queue management, are crucial components in developing an elite in-store experience.

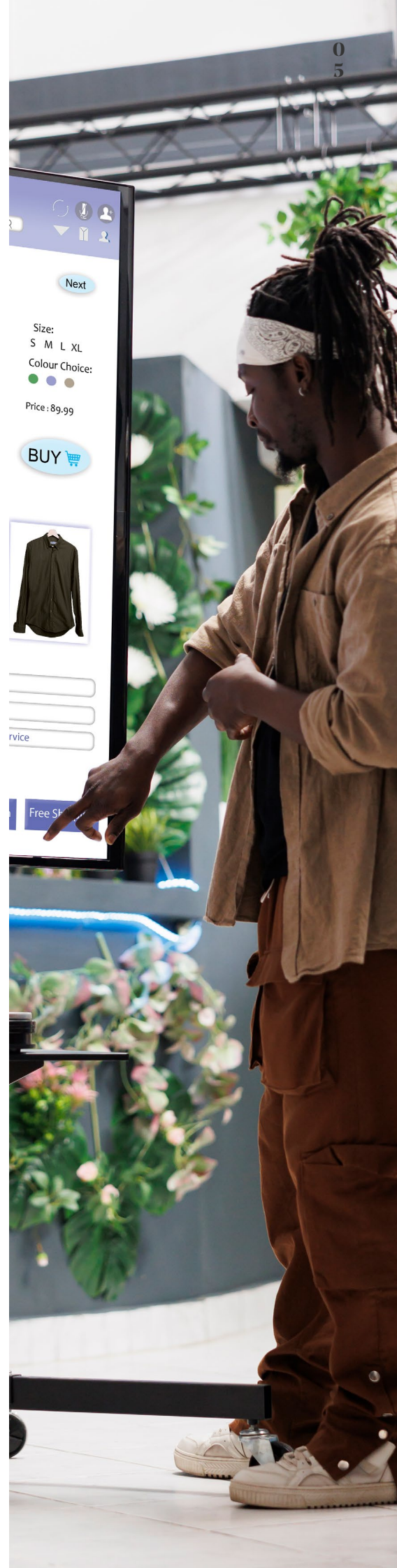
• **Back-end Operations:** Streamlining back-end operations is crucial for efficiency. By pinpointing and automating high-volume manual processes, a brand can significantly enhance

performance. Key areas to focus on include inventory management, order processing, data analysis, supply chain coordination, and staff training. These elements are vital to ensuring every aspect of the customer sale is managed effectively and seamlessly.

**3. Technology:** Enhancing operations involves integrating a suite of technologies aimed at enhancing customer care and creating unique digital experiences. Modern consumers expect personalized interactions across all touchpoints, and the advanced digital tools that comprise a service center technology ecosystem make this possible. By leveraging technologies such as customer relationship management (CRM) systems, artificial intelligence (AI), and automation, brands can gain deeper insights into customer preferences and behaviors. This allows for more tailored and responsive service, enhancing overall satisfaction and loyalty. Additionally, innovative solutions like virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR) can create immersive experiences that differentiate a brand and engage customers in novel ways. Ultimately, the thoughtful integration of technology not only streamlines operations but also elevates the entire customer journey, turning every interaction into an opportunity to build lasting relationships.

**The service experience is a critical part of a luxury brand's success.**

Focusing on delivering a quality product is what distinguishes a good brand from a great one, as "89% of luxury customers consider the quality of service as important as the product itself". While product quality remains important, public perception of customer care significantly impacts a brand's success. Luxury brands prioritize a customer-centric approach in their delivery model to continually foster brand loyalty and advocacy through positive word-of-mouth. It is not just about selling luxury goods; it is about delivering luxury services that exceed customer expectations.



# Who Are The Customers Purchasing Luxury Items?

**Historically, only nobility and the upper class comprised the luxury-buying demographic.**

Through evolving societal norms and expectations, that pattern has shifted. Today, economic demographics no longer serve as a boundary to purchasing luxury goods. Instead, emerging research suggests that luxury customers can be divided into three key groups, or customer personas: The traditional luxury customer, the emerging affluence luxury customer, and the aspirational luxury customer.

## Customer Personas

**The traditional luxury customer** is defined by repeat luxury customers who have belonged to elite social classes with “significantly higher income than their country’s GDP per capita”. Largely, this group possesses a minimum net worth of \$30 million in investible assets and are mostly found in the USA, Europe and China. The majority of this group are 50 years of age or older. This group is often familiar with and has a long purchase history of luxury items and grew up around luxury. In luxury experiences, the traditional luxury customer cares about quality products, exclusive experiences, and verified authenticity. Examples of offerings enticing to this group include invitations to runway shows, private

Maison appointments, and white glove delivery. Moreover, traditional luxury customer cares deeply about alignment in brand vision (what the brand stands for or is about), product development, and the customer experience. This group takes tremendous pride in their status as luxury buyers and want to be recognized for their brand loyalty and purchasing power.

**Emerging affluence luxury customers** represent a market separate from the traditional luxury customer by their newness to extreme purchasing power and luxury goods and services. An academic study of service delivery for these customers noted that this group can be defined as: the “economically nouveau riche that becomes a repeat purchaser of luxury goods and services.” This customer was likely not exposed to luxury products and services throughout their development or through their socioeconomic class, distinctly stratifying them from the traditional luxury customer. The emerging affluence luxury customer purchases luxury to experience a “heightened emotional satisfaction from their consumption.” This group primarily values a symbolic connection to luxury, leveraging luxury items and services for self-expression and status identifiers. Moreover, they will engage with luxury brands that mirror their aspira-





tions and serve as a testament to their success. The neo-luxury customer will become well-informed and thoroughly researched before making a purchase, likely influenced by social media and Internet trends. The neo-luxury customer segment is ever-evolving and is posing the biggest challenge for luxury brands, but also the greatest opportunity for increased profits.

The **aspirational luxury customer** is the final customer persona, encompassing individuals from middle or lower socioeconomic backgrounds who upgrade their purchase behaviors and product preferences to align with luxury standards. This group represents a surprisingly large volume of luxury customers. The aspirational

luxury customer is primarily exposed to luxury through social media and social media influencers, celebrity endorsements, and targeted digital marketing. This customer is generally sensitive to discretionary spending, but highly values the status and social acumen associated with purchasing and using luxury items. While this is the primary purchase driver for the aspirational customer, they are, similarly to emerging affluence customers, driven by emotions of achievement and pride. Moreover, this customer values trends and fashionable items, often influenced by what is currently in vogue. This customer is perhaps the most difficult and arguably important demographic for luxury brands to court and maintain

relationships with, as they represent a high volume of sales, but are sensitive to economic headwinds.

In conclusion, the landscape of luxury consumers has evolved from being the exclusive domain of the elite upper class to encompassing a diverse range of economic backgrounds. This shift has resulted in the identification of three primary customer personas: traditional luxury customers, emerging affluence luxury customers, and aspirational luxury customers. Understanding these distinct groups allows luxury brands to tailor their strategies and offerings to meet the unique needs and aspirations of each segment, thereby maximizing engagement and profitability in a dynamic market



# Trends Dominating the Service Space

*Trends and dynamics within the luxury service sector are evolving. Historically, the luxury industry has been reluctant to embrace both digitization and a multi-factor view in service delivery. While luxury brands are aware of the importance of digitization, they often remain cautious about it encroaching on in-store customer interactions. Nevertheless, with AI and digitization increasingly shaping customer expectations, it has become evident that luxury brands cannot continue to resist the advance of digitization, but instead must find ways to adapt to it.*

**The History:** Luxury brands have shown reluctance to embrace online sales. In fact, it was not until recently that Chanel joined other brands like Hermès and Louis Vuitton in offering online sales to consumers. This hesitation towards establishing an online presence stems from the belief that luxury shopping is an experience, one that cannot be replicated with a simple click of a mouse. Yet, these elite brands must acknowledge the opportunity in e-commerce, as online sales for luxury are expected to grow to 32% of sales, up from 20% in 2023. It is imperative to strike a balance between over-digitization and maintaining a bespoke customer service experience.

The emphasis on exclusivity can explain the initial resistance towards digitization. There is an aspect of control over the in-person experience that brands crafted and refined over decades, unlike the constantly evolving nature of the digital sphere. While in-store, employee behaviors are regimented with strict training to ensure perfection and precision in all interactions. Such idiosyncrasies include presenting products in specific manners tailored to the brand's target demographics and, at times, discouraging apparent «non-customers». This balancing act between encouraging target customers and discouraging non-customers explains why luxury brands want their employees to remain in control - something that can be difficult to accomplish online.

**The Rise of the New Consumer:** As Millennials begin to dominate the luxury market, we see a shift in luxury service trends. What once was a domain primarily occupied by Generation X consumers, known for their appreciation of tradition, desire for status symbols, and collection of exclusive items, the industry is now seeing an influx of Millennial consumers. This group differentiates itself because they have a greater

willingness and enthusiasm to adopt technology while still embracing the tradition, naturally blending the new with the old. Utilizing digital channels to provide an omni-channel experience can be a perfect mix for luxury brands. Harper Concierge, for instance, provides a try-before-you-buy service where customers order online and a style concierge delivers the products to the customer's door to try on at home. The customer will only purchase what they keep and the concierge retains unwanted items – the perfect hybrid model.

**Dominant Trends:** The digital age has spurred numerous advancements in the way luxury brands conduct business:

**1. Artificial Intelligence (AI):** A growing number of luxury brands have begun integrating AI into their service strategies to offer a highly personalized shopping experience, leveraging technology with human interaction. AI can analyze customer data at a more granular level, providing brands with greater insight into their existing customer base and identifying the buying trends of target demographics. This allows brands to tailor their interaction strategies, product marketing tactics, and other customer-facing initiatives. For example, The Ritz-Carlton Hotel Company, L.L.C. uses AI to personalize room settings based on guest preferences gathered from previous stays (i.e. pillow type, dining habits, activity requests, etc.), ensuring a unique and comfortable stay with each subsequent visit. AI, as a foundational advancement, has elevated brands' abilities to truly deliver unique experiences.

**2. Spatial Computing:** As customer segments cycle through each generation, brands integrate more modern components into their traditional frameworks. A great example is the emergence of extended reality and the Metaverse, a hot topic amongst Generation Z. Brands have catered to the surge in interest by building creative and engaging experiences to target younger demographics. Especially during the pandemic, when in-person interactions were either limited or nonexistent, brands leaned on this new method of engagement to maintain or create connections with their customers. Gucci's Gucci Garden immersive experience is a notable use case, bringing together digital muralists to create virtual displays and showcasing the latest clothing lines to introduce new buyers to their brand.



From a service lens, augmented reality has propelled opportunities forward. Chanel introduced smart mirrors in their Parisian boutiques to help facilitate the try-on and buying process. A high-tech mirror displays the customer's choices that were either pre-selected or chosen while in the shop, offering multiple angles of product visualization. As more products are selected while browsing, the technology captures the RFID chip and displays it in the mirror. Over time, the technology has evolved to allow brands to harness augmented reality effects as in-store purchasing resumed. This new-age technology has helped further bridge brands with their customers and allowed organizations to recognize the merits of digitization.

**3. Infrastructure Modernization:** Since the pandemic, there has been a greater presence of online and virtual product management, making it convenient for consumers to enjoy personalized shopping from the comfort of their own home. As luxury brands continue to offer more robust online sales to consumers, they must continue to modernize their infrastructure. Luxury consumers expect the same attention to detail and tailored experience online as they do in person. Some brands such as Gucci have closed the gap between in-store vs. online experience by offering virtual try-on (VTO) technology, which is accompanied by the presence of an online sales associate. Additionally, many brands have increased the capabilities of their online chatbots and conversational AI. For example, during a past New York Fashion Week, Burberry launched a chatbot that allowed customers to go “behind the scenes” of the September collections and shop pieces from the fashion show directly from the app. Going one step further, the brand also utilized its messenger bot to send push notifications to every person that had previously interacted with it. To generate the best results from conversational AI capabilities, it is important to understand, connect, assist, and automate a consumer's preferences, making the buying process deeply personalized. In fact, conversational AI has made it easier to track and record customer preferences to incorporate into future conversations. Brands are continuously finding ways to offer similar personalization and expertise through their online chat services just as they can in store.

**4. Post-Purchase Care:** Many elite brands have commitments to exceptional post-purchase services and care, such as repair, maintenance, and post-purchase surveys. For example, some of these brands use the post in-store purchase survey as a comprehensive tool for the brand to understand the customer experience. These post-purchase surveys allow the brand to reflect on their in-store service, but also convey to the customer how much they value their opinion. Other brands stress the importance of enhanced after-sales services, such as maintenance and repair, because this can enhance customer loyalty and lifetime value turning a one-time buyer's business into lifelong patrons. For example, Bottega Veneta offers “Certificate of Craft”, where certain handbag models can be brought in for a lifetime complimentary refresh and repair, and they will supply a loan handbag if it will take a significant time to repair.

The unique combination of the rise of AI and digitization, coupled with changing consumer expectations has compelled luxury brands to adapt their service strategies. By utilizing tools and technology to enhance personalized service, brands can create memorable customer experiences. The shift towards semi-virtual service models, virtual try-ons, and increased use of digitization during the in-person shopping experience highlights the industry's evolution and willingness to meet the demands of modern consumers who value both convenience, exclusivity, and emotional connections.



# The Ideal Service Model

Ultimately, the ideal service model is reflective of a brand's customers, touchpoints, and values. However, when operating within the sphere of luxury, there is a general structure and best practices to follow for the creation of the optimal experience, developed by service strategy experts. In academic research within service, "outstanding luxury service experience may allow customers to become so involved in the experience that it becomes a form of temporary escape, and that this pleasurable escape is a desired part of customers' value process" (6). To create the experience of "escape," organizations must be well-structured and equipped. Luxury goods and retail organizations should hinge their customer service and experience strategy on three focal components: customer segmentation, service tools, and training and recruitment. These strategies are core drivers under the framework of people, process, and technology, and are both individually beneficial and additionally support the impact and outputs of the others.

## Process: Customer Segmentation

Crafting an effective service strategy for luxury retailers necessitates a segmentation of the client base and the identification of customer personas. Understanding who a customer is, is imperative to servicing the customer well, and this is particularly true within high-value, luxury consumer goods. Service should differ between groups of clients, and a structured, methodical approach to client segmentation enables this.

A potential framework for segmentation is a data-driven understanding of customer geography, distribution channels, purchase history, and net worth. These datapoints reflect tangible and individually significant customer attributes:

1. An understanding of geography lends itself to location-based differences, such as Asian preferences for "ultra-personal" experiences" or European preferences for more detached service ().
2. An understanding of distribution channels, between physical stores, specialized intermediaries, and the web, allows the luxury organization to understand where a customer is pur-

chasing and market to them through that channel.

3. An understanding of purchase history enables insight into customer preferences, allowing for more personalized recommendations and targeted marketing based on product segmentation.
4. An understanding of customer net worth, particularly for ultra-high-net-worth clients, flags needs for potential "ultra-luxe" services, such as private store experiences and access to runway shows.

This framework—an understanding of geography, distribution channels, purchase history, and net worth—is an excellent platform from which to tailor service strategy for clients.



## Technology: Service Tools

Tools and technology are imperative to delivering high-quality service. To optimize service, luxury brands should implement technologies that fulfill the following categories: customer engagement, contact center tools, and marketing technology. For luxury retailers in particular, this may take a more individualized approach, like dedicated phone numbers and client service professionals for unique customers. In partnership, these categories form a well-rounded, methodical, and data-driven approach to service.

- *Customer engagement describes technologies that collectively focus on improving and managing the overall customer experience by leveraging data and insights to enhance customer relationships. This can include customer relationship management (CRM), customer experience systems, and customer data platforms. These would contain data on prior purchases and customer service interactions, which, in a luxury setting, would be impactful in understanding what segment a client belongs in.*
- *Contact center tools are a comprehensive ecosystem of tools to handle customer interactions across various channels, incorporating call center software, self-service technology, workforce management, email management, and artificial intelligence. These tools represent a baseline of service delivery via inbound and outbound communications and represent a more generalized way to contact a luxury retailer.*
- *Marketing technology is a tangential and essential component of service strategy for luxury organizations. These technologies, like email marketing and marketing automation software, help organizations plan, execute, and manage*

*marketing campaigns, automate repetitive tasks, and analyze performance to improve customer engagement and conversion rates.*

Luxury organizations have many softwares to choose from within the framework of customer engagement, contact center tools, and marketing technology. These categories represent key service goals, such as maintaining customer relationships, allowing open customer communication, and driving sales through outreach. In tandem with customer segmentation and the optimal personnel, luxury retailers can optimize their service approach.

## People: Training and Recruitment

Finally, training and recruitment represent critical and ongoing functions of service delivery, responsible for the human touchpoints and operationalization of strategy. This is multifaceted; it requires selecting qualified and highly trainable individuals, and developing deep product expertise, sales skills, and customer empathy within them. Tom DeCarlo noted that «Effective recruitment and training in customer service are pivotal to exceeding customer expectations. The right hires and continuous development programs create an empathetic and well-informed customer service environment.» Primarily, effective recruitment is necessary to cultivating a brand and sales. Brands should consider communication skills, innate empathy, and attention to detail. Additionally, sales expertise with an emphasis on subtly upselling and cross-selling while maintaining professionalism and discretion are necessary qualities within the luxury retail environment. Cultural fit within the brand's environment, adaptability,

and teamwork are other factors. Brands must be mindful of geographical and organizational fit; for example, one expert asserts new storefronts should consider recruiting salespeople from the same neighbourhood—even if they do not have luxury retail experience—because they will have knowledge of the neighbourhood's customer. Recruitment is deeply personal to the brand and ethos of an organization, but there are essential qualities all luxury retailers should search for.

The second component is training, which aligns naturally talented individuals with the brand. Training is more iterative, with onboarding and “on-the-job” training being the two primary components. Because of the specificity and brand alignment of luxury retail, onboarding should be a relatively long process, acclimating new hires to brand standards, training them on sales and technology techniques, and educating them on products and offerings. However, this is merely the first step. Managers should engage in role-specific training, continuous improvement and feedback, and evaluation and assessment. The paramount goals within recruitment and training for luxury retail is product expertise, environment-specific sales techniques, and customer empathy. While individual approaches may vary, across the board, luxury requires keen attention to these within hiring and personnel management.

These three focal components provide a framework for luxury retail organizations to provide the experience that customers increasingly desire. By strategically intertwining these components, luxury retailers can not only elevate individual customer interactions but also amplify the overall impact and outcomes of their service delivery.





# Benefits of Integration

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*Integrating the ideal service model yields significant benefits, such as increased customer loyalty, brand differentiation, revenue, and operational efficiency.*

## Increased Customer Loyalty

Integration of a strong service model contributes significantly to increased customer loyalty, which can be evidenced by metrics such as Customer Lifetime Value (CLV) and customer retention rate. CLV measures the total revenue a business can expect from a single customer over their entire relationship with the brand. Brands that prioritize customer experience see a 1.6 times higher CLV than those that do not. As mentioned in The Customer Experience section of this paper, by delivering exceptional service and personalized experiences, luxury brands can boost CLV. Satisfied customers are more likely to make repeat purchases and engage with brands over the long-term, enhancing the CLV. Additionally, a high customer retention rate demonstrates that customers are loyal to the brand, choosing to continue their relationship rather than switch to competitors. In both instances, this loyalty is a testament to the effectiveness of the brand's service model in meeting and exceeding customer expectations.

## Brand Differentiation

Brand differentiation is not just a strategy, but a necessity for a brand's sustained success. By integrating the ideal service model luxury, brands will have a significant competitive advantage in the market. Brands set themselves apart from competitors through delivering service with personalization, impeccable care, and technological advancements. In addition, enhanced

reputation management, a theme that was explored earlier in this paper, is enhanced by consistently delivering exceptional service. This translates into favourable reviews and high Key Performance Indicators (KPIs), such as sentiment analysis and positive word-of-mouth referrals. For example, brands like Louis Vuitton and Chanel are renowned not only for their products, but for the personalized experiences they offer. These initiatives enhance the brand's image and help create memorable moments for customers. This strategic focus distinguishes luxury brands from their competitors and strengthens their position as leaders in the luxury market.

## Revenue

Revenue is one of the most telling measures of a company's success. By ensuring the ideal service model is seamlessly integrated into operations, brands can significantly increase their revenue. As discussed in the "Ideal Service Model" section, training is a crucial component of the service model. In this case, training can equip sales associates with the skills to effectively cross-sell and up-sell. Ensuring an associate can confidently recommend a related or complementary product or service to meet needs not met by the original product is imperative to increasing revenue. In the specific case of luxury, associates should already be aware of a customer's preferences – making cross-selling even more seamless. Additionally, the ideal service model positively influences several KPIs, such as average order value (AOV) and sales growth rate. Meeting and exceeding the needs of customers encourages repeat and a higher average number of purchases, thereby driving revenue KPIs upward.

## Operational Efficiency

Strategically incorporating best practices in people, process, and technology lends itself to enhanced operational efficiency and decreased operating costs. Clear guidelines, standardized procedures, and the right technology stack ensures consistency in service delivery, minimizing errors and saving time. The organization becomes streamlined and has a defined flow to service interactions, which also enhances the employee and customer experience through the achievement of a higher service level standard. This creates a positive feedback loop, within which employees are engaged and empowered to resolve customer inquiries more quickly. Ultimately, this leads to cost savings for both client service centers and their clients, minimizing the cost per interaction (7). Implementing an effective service strategy not only enhances operational efficiency but also leads to significant cost savings, which allows additional investments into client services and poises the luxury organization for long-term competitive advantages.(7).



## Conclusion

Service is the foundation for the overall customer experience, as it plays a pivotal role in shaping a brand's reputation, customer loyalty, and sales potential. Bridging intangible elements such as brand perception and emotional engagement with the tangible product allows customer service to take the lead in creating a successful brand strategy. Because luxury consumers vary widely, from the first-time buyer to seasoned high-net-worth individuals, it becomes necessary to adapt the service model to meet diverse needs.

Additionally, as millennials increasingly dominate the luxury market, luxury brands must find ways to shift towards implementing digitization into their service model to meet the needs of customers. Despite brands' historical reluctance to embrace digital advancements, consumer expectations demand that these same brands innovate, while also maintaining the exclusivity and control inherent to in-person interactions. Luxury brands must continue to focus on embracing digitization, while also focusing on customer segmentation, leveraging tools and technology, and investing in training and recruitment. The focus on these strategies will not only individually enhance service quality, but also collectively create a cohesive and exceptional luxury experience.

# Your contacts

## Tom DeCarlo

Client Services,  
Technology & Operations  
Financial Services Industry  
**NEW YORK, NY**  
tom.decarlo@sia-partners.com  
+1 (714) 453 - 7185

## Alexandra Ko

Client Services,  
Technology & Operations  
Luxury & Lifestyle  
**NEW YORK, NY**  
alexandra.ko@sia-partners.com  
+1 (650) 208 - 4150

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