

CORBELLINI · CERINI
PALADINO

The Changing Roles of Salespeople and Managers in Fashion Retail

The role of sales associates and store managers in the fashion and design industry continues to evolve. To cultivate lasting relationships with customers, retail professionals today must possess strong storytelling and advisory skills, as well as a keen entrepreneurial mindset. Additionally, sustainability training is recognized as essential to strengthen the value proposition offered to customers and promote a more informed buying process, while at the same time enhancing the attractiveness of retail positions and increasing retention.

RETAIL//FASHION//SUSTAINABILITY//INNOVATION//TRAINING**ERICA CORBELLINI**

is a Lecturer at Bocconi University (Milan). Her main research topics are business model development, digital strategies, retail experience creation, ingredient branding and supply chain traceability for fashion and luxury companies.

LICIA CERINI

is a Postdoctoral researcher at Bocconi University (Milan), Department of Management and Technology. Her main topics are innovation, growth strategies and sustainability, with a special focus on small and medium-sized enterprises and fashion and luxury companies.

LUCIA PALADINO

is a Fellow at SDA Bocconi School of Management (Milan). Her research focuses on the management of fashion system companies, internationalisation and diversification strategies in fashion, branding strategies in fashion/luxury, the use of digital media in fashion companies, and omnichannel management.

Over the past two decades, large fashion and design groups, both in the luxury and mass market segments, have gradually abandoned their exclusive role as manufacturers of goods and turned into full-fledged retail chains. This transition has made the retail sector one of the biggest employers in the fashion and design world. While in the past, brands favored the indirect sales channel (based on intermediaries such as agents, distributors, and stores that buy and resell products) today much of the revenue comes from directly operated retail channels, where the manufacturer reaches the end consumer through various retail formats. In these channels, the B2C logic prevails, meaning the manufacturer's main objective is sell-out (i.e., selling to the end consumer), as opposed to the sell-in, which characterizes the B2B logic of indirect

retail channels and refers to sales in the store. There are three main reasons that drive fashion and design companies toward downstream integration:

1. To convey brand identity and encourage cross-selling of a total look and lifestyle. (It's easier, no doubt, to promote products outside the core business in directly operated stores.)
2. To get to know the end consumer, a strategic advantage for refining marketing strategies and merchandising decisions.
3. To boost profitability by retaining margins that would otherwise go to retailers and intermediaries.

Some large stores now have the same number of employees as medium-sized companies. For example, in 2023, the most representative store of an Italian luxury brand in Rome's Via dei Condotti employed more than 130 people: about 10% were managers, 65% were salespeople, and the rest were warehouse workers, customer service personnel, administrative staff, and tailors.

Given the centrality of stores, the role of sales staff is vital to raising consumer awareness of sustainability. In recent years, this professional profile has undergone profound changes, requiring not only new skills but also new attitudes. The aim of this article is to explore the evolution of the role of the retail professional, with an accent on the impact of sustainability storytelling in increasing the attractiveness of the position and retaining staff.

INNOVATION IN RETAIL

The new focus of retail is experience and service. Especially for high-end brands, the store goes beyond the function of a simple point of sale to become a space dedicated to creating unique experiences through the sales ceremony. This approach transforms stores into strategic tools for communicating brand values, making them media platforms, in a sense, capable of entertaining

and educating customers with sophisticated, personalized experiences and services. So the store (whether physical or digital) is configured as a profit center, but at the same time as a manifesto and a visual representation of the brand. This leads to the need to maximize not only economic performance, but also the customer experience, incentivizing shoppers to visit more often and stay longer.

Advances in digital technologies and new ways to use consumer data have helped reshape the retail industry (Klaus & Kuppelwieser, 2023). Looking at the latest trends, we see the growing importance of digital experiences, such as virtual try-on, which allows customers to see how desired items would look on them without having to physically try them on. In this highly digital context, the physical store maintains its positive performance and relevance over online sales channels (Altagamma Consensus, 2024), which act as complements and not necessarily substitutes in the omnichannel strategy. Physical stores are seen as destinations where the shopping experience is different from online contexts (Dirvanauskas, 2020).

Innovation in the physical store is necessary, but it is crucial to preserve the authenticity and DNA of the brand. In the context of fashion and design, omnichanneling means, on the one hand, transferring the exclusive in-store experience to the digital space and, on the other hand, creating a fluid customer experience by innovating the offline experience through digital. An example of this fusion of physical and digital is click-and-collect, a service used by many fashion brands that integrates social media features into the retail experience, allowing customers to order items online and receive them at home or in the store. This is where the use of technologies such as AI comes into play, to track inventory levels, study customer buying patterns to assess product needs, and automatically order merchandise for stores. On a day-to-day basis, AI can automate the supply chain, manage cash flow, evaluate pricing and promotions, and monitor key store performance metrics.

FROM CUSTOMER SERVICE TO CLIENTELING

Store management must be integrated into the customer journey, which includes all marketing levers and tools used to engage with customers before, during, and after the purchase. Customer Relationship Management (CRM) is a term that refers to the practices, strategies, and technologies that companies use to manage and analyze customer interactions and data throughout the customer lifecycle, with the goal of improving business relationships, fostering loyalty, and driving revenue growth. Building on the information captured by CRM, the evolution of this approach - clienteling - uses these data in a targeted way to create personalized customer experiences. Clienteling marks a fundamental shift in customer relationships: whereas customer service is reactive, clienteling is proactive (Table 1).

TABLE 1 MAIN DIFFERENCES BETWEEN TRADITIONAL CUSTOMER SERVICE AND CLIENTELING

Traditional customer service	Clienteling
Answers customers' questions	Anticipates customers' questions
Treats all customers equally	Treats each client individually
Collects data to solve purchasing problems	Collects data to personalize shopping
Provides short-term, transactional reports	Fosters long-term relationships based on loyalty

The goal of the clienteling strategy is to consistently convey brand values across all touch points and create valuable and memorable experiences for customers. Clienteling should be viewed not simply as an IT infrastructure for collecting and managing data, but as a complete environment that encompasses the emotions and opinions of customers. This integrated approach is critical to establishing a customer-centric culture

that supports growth through big data analytics, personalized communication strategies, long-term retention, emotional branding, and organizational evolution.

But are store associates prepared for this paradigm shift? The role of salespeople and store managers in the fashion and design industry has been under the lens for several years now. This article explores how these functions are evolving to meet the challenges of digital and sustainability.

THE NEW ROLES OF RETAIL

The Boutique Survey¹ found that there is still limited use of technology and a lack of consistency in promoting the sustainability narrative within the store. More than 80% of boutiques said they would support the introduction of digital training tools for their staff to raise awareness of sustainable brands, products, processes and practices, and to stimulate discussions with customers about sustainability. This approach would help educate consumers to recognize the premium price of quality products.

It is worth noting that upgrading digital skills and ongoing sustainability training are also seen as tools to enhance the role of salespeople, a crucial aspect for the future of fashion and design brands. Indeed, they need to have more and more qualified staff in their stores, but they must contend with the perception of the role as underpaid, monotonous, with long exhausting hours and limited career opportunities. As a result, these stores find it difficult to recruit young talent; the main method is word of mouth. In addition, without improving staff skills, effective sustainability training cannot be transferred to either sales associates or end customers.

In order to understand how roles in stores are evolving, what skills employees need, and how to

1. Between April 2023 and May 2024, after a thorough study of the relevant literature, interviews were conducted with 4 high-end Italian brands and 59 independent boutiques in Milan, 8 of which were re-interviewed for in-depth study. In addition, they examined 45 job descriptions for retail positions in brands and department stores in the fashion and design industry, both Italian and international, advertised on LinkedIn and *The Business of Fashion*.

implement sustainable practices, we formulated some key questions: Can in-store jobs be made more attractive to recruit top talent? What are the necessary skills and abilities that these professionals should possess and develop to cope with increasing digitization and the importance of sustainability? What role should training play in honing skills and retaining staff?

The primary responsibilities of an ideal client advisor, which we identified through this study, are reported in Table 2. Note that while the first six tasks relate to activities that salespeople have commonly performed in the past, the others are clear examples of the modern version of the role. The list of tasks in Table 2 clearly illustrates how the salesperson has become a key business-development figure, often with a budget to create personalized experiences for high-spending customers.

Styling, the ability to make targeted suggestions based on the customer's physical and personal characteristics, is also part of this expertise.

For this reason, salespeople today are also fashion consultants. Their skillsets have also changed with the introduction of new technologies that create immersive experiences and with the use of digital devices that can train them on new product offerings and track all customer information. Finally, salespeople must have a knack for storytelling to convey brand DNA in terms of heritage, iconic products, and sustainability.

In summary, customer relations staff must be proactive, flexible, technology savvy, team oriented, entrepreneurial, and skilled in interpersonal communications. In terms of training, there were some differences based on store size. In the independent boutiques we surveyed, training focused mainly on sales and storytelling activities, which are perceived as indispensable for increasing sales. However, since digital tools and technologies are not frequently used, specific training in this area is limited; the same is true of sustainability issues. In contrast, this content is the topic of training for larger brands, where the need for more articulated

TABLE 2 MAIN DUTIES OF A CLIENT ADVISOR
Engage in cross- and up-selling for all product categories
Maintain product replenishment and physical inventory of goods
Participate in organizing promotional and in-store events
Serve customers according to the brand's sales ceremony
Follow brand standards and policies in terms of dress, personal care, and language
Dialogue with clients and advise them on general trends in the fashion world and developments in the luxury market, showing a passion for these areas
Create an exceptional service experience by welcoming, listening and assisting customers to fulfill and even exceed their needs, demonstrating excellent knowledge of products, including their sustainable characteristics, as well as brand history and heritage
Build and strengthen customer relationships, purposefully interacting different nationalities and types of customers, always putting customers at ease
Ensure qualitative monitoring and updating of customer information according to company tools (CRM), to retain current customers and develop actions with new high-potential customers
Act as brand ambassador to build relationships with new customers and VIP clients
Implement and manage the boutique's promotional programs to keep social relationships with customers active and build customer loyalty
Proactively maintain long-term relationships with customers
Strive to achieve individual and store goals, improving and developing the business
Promote open and constructive communication with other team members, always being cooperative and proposing effective solutions
Help manage product displays according to brand visual codes
Ensure the functional maintenance of the store and appropriate levels of products on the sales floor, in line with company policies and procedures

skills stems from the greater variety of roles.

Figure 1 illustrates the structure of a medium to large store (20 to 100+ employees) and identifies positions that would lead to a career path, in terms of store management and people management. Based on this structure, the top role in a boutique is the store manager, who is responsible for coordinating the other lower-level managers and employees. Essential skills for store managers include the ability to multi-task and make decisions, action-oriented leadership and strong motivation, solid organizational skills, effective communication, an aptitude for problem-solving, team development and coaching, and leading by example (Table 3). More and more often, these professionals are also responsible for raising awareness of sustainability issues. This includes educating employees about sustainable labels and certifications, sourcing and traceability, product sustainability, the environmental impact of transporting and storing goods, as well as managing the repair and reuse of damaged and/or

unsold products.

In addition to the store manager, there are other roles in larger boutiques, such as the operations manager, who is responsible for overseeing all operational activities (Table 4).

Finally, the visual merchandiser creates the setting of the boutique's interior and storefront in line with the brand's target world (Table 5).

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

This analysis of retail roles has shown how the salesperson is evolving into a true advisor, both for existing and potential customers. In terms of the actual sales activity, the transformation will increasingly turn towards edutainment, a mix of entertainment and education on product quality and brand codes. Here, sustainability education will play a crucial role in qualifying the value proposition to customers, teaching them to make better choices.

Some fashion brands have begun to provide

FIGURE 1 SAMPLE STRUCTURE OF A FASHION/DESIGN FLAGSHIP STORE

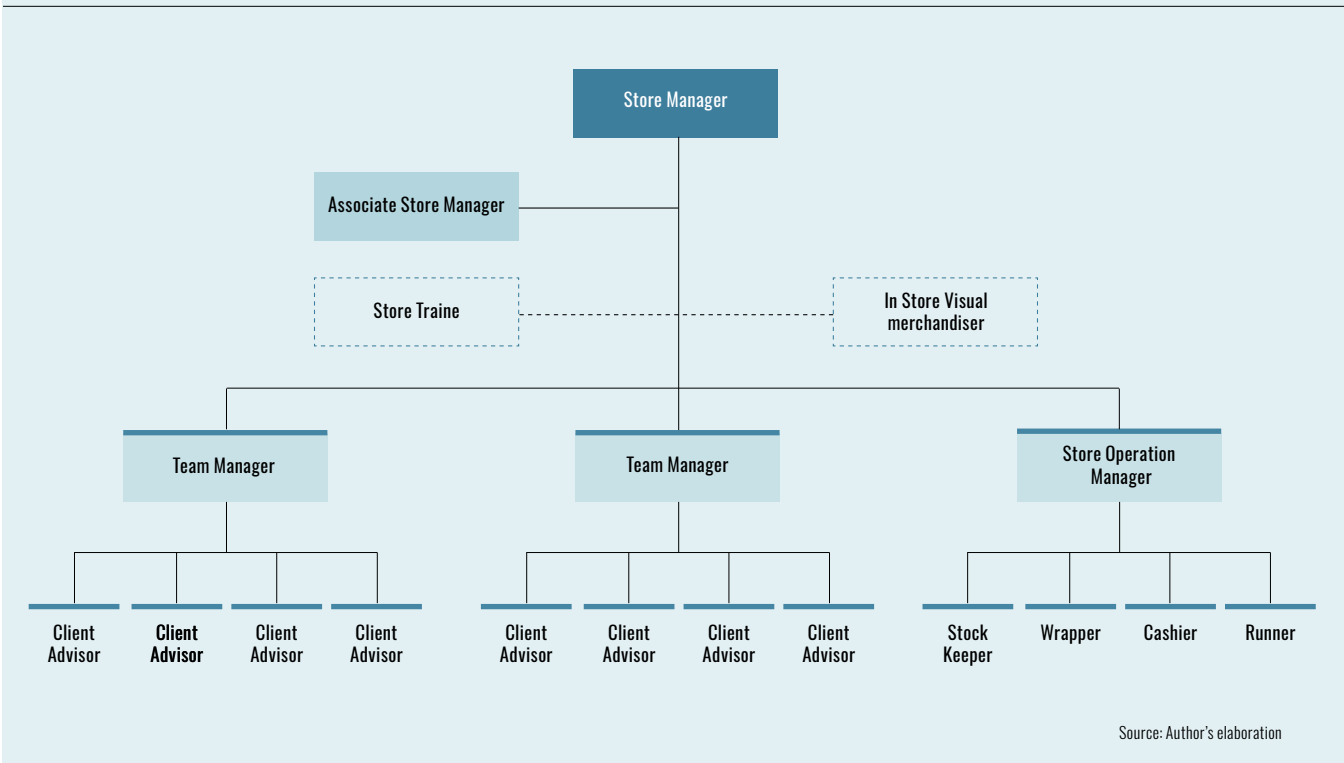


TABLE 3 MAIN DUTIES OF A STORE MANAGER

Set monthly goals and objectives and prepare company reports
Lead the team effectively to ensure individual and store goals are achieved, improving and developing the business
Manage staff and scheduling, and conduct interviews to select new employees
Support the team in building, developing and maintaining the customer database, ensuring repeat visits and customer retention
Make certain that customer complaints are resolved promptly and successfully
Provide staff training and development, performance management and coaching
Organize marketing and promotional activities that reflect the brand image
Recruit new customers and convert them into VIP customers by providing them with exceptional experience and establishing a long-term relationship
Ascertain that all sales and operational policies and procedures are followed in the store
Think hybrid, taking advantage of all types of online and offline outlets
Develop the omnichannel mindset among the team, constantly promoting the different touchpoints of customer experience (physical and digital), a clienteling approach, and sales techniques with a focus on VIPs
Ensure that the team provides exceptional standards of customer service and exceeds customer expectations by following the brand sales ceremony
Maintain the efficient operation of the boutique by following the established guidelines and procedures of the retail academy, if applicable
Verify that all operational standards are followed, from replenishing stock to organizing displays according to brand visual merchandising guidelines
Guarantee adequate coverage of sales targets by analyzing historical traffic data and anticipating peak hours
Provide a consistent example of brand image through attitude, personal care, dress code, language and customer relationship management
Manage all health and safety issues by following company procedures and ensuring a secure environment
Create a dynamic and inclusive environment to motivate everyone to create team spirit and achieve results
Act as a coach for team members and foster a growth mindset by constantly monitoring team development plans and individual progress

TABLE 4 MAIN DUTIES OF AN OPERATIONS MANAGER

Ensure that inventory and logistics are properly managed
Control product quality
Train and recruit new staff and handle scheduling
Supervise the various types of technology used in the store

TABLE 5 MAIN DUTIES OF A VISUAL MERCHANDISER

Manage storefront installation to enhance customer experience
Create a visual strategy, such as placing products under certain lighting so that they are more attractive to customers
Create new proposals to update installations, especially when there are new collections and new collaborations
During the holidays, use seasonal elements to create the theme of a festive experience in the boutique to stimulate customers to make purchases

general product sustainability training through podcasts, corporate videos, quizzes, and role-playing games. It is conceivable that the next frontier will be post-sale sustainability training, particularly in areas such as repair, pre-owned, and recycling. However, as noted above, nothing is being done in this regard by independent boutiques. This tells us that there is a serious need for more sustainability training, a need that is only partially being met and addressed by stores.

Our field study allowed us to create three clusters of stores that require different content and tools:

1. Large brands with directly operated stores, a high level of digitization and retail academies that already address sustainability, albeit limited to internal products and business processes.
2. Large brands with directly operated stores, a high level of digitization, and retail academies that do not address sustainability.
3. Independent multi-brand boutiques and concept stores with little or no digitization, no retail academies, and no sustainability focus.

The same independent boutiques that are lagging behind in training their employees are crucial in conveying messages to local communities and promoting small and medium brands that represent the excellence of Italian supply chains. This is an opportunity to “train-the-trainers” (i.e., to train salespeople so that they in turn train end customers) through videos delivered on platforms accessible to clusters of stores. The survival of independent retail depends on its ability to improve the quality of its value proposition in the eyes of its customers; ESG practices are an indispensable element to this end. Also essential is to offer employees opportunities not only for economic growth but learning through continuous training as well.

Here are suggested topics for training modules and future sales content:

- Helping customers understand how to read labels, explaining the performance and alternatives

in terms of sustainability of textile and leather supply chains.

- Clarifying the concept of Life Cycle Assessment (a methodology that measures the environmental footprint of a product/service throughout its life cycle).
- Compliance with regulations standards or best practices aimed at achieving goals, such as sustainability, which must be pursued not only by the company itself but also by the partners it works with).
- Outlining available options when a product reaches the end of its life cycle.



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MANAGERIAL IMPACT FACTOR

- **The role of the salesperson:** This has evolved to encompass complex activities such as clienteling, promoting business development, styling, using digital skills, and brand storytelling.
- **The role of the store manager:** An increasingly complex job, these professionals must now focus on multichannel, customer base, competitors, brand DNA, and product and people management, which is becoming critical.
- **Centrality of experience and service:** The integration of advanced technologies (video, podcasts, AI, blockchain) makes the store a critical juncture in the customer journey, offering edutainment and interaction before, during and after the purchase.
- **Sustainability as a tool for building loyalty:** Client advisors will be vital ambassadors in educating customers about sustainable practices, adding value to the value proposition and shoring up store loyalty.



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