



Dressed for Success

By Abby Kleckler

Online shopping sometimes takes one-on-one customer service out of the equation. New ventures, however, have embraced personalization to match or exceed brick-and-mortar stores.

Blake Smith, co-founder of Cladwell based in Cincinnati, Ohio, knew he needed help after realizing just how much his clothes communicate before he even opens his mouth. He sent out an SOS to his friend Chris Merchich, who at the time was a brand specialist for Macy's.

"I get 50 emails a day, and I'm horribly cheap. I never buy anything from emails," Smith says. "But when Chris sent me clothes recommendations, I bought everything in the message."

Smith suddenly realized, "Everybody should have 'a Chris.'"

In 2013, Cladwell was created to help men look their best without the stress of entering a mall or the anxiety of not knowing what to choose. By asking the right questions, co-founders Smith, Merchich and Tim Brunk, along with the Cladwell team, have figured out exactly what their customers want.

"In order to really sell anything, you have to figure out what the need is that person has," Smith says, "So we ask four big questions."

Build, Lifestyle, Budget, Preferences

Cladwell discovered what areas give them the most information to choose the right clothes for each individual. They need to know a person's body type to determine what looks good, lifestyle to figure out what makes sense, budget so the clothes are viable options and preferences to see what they like.

"I learned the hard way while working in retail on the sales floor that if you don't ask enough questions up front, then you come back and you show something to the guy that he hates," Merchich says. "He ends up looking for another salesperson to help him, or he just walks out of the store."

"You don't get a lot of shots, so as much information as you can get up front as possible is really going to help you."

The company's simple two-minute survey gives stylists enough information to work with, but additional questions can be helpful.

"It's OK if we ask something and the guy doesn't know," Merchich says. "A guy can often skip a question because he just hasn't thought about it before or doesn't know."

Success comes from tailoring recommendations based on four things rather than just providing random suggestions of what the team thinks is cool.

Urgent Situations, Planned Purchases

Cladwell's research discovered two main types of shoppers, specifically for men's clothes — although the parallels to other industries can't be missed.

"I need it right away so I'm heading to the mall. Please help me," Smith describes the first shopper. This person can benefit from specific, singular wardrobe recommendations to fulfill this immediate need.

"I go to the mall once per year, and I buy five pairs of pants. I buy six pairs of shirts," Smith classifies the second type of shopper. This person needs more of a capsule wardrobe, multiple staples that can mix-and-match for a minimal yet

comprehensive closet.

Cladwell stylists need to know what type of shopper they are serving or else the recommendations may get overwhelming, or they may fall short.

"I think there's a shift happening right now," Smith says. "It was 'give me more and more options;' now I think it's 'give me fewer options but better options.'"

The convenience factor of having everything at your disposal in a short period of time has some appeal, but it fails to give direction.

"You can have self-checkout at Nordstrom and that would be OK — you could actually do it — but people don't want self-checkout," Smith says. "People want an expert to help them."

How have your employees become the expert customers trust for recommendations? Do you have "a Chris" who knows what works best? What questions can you ask up front to really personalize someone's experience?

"We're not actually about fashion. We're not about making sure every guy looks exactly like how we want them to look or follows certain rules," Smith says. "We see clothing as part of the portfolio of things men should be choosing in their lives."

For Cladwell, it's not just the clothes that keep customers coming back to the website ... it's more the feeling customers get. Could the same be said for your garden center? **LGR**

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