4 Challenges I Overcame While Working in Business Development for a Luxury Company

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Opening a flagship showroom for an Italian design brand in New York City presents all sorts of challenges. I accomplished a project like this when I was at the beginning of my career in my 20s. I didn't have experience in business development, I didn't know how to secure high-end projects, and on top of that, it was my first time working in the design luxury industry.

The brand I worked for is very established overseas, but that doesn't translate automatically in the US or another geographic market. In my experience, it's like building a startup from the ground up. The company had barely any sales in the region, few clients, and no distribution network. I started from scratch, and luckily, I had a mentor that taught me everything about business development, sales, and prospecting high-net-worth clientele. But he was physically located on the West Coast, and most of the time, I had to figure things out by experimenting.

I keep receiving requests to help other companies in a similar project, so I decided to share with you the four main challenges I faced and overcome while opening a brand new

showroom for a luxury design brand in the US.

Challenge #1: Investing in a showroom location

When choosing the location for a new showroom, you want to think about who your clients are and where they hang out – for both brick-and-mortar retail and online.

It's worth investing in a smaller space where valuable clients browse and a much bigger boutique in a part of town your clients will never travel.

As a location for the luxury showroom I opened in Manhattan, I choose the D&D Building (Decoration & Design Building). The D&D is a well-known design center where interior designers and decorators come to shop for furniture, home decor, etc., for their affluent clientele.

My goal has always been to transform the showroom into a destination where clients can experience the brand and not just buy products. I did that in several ways:

1. I held in-store workshops to educate clients about craftsmanship and offer behind-the-scene details.
2. I teamed up with artists and showcased their works during events.
3. I created a lounge where designers could hang out and present ideas to their clients.
4. I made sure customers enjoy themselves while spending time in the showroom.

Challenge #2: Prospecting clients from scratch

The advantage of choosing the right location for your business guarantees you valuable traffic from the very beginning. Even

if you start from a blank slate as I did, clients will discover and visit you. You already did half the job.

But you can’t rely only on foot traffic. You want to have an organized approach to prospecting from the start. Since I didn’t have any existing portfolio of clients, I started from scratch and cold-called the list of the top 100 interior designers and invited them to the new showroom in the D&D. I remember it took me 16 tries before I got one “Yes.” To master how to conduct cold calls is an art in itself and is worth the pain to learn.

Challenge #3: Designing a retail concept store that enables transformative experiences

The only space available in the Design Center was a long and narrow 750 square ft. space on the 5th floor with only one window at the very end. It was rather challenging, considering that I wanted to display large colorful Murano glass chandeliers with a lifestyle branding approach and offer a lounge space.

The solution of a gallery-style boutique was the most appropriate, considering the constraints of the space. When it comes to visual merchandising, make sure to consider all four key elements: store exterior, store layout, store interior, and interior display.

The most important thing is to think about is what kind of brand experience the boutique will enable, and harness all the potential of the space. Ultimately you want your brand to become an agent of transformation for your customers, offering transformative and creative experiences.

Challenge #4: Building a team of brand custodians

Finding the right members for my sales team has been the most difficult challenge. Selling luxury is not everybody’s cup of tea, as well as connecting and engaging with affluent shoppers. Many people are intimidated or are uncomfortable in communicating high-ticket prices. I saw hesitation even in the most talented salespeople when it comes to telling the price of luxury. Others are too focused on sales and forget to develop a fiduciary relationship with clients. The solution is to train each member to be a brand-custodian and a product expert, rather than just as a sales associate. This way, you make sure engagement is first, and transaction comes second.

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