Bestseller project halts online returns surge

By Sandra Halliday - October 15, 2020

Bestseller has managed to reverse a rising tide of online returns following the creation of a small team at its e-commerce office in Amsterdam.

The Danish fashion retail giant said it had been seeing “a worrying trend” heading into its 2019/20 financial year with its online return rate having been growing steadily for half a decade and set to hit an all-time high.

It brought together 10 e-commerce specialists from various departments to investigate returns and attempt to reduce their impact on the firm in a project dubbed Return Revolution.

While it didn’t give specific figures for a reduction in its returns rate, it’s clearly pleased with the results. It “closed out the financial year successfully having curbed the upward trend in our return rate and achieving a significantly lower percentage than the previous year”.

Jordan Burke, who oversaw Return Revolution, said: “Returns have a big impact on our profitability and environmental footprint, so we were concerned about the upward trend. We started with a question that we hadn’t asked before: ‘how do we reduce the business and environmental cost of returns?’ We knew that if we were to be truly successful in responding to this question, we needed to look at returns from all angles.”

The project resulted in over 130 ideas in response to the question with 100 of them being followed up. The initiatives they introduced included data and financial analysis, as well as changes on its brands’ websites and in the way it operates.
One "significant change" was to extend the firm’s online return window from 30 to 100 days.

Team member Sofie Bertholdson said: “It might seem counterintuitive, but extending the return window has proven to be the right thing to do, both for the customers and the company. Customers can try on the items at home without feeling stressed to make a fast decision. As a result, customers are now keeping more items and returning less.”

And it has begun a process in the Fulfilment Centre where it adds a tag to high value, high return items. The aim is to not only to lower the return rate for these items, but also to deter customers from wearing products and then returning them.

And as well as minimising the volume of returns, the project also wanted to minimise their impact, which included investing in new environmentally-friendly cleaning equipment at its Return Centre in Poland to remove small stains and odour, "heavily reducing our need for external cleaning". The new cleaning options "restore products to pristine condition faster so stock can be sold again, and they make a positive environmental impact compared to alternative options by reducing water, paper and chemical usage".

The project has now evolved into a new e-commerce Customer Team led by Burke with Bertholdson responsible for ongoing innovation in her role as Operational Excellence Specialist.

The company is also continuing to collect more data via the online return portal, to understand why customers return, which items they return and when.

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