Booting up

THERE ARE SO MANY NEW GADGETS TO ENHANCE DIGITAL SALES IN THE FASHION E-COMMERCE SPACE. R.M.WILLIAMS IS SCALING A FEW OF THESE ABOVE ITS SYDNEY STORE.



Directly above R.M.Williams' new Sydney CBD flagship is a space dedicated to the 92-year-old brand's virtual customers. Called the 'Homestead', it houses a showroom, a boardroom and a customer service space that is "reshaping the paradigms of what a typical call centre environment would be" - according to R.M.Williams head of digital Emily Anders.

Anders joined the company in September 2022, following a seven-year term at Gucci where she oversaw the luxury retailer's own version of a customer experience centre. It was her role to build a unique proposition for R.M.Williams, which officially launched alongside the opening of the flagship store beneath it in late November 2023.

Homestead employs 12 customer experience ambassadors, with three of these remote workers. The space uses technology designed by global software developer Powerfront and allows the 12 employees to interact with customers across a host of different platforms including online live chat, email, phone, text, and Whatsapp. They can even watch those same customers browse the R.M.Williams online store on a TV screen.

Literally.

The TV display looks like a top-down floor-print of an R.M.Williams store, with every customer browsing the online store appearing as an avatar. Where they appear on the online store depends on where they are on the website, whether browsing womenswear, Akubra hats or boots, or even at the checkout.

Anders says the technology can also show if a customer is a retained VIP or a new acquisition, whether they're in Australia or overseas, and even measures temperament if they face frustration points. This is all based on website tracking data, customer details, as well as algorithms based on customer browsing behaviours that will continually be built into the system.

Anders says all this information allows agents to be proactive in their service.

"Part of the visualisation is a kind of gamification, where we are able to recreate that crucial in store experience," Anders says. "We're building in rules and algorithms to pick up on all of these little changes in intention and then we proactively engage with that customer.

"It's a very smart and intuitive technology and it makes sure that the utilisation of the Homestead is kept at capacity. We're continually just eliciting connections - a really human connection - in otherwise what is a very faceless shopping experience digitally."

While customers are the key focus, Anders says Homestead agents are also benefitting from the technology.

"We wanted to actually bridge that gap from the agents virtually into a physical sense where they can see the customers, they can read their intentions and their motivations.

"And that, of course, helps the customer service agents to actually predetermine and have more of a contextualised dialogue with the customer."

According to Anders, 76% of the brand's online audience is from mobile devices. R.M.Williams also has a large cohort of customers from the regional space, who may be located anywhere from 100-1,000km away from the nearest store. They are the brand's 'Heartland' customers.

She says the key is to bridge that geographic boundary with human experiences.

Two months after the launch of the Homestead, the next phase in bridging the gap was hit with the introduction of virtual selling. Through video, the fashion retailer can now take clients through a personal shopping experience within Homestead.

Homestead director Miles Ruge, who joined the company in November last year to head up the space, says the bulk of the 12 customer experience ambassadors are trained to undertake live video shopping, with the brand also tapping into a select few of its longstanding in-store shop assistants to help.

"They obviously have a wealth of knowledge, particularly in the fitting space when it comes to our footwear," Ruge says. "So we'll be using their expertise as we begin this journey."

Powerfront, which already covers the brand's live chat capabilities and the gamification software of its online store, is also behind the virtual selling. This software also includes social commerce capabilities, as well as booking appointments for both the stores and the Homestead.

Ruge says he is aiming for virtual video shopping to take up at least 20% of the live chat customer interaction workload already undertaken by the 12 staff, which itself already takes up about 50% of the entire workload.

Part of this drive will be introducing new concepts ahead to complement the video shopping element. For boot fitting in particular, Ruge says the company is finalising details on a special pack that can be sent out to customers, which could include a use-at-home sizing device.

"It will also look at things like those sensory elements that you can't get through a computer screen," Ruge says. "So leather swatches, the signature scent that we've got. How can that package, which can be delivered to the customer prior to their appointment, transport them into an R.M.Williams store?"

From there, Anders says R.M.Williams will then tap into 'live commerce', where customers can view and buy directly from live video experience. Think TVSN, but on social media.

Customers will be able to interact directly with the live video, such as skipping through chapters and learning more about the product.

"So essentially, it's curated; it will be filmed from our virtual showroom, and all of the products that are featured within that video will be instantly engageable and shoppable," Anders explains. "It's a really interactive experience, which uses ambience, emotion and sound."

The team recruited to Homestead has been built from the ground-up.

"We built a new team," Anders confirms. "But we have invested a lot in that team in terms of brand immersion - spending a week in Adelaide in our workshop with our craftsmen, spending time in the stores.

"We have also, as part of our team composition, recruited from within our store retail environments as well. We've enabled that cross-pollination from a retail experience into the Homestead.

"The homestead, for us, epitomises a new ecosystem of the organisational structure." ●