

# THE EMPOWERED CONSUMER

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The goal of this article is to shed light on the changes the consumer has gone through and how those changes can be addressed by retailers to impact day-to-day business success.

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**T**he “empowered consumer” is one of the changes retailers face as they actively engage in the greatest societal revolution of our time. We in the lighting industry must turn the focus inward to adapt to these changes.

#### THE SHIFT

We can't begin to talk about today's empowered customer without first examining their journey from passive purchaser to commanding client. There is no documented timeline that tracked this power shift from retailer/manufacturer to the customer, but looking back now there were some tipping points.

For decades, retailers held all the cards clients needed — such as information, pricing, and product availability. The shift toward the empowered customer came so slowly that at first it was almost indistinguishable...so much so many retailers chose to dismiss the start of the digital divide as a passing fad.

The impact of the digital era has made many changes and continues to alter the way customers behave and the demands they make on retailers in any realm when it comes to making purchases. The client with the power of the World Wide Web can disrupt the traditional retail sales process — and *they are*.

#### A LEVEL PLAYING FIELD

One lesson that rings true: information = strength, and clients with the most information are powerful. Information is no longer the tool of the retailer. In the pre-digital days of selling, retailers could decide what they would — and would not — share with their customers. Now, without ever leaving the comfort of their homes and in a matter of seconds, clients can access information, read product reviews, and make decisions on which stores to visit. They are being digitally provided with enough

hard facts to make an informed purchase decision.

Say good bye to the client walking in at the **discovery phase** — when the customer comes into a store to get all the latest information on style, color, and trends. This was an important segment of the sales process, when the skilled sales professional was building rapport, collecting information, and assessing the needs of the customer. It is this part of the face to face sales process, plus several other client behaviors, that have been transformed.

#### TRANSFORMATION #1: TRUST & RAPPORT

Building trust and rapport online is challenging. This, in part, is due to the inability to interact with clients directly because the discovery phase of the shopping process has shifted online.

The question to ask is: How do we build trust and rapport before we ever meet the customer in the real world?

The digital actions you take can begin to build trust and rapport with potential customers. It begins with a plan that demonstrates what you do, why you care about what you do, and the people you do it for. In real life or in the digital world, people relate to people first and foremost.

To reach the people you want, you must relate and educate, and drop the sales-y actions. The adage “People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care,” gets a bit of a 21<sup>st</sup> Century twist. To demonstrate you care about your clients, educate them before they ever know they need you — and do it in a fun and engaging way.

#### TRANSFORMATION #2: FACE TO FACE ENGAGEMENT

Swap out the typical “Needs Assessment” stage of your sales process for a “Knowledge Assessment.” Having a firm and empathetic understanding of the client's knowledge is crucial when guiding them to a purchase.

Tread carefully with clients when remedying misinterpreted or misgiven data. I have a favorite phrase, “People do not argue with their own information.” If they read it and believe it, it is true to them and shaking up or clarifying that truth can be unsettling for many reasons. The most evident of those reasons is the pre-conditioning the public has gone through when it comes to the clichéd assumptions of the salesperson: “They will say anything to get a sale.”

#### TRANSFORMATION #3: REINFORCE KNOWLEDGE AND DROP THE SALES PITCH

After hours upon hours of research, the client has a level of product knowledge and pricing we have not experienced in the past. This makes it a requirement that our sales and marketing teams know and share the real details of a category, item, or vendor.

Both your digital and physical presence is about educating and serving the customer, and being the ultimate resource on their buying journey. The “empowered customer” is causing modifications in the way we train our sales teams, too. While the basics of selling are still an important foundation — rapport-building, controlling objections, active listening, and guided questioning — we need to reinforce the skill sets of hospitality, empathy, and emotional intelligence.



More is less when it comes to digital marketing and enticing clients with a shortening attention span.



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**ADVERTISING OVERLOAD: DON'T PUSH CUSTOMERS IN YOUR DIRECTION, ATTRACT THEM**

The average consumer spends almost six hours a day on digital devices. This is not breaking news since marketers have been watching this trend grow continually at a dramatic pace since 2012.

What is happening now is that the consumer is overloaded with advertisements in their newsfeeds and apps. This is the result of a strategy popularized by centuries of print media to get "impressions." What it is also doing is driving eyes away from our digital efforts. "Impressions" don't add up to sales; engagement that is seamless between the digital and physical worlds does.

More is less when it comes to digital marketing and enticing clients with a shortening attention span. Creating advertising that breaks through all the digital noise and wins the battle for attention can be done by touching on emotional triggers.

With so many different people reading this article – all on various types of sales platforms – the emotional triggers below can build trust in a variety of situations.

- ☛ Stories can create an emotional connection and reinforce behaviors
- ☛ Create curiosity in a product or about a service
- ☛ Solicit customer testimonials; they speak loudly to their peers
- ☛ Share the latest information about style and technology, and present it in a client-friendly way
- ☛ Provide incentives to visit your showroom or to set an appointment

The formula for success is creating personalized content that supports the context of your message and brand. The goal of the content is to induce client interactions and get people into the store or to submit a request for more information. Cookie-cutter posts or repetitive "Liking" and sharing of another's produced content will not deliver the differentiation needed to stand out in this cluttered digital space.

**THE BENEFITS OF SATISFYING THE EMPOWERED CONSUMER:**

After investing time, effort, and money in learning how to adapt to the "empowered consumer," what are the benefits we can expect?

We will attract clients who want to work with us, or should I say, work with the image we portray; so

select your persona carefully and then build around it. If our digital appearance is consistent with our physical reality, we are much closer to converting the prospect to a client.

When you have connected with the empowered client and they are pleased with their experience, they can be the most loyal customers. Having a recognition strategy for these folks keeps you top of the mind with them and in your corner.

Additionally, "empowered customers" are happy to share their real experiences on their favorite social platforms. The details they share can be a positive testimonial of product, service, and experience – or the pain felt from a bad occurrence.

In today's digital selling climate, I look to Dr. Robert Cialdini's book *Influence*, and the effects that four of those points have on our clients: commitment and consistency, social proof, authority, and liking. Each of these points can create a result when attempting to reach the "empowered customer."

I believe that showrooms that concentrate on communicating the "authority" aspect of the principles of influence will be paid the most dividends. Because lighting is not an everyday purchase, we must inform consumers that they need to have an expert resource on their side. Much in the same way that they can research an ailment online, people still want to see the "expert" physician to confirm their findings. For that reason, one of your online personas should support your expert status. ❖



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