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How to design for your customers

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HOW TO DESIGN FOR YOUR CUSTOMERS



Selma Bamadhaj and Nur Rulhuda of Lully Selb school us in the importance of personalised service and turning customers into friends.

The global Muslim fashion market is estimated to be worth \$327 billion by 2020, but here in Singapore, modest fashion is still in its infancy. Selma Bamadhaj and Nur Rulhuda, co-founders of Muslimah label, Lully Selb, are spearheading the movement, catering to both Muslims and Non-Muslims looking for edgy, modest clothing.

“We feel that our clothing line can create a conversation between Muslims and Non-Muslims by raising awareness of the different modest wear styles. You don’t have to wear a long, covered dress or a tudung like how a typical makcik dresses. Lully Selb has become our personal mission to spread this message.”

Despite their grand ambitions, the conversation we’re having keeps circling back to one thing — their customers. Small business owners tend to be closer to their customers, but Selma and Huda speak of their customers with a certain intimacy: they are friends who share a similar taste in fashion; they are also friends who share the occasional dinner table. Whether consciously or not, the enterprising duo has built their business on an age-old secret: listening to their customers and actually acting on their advice.

What’s the story of Lully Selb?

Selma (S): We wanted to create a brand that could be appreciated by both the mainstream and modest wear market. For example, you (as a Chinese) wouldn’t wear something from the modest wear market because it looks like a *baju kurung*. We wanted to change that.

Rulhuda (R): We prefer urban, edgy styles — we noticed the commercial market had nice clothing but they were often too translucent. It was difficult for us to wear without layering but that’s not always practical with the weather.

Is it challenging conveying what Lully Selb is about?

S: It is. When we began, our brand was so new to the market. People would say, “wow, how do I wear this?” because they still had this mindset that headscarves had to be simple, boring, and traditional.

R: Another challenge was that some of our prints were too loud and not everyone liked them. We had to fine-tune our designs and find a balance using softer colours and subdued prints.

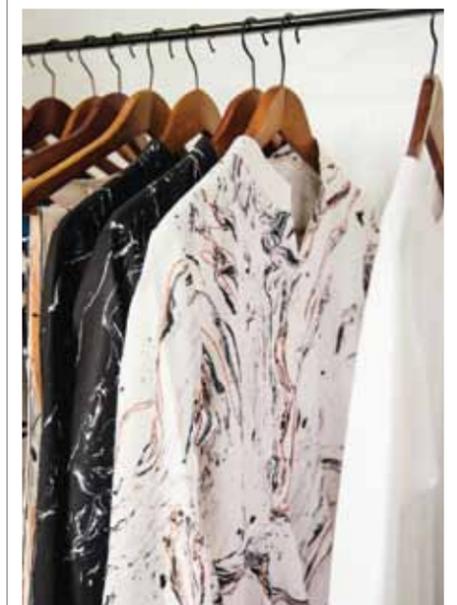
S: Huda is an artist and I wear the commercial hat, so there are times when our perspectives clash. The business definitely respects her creative direction, but we also know we have to find middle ground.



So as an online retailer, what are your thoughts on service in the online fashion industry here?

S: The online industry is about automation, like how you receive a thank you email once you make a purchase online, or get an immediate notification once your purchase has been shipped. And automated features can be quite smart; they can customise emails with “Dear (customer name)”. Honestly, though, we both think that customers are so used to seeing these types of emails it’s become necessary to do more than just rely on automation.

For me, service is about being personal to your customers. Even though we send out standard mailers, we still write personalised emails to some of our customers. Sometimes we even write personalised, handwritten notes. A lot of our VIP customers have become our friends, actually. They have our personal numbers and know our personal social media accounts, and they give feedback all the time. They’re loyal and supportive. There is trust between us. So to me, that’s what service should be about — maintaining close, personal relationships with your customers.



So we refine Huda’s artistic concepts based on customer feedback or current trends for commercial purposes.

How did you gather this feedback?

R: We had many trial-and-error moments, so we decided to get feedback from our customers on what they really wanted by organising focus groups.

S: We handpicked the people: most were our core customers and some were

influencers. We also selected customers who had bought from us many months before but were quiet after.

The sessions were mostly about determining the winning prints. We shared the products we were planning to release to see how customers reacted. We got to know their tastes and preferences better by showing them different colour palettes and silhouettes. We used the information to refine the prints before production.



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Does this extend to offline touch points too?

S: Yes. Serving our customers is a continuous and conscious effort we make every day, so while we're pretty much always online, we feel being offline is just as important. It's where we meet new customers and how existing customers get to actually see and feel the products, talk to us, and learn more about our brand story.

R: It's important to be present every time we have a pop-up store event, because many new customers come down just to meet us. We sometimes host workshops where customers can come behind-the-scenes to see our process. We also host dinner sessions for our VIPs whenever we launch a new collection. The dinners are a time for us to catch up on our lives and get to know each other better.

It's just you two running the business now, so how do you think your service philosophy will change when you grow?

S: Expanding the business is important, but existing customers also come first. Our core customers will always be our priority, especially at events. I feel like one of the points many businesses fumble at is when they start to grow and lose their identity. We know there are customers who go "Oh I used to support that business but they're now so big and they've changed."

We will probably be adding to the team soon and we want whoever joins us to first believe in the brand and our approach. What we're looking for is someone with that personal touch. Training will come hand in hand, but it's less about skills and more about who they are as a person.

With this framework of service as a very personal, tailored approach, do you think there are areas our local service industry can work on?

R: First impressions matter. If the staff doesn't acknowledge me when I first enter a shop, I immediately don't feel like the service is good. But I usually stay for a long time if they show they are ready to serve.

S: I feel like once you've travelled abroad, you realise how our local service standards still have a long way to go. I most enjoy walking into a store when the owner's there. I think people are more passionate about service when the store is their own baby. And I think the service in the beauty and wellness industry here is generally good.

But for the most part, I think customer service isn't in our nature or culture. We aren't the most polite or passionate people in the world. Everything's rushed and everyone's stressed out — sometimes the waiter at the restaurant doesn't even smile at you. And at the end of the day, I feel like all it takes is a smile to show customers you're there for them. ✦