

RETAIL CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE FUNDAMENTALS

[2ND EDITION]





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Retail Customer Experience Fundamentals
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Retail Customer Service Fundamentals

2nd Edition

by



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Retail Customer Experience Fundamentals

Introduction

This guide is intended to provide a basic understanding of the role of a retail sales associate or retail customer service employee. If you understand the points you will be able to speak to a prospective employer in terms they relate to and, once hired, you will be capable of providing customers with a positive shopping experience. Remember, most hiring Managers want to hire people who understand what it takes to be successful in customer service.





We can give you many examples of candidates' responses which clearly indicate that they really don't know what is required to become successful in retail or customer service. For instance, when asked what

customer service means many people, particularly beginners looking for their first retail job, respond with something like **"it means helping people find what they are looking for"** or **"being friendly and asking them if they need any help"**.

There is nothing wrong with these responses and, certainly, friendliness and helping people are a good start, but they simply don't compare to these statements: **"making customers feel great about being in your store; so great that they tell others about their positive shopping experience"** and **"building rapport and asking questions to understand their needs so that I can show them something that they'll want to buy"**.

This guide gives you information to help you understand what is really expected of a retail/customer service employee and what will make you successful.

Remember, it's all about the customer and it starts and ends with you!

It is important to understand, right from the start, that you must possess a strong work ethic in order to succeed in satisfying customers. If you do not really want to put in the effort and work hard at your job, then it is going to be difficult for you to serve customers well.

Customer Satisfaction

You have probably heard the phrase, "Rule #1: 'the customer is always right', and Rule #2: 'If the customer is wrong, refer to rule #1'." Some interpret this to mean that the customer is always deemed to be right, no matter what. And if the customer is right then it follows that someone, or





something, in the store must be wrong. Of course, that is not always true. What the phrase really means is that the customer, right or wrong, must be handled with care.

S/he is the person who makes it possible for your employer **to stay in business**. The **customer pays your wages** and returns profit to the owner of the business. If the customer does not buy whatever it is you are selling, the business will fail – it's that simple.

Before we go any further it is important to understand that when we discuss the customer, we are talking about normal people who behave in a normal fashion, even if they occasionally raise their voice to get their point across.

We are not talking about abusive, nasty people who really should not be allowed to get away with treating you or your co-workers the way they do.

Nor are we talking about those people who will do just about anything to get what they want, even if what they want is wrong and is clearly aimed at taking advantage of the retailer.

These people all fall into the category of abusive customers who are not really customers you want. Be cautious, however, when you are determining who is in this category. You will want to look to your Manager for advice on this.

Let's move on....

Customer satisfaction ultimately determines the success or failure of any enterprise. Everyone knows that providing a relatively high standard of customer service is essential to the success of a business.

The problem is that most people talk about it but fail to achieve any real results on the service front. There is often a vast difference between what a company claims it delivers in the area of customer service, and what it actually does deliver.





Generally, the problem is lack of communication, followed closely by lack of focus, understanding and commitment.

So, what does it take for a customer to be satisfied? There are as many answers to this question as there are people out there. Everyone has different expectations.

What you need to do is to provide enough positives during the customers' shopping experience to make them feel comfortable about parting with their hard-earned dollars. They must perceive value in your offering – both product and service.

So how do you, as a retail associate, contribute to this? You may be asking yourself "If everyone has different expectations how can I possibly do it?" And that would be a very reasonable question.

Here are the basics that are required if a customer is to have a **positive shopping experience**:

- + clean environment
- + orderly set-up
- + friendly, well groomed, knowledgeable staff
- + a greeting and welcome into the store
- + clear signage
- + efficient check out
- + perceived value of merchandise or services

Let's look at how these basics pertain to you:

Clean environment: As an employee of the store, it is one of your duties to maintain the cleanliness of the store. When you see dust, get rid of it. When you see litter, pick it up and dispose of it. If something is spilled, clean it up. In many retail stores, there are no cleaners hired to take care of these things. Each and every employee of the store must do their part to ensure the store is clean...very clean.

Orderly set-up: Do not walk past messy counters without stopping to straighten them out. If racks or tables get moved around by customers,





put them back to where they belong. Don't leave ladders or extra fixtures lying around. Remove extra signage that is not in use.

Take a look at the store, from the outside, and ask yourself if it appears to be orderly. If it is not orderly and actually resembles something closer to chaotic, something needs to be done to correct the situation.

Friendly, well groomed, knowledgeable staff: This one is fully under your control. Hopefully you don't need to learn how to be friendly – that one is pretty straight forward.

Being well groomed means that you must be clean and professional looking; your clothes must be clean and pressed, your shoes polished, your hair clean and tidy.

Being knowledgeable is something you must strive to be. You need to read about the merchandise available for sale in your store. You must read and understand how your company operates its stores.

In short, you need to be someone the customer can count on for credible information. So, do your homework.

A greeting and welcome into the store: Nothing says "you're not important" better than ignoring someone who comes into the store. That is simply not an acceptable message for any business to send to its customers. Always greet and welcome your customers.

Clear signage: As an associate, you may not have a lot of control of what signage is present in the store. You can, however, offer your opinion if you find that the signage is not clear.

Let your Manager know if you think customers may be confused by the signage. S/he will thank you for bringing it to their attention.

Sometimes, retailers run different promotions at the same time and signage tends to get a bit confusing. Nevertheless, be sure to point it out to management.





Also, be prepared to answer your customers' questions should they become confused.

Efficient checkout: First and foremost, remember that, once a customer has decided to purchase something they consider it theirs – even before they pay for it – so treat the merchandise with care; place it on the counter carefully and pack it appropriately.

Next, you need to be aware that, at the time of checkout, the customer is finished shopping and no matter how much time they spent shopping, they may suddenly be in a hurry. You must be respectful of their time.

Even if something goes wrong and the customer is held up at the checkout, let them know why they are waiting and how long they will likely have to wait.

This shows them that you are not committing the deadly sin of taking their time for granted.

Perceived value of merchandise or services: Your store offers merchandise or services at a particular price and, usually, there will be value, real or perceived.

As an associate, the biggest impact you can have in this area is to make sure you always show great pride in what your store has to offer and never speak negatively about anything that is being offered for sale in the store.

The Importance of Greeting Your Customers

When you have invited guests to your home, you are expected to greet them when they arrive.

Imagine this scenario: your invited guest knocks on your door, enters the house, removes their shoes and hangs up their coat and then comes looking for you.





Don't you think you would feel bad because the guest wasn't greeted at the door and welcomed into your home? Of course you would. You would never treat a guest that way. You would apologize profusely for not hearing them come in.

Now imagine a similar scenario in a retail store or restaurant. Do you really want customers to come in and be ignored until they need something?

Wouldn't it be so much more desirable to say 'hello' to the customer as they walk in and offer them assistance and information regarding your store?

The greeting is very important. **Don't forget to greet each and every customer.**

Success tip: Always position yourself so that you are facing the front of your store/workplace. This way, no matter where you are in the store, no customer will enter without you knowing.

If you are engaged with another customer at least you can make eye contact with the customer who is entering. This will make them feel welcome in the absence of a verbal greeting. Of course, you should greet them verbally as soon as possible.

Key Performance Indicators

You should know that there are certain key performance indicators, used by retailers, which measure the success of the sales associates, the management, the store, and the company overall. They are usually referred to as KPI's.

As you will likely hear these terms often, we have provided a brief description of the 3 most commonly used KPI's that a sales associate would be held accountable for.





This is by no means an exhaustive list. There are many others that you will come to learn during your retail career. You would be well advised to learn as much about Retail Math and KPI's as you can.

For now, get to know the following:

Sales per Hour (SPH)

This is calculated by dividing your total personal sales by the number of hours you worked in the period.

For example, if your sales for the day or shift were \$900 and you worked 8 hours, your SPH would be \$112.50. That's $\$900 / 8$.

Average Sale per Customer (ASPC)

This is calculated by dividing your total personal sales by the number of customers you personally sold to in the period.

For example, if your sales for the day or shift were \$900 and you sold to 14 customers, your ASPC would be \$64.28. That's $\$900 / 14$.

Units per Transaction (UPT)

This is calculated by dividing the total number of units (pieces of merchandise) you sold by your number of transactions in the period.

For example, if you sold 37 units and you sold to 14 customers, your UPT would be 2.6. That's $37 / 14$.

The KPI's explained above are very often used to determine whether a sales associate is doing the job well enough.

Lack of performance in certain KPI's could signal that more training is needed, the scheduling is incorrect, the associates are not up to standard, etc.





You should make a point of finding out what the standard expectation is for SPH, ASPC and UPT and possibly others that are not mentioned above.

Many stores will monitor more and/or different KPI's. Whatever KPI's are being monitored in the store, there will be standards set for them and you will be expected to meet those standards.

The point of monitoring KPI's, at sales associate level, is to help the Manager determine what steps to take to improve business.

If certain associates are not performing well, it tells the Manager where to invest some effort, training, discipline, etc. Even when business is good, things can always be improved.

Basics of the Sales Process

This Success Guide was designed for people who have no experience in the retail/service industry. For this reason, we will not go into too much detail regarding each step.

With experience, people use the steps in their own unique way – a way that they have found to work well for them.

However, for someone just starting out, it is advisable to keep these steps in mind and to follow them as closely as possible until a personal style or preference takes shape.

Your employer may want to make some slight adjustments to the sales process you are expected to follow but, generally speaking, these are standard.

There are a few simple steps to be followed during the sales process:

- ✚ greeting
- ✚ approach/build rapport
- ✚ determine needs





- ✚ present options
- ✚ overcome objections
- ✚ close

The Greeting:

As mentioned earlier, the greeting is very important to both the customers' positive shopping experience and the sales associates' success.

Customers want to feel welcomed. Always greet your customer in a friendly, enthusiastic manner.



You may say "Hello, how are you doing today?" Or you may become more involved and say something like "Hello, I can see from all of the bags you are carrying that you are having a successful shopping trip today. What can I help you find (or what is still on your list)?"

Regardless of what you say, the important thing is that you have acknowledged their presence in your store and you have welcomed them in a friendly and enthusiastic manner.

The Approach and Rapport Building:

You have welcomed the customer and s/he is now looking around at what you have to offer.

After giving the customer a few minutes to familiarize themselves with your offering, it's time to approach them and try to start building a relationship with them.

You may notice them handling merchandise. That is the perfect opportunity to approach and mention some of the features and/or benefits of that particular item/piece of merchandise.





You may make a comment like “I bought that stereo last weekend and the sound is unbelievable.

If you are planning to update your system we have a lot of options available.” Depending on how the customer responds to you, you can continue talking to them in a very friendly, helpful way.

Perhaps they will tell you about a party they are planning and their need to update their equipment. You can show enthusiasm about their event and ask questions about it – i.e.: “How many people are attending? What is the occasion? Etc.

And then you can move into more open ended questions such as “What did you have in mind?” or “What are you planning to replace?” or “What do you have now?” and “How well has it performed for you?”

Open ended questions require something other than a ‘yes’ or ‘no’ answer. Asking questions that can be answered with a simple ‘yes’ or ‘no’ can keep you asking questions for hours without finding out anything that will help you make a sale.

You’ll be like a hamster on a wheel, spending plenty of time and energy going nowhere; not covering a lot of ground.

So, even during this step in the sales process, it is important to ask questions that encourage an informative response from the customer. You need to get information from the customer in order to proceed to the next steps.

After all, how can you present options (in step4) that are meaningful to them if you don’t have any idea what they are looking for or what they need?

During this discussion you are, in fact, building a relationship with the customer because you are showing interest in them, learning about their reason for being in your store and making friendly, non-threatening conversation.





Determining Needs:

This is where open ended questions are critical. You need to ascertain what your customer wants/needs/desires. Keep asking questions and really listen to their responses. Don't ever assume you know what they want/need/desire.

Customers come from all types of backgrounds and they have all kinds of different lifestyles; they are old and young; big and small; etc. The secret to determining needs is to ask open ended questions, and then listen to the responses.

Listen really well so you can formulate the next question and the one after that and so on...which will do a number of things: 1) it shows your interest in your customer – you are not just asking random questions, you are asking based on what their response was 2) it is the quickest way to actually learn what they need 3) you are doing more relationship building which will help the customer, you and your store over the long term.

So, the best advice to you is: Ask, Listen and Learn.

Presenting Options:

Once you feel comfortable that you understand what the customer wants it is time to start presenting options for them to choose from. You do not have to wait until you know everything, but enough to put you on the

right track. And you will need to know what you are talking about when you start presenting options. Depending on what you are selling, you need to have a certain level of product knowledge.

Whether it's chocolate, clothing, electronics or cars, you need to understand the features and benefits of what you are selling.

So, start presenting options to your customer. As you present each option explain the features and benefits.





You will know, relatively quickly, whether to continue with one option or move on to another one. Pay close attention to the customers' responses and body language and use your best judgment.

One very important note about 'presenting options': It means just that, **presenting** the options. It does not mean mentioning options, or pointing to options, or discussing options.

Take it literally. Present the options physically. This is how you get the customer involved. It is during the physical presentation that the customer can touch and feel the merchandise.

Overcoming Objections:

During the 'presenting options' stage, you may sense that the customer has some objection to what you are presenting. You will want to know what the objection is because it may, or may not, be well founded.

Customers usually do not know as much as you do about your product-although there are some exceptions to that - so proceed accordingly.

Sometimes the customers' objection is based on an incorrect assumption the customer is making. It is up to you to determine what the objection is and then overcome it.

Of course, if the objection is clear ("I don't like the color!") move on. But if the objection is not clear, you need to ask questions to find out how to get to the bottom of it.

For example, the customer may be looking at a suit you have presented and they seem unsure about it. You need to find out what it is that they do not like about the suit.



You cannot continue presenting options that are not acceptable. That is a waste of everyone's time. In a case like this say something like "You're not sure about this one?"





What is it that you don't really care for?" Perhaps the customer will say "I'm not sure about this fabric." At that point you have the perfect opportunity to respond with all of the positive information you have about the fabric of that particular suit.

If the customer responds favorably to what you have told him/her, then you have successfully overcome the objection. If not, you need to find out more about the type of fabric the customer has in mind and then find a more suitable item.

Whenever the customers' objections cannot be overcome, you will have to present more options. The important thing to remember is that by trying to overcome the customers' objections you are offering a service to your customer by providing information that they do not have about the product you are presenting.

If this is done properly, the customer will understand that you are trying to help rather than trying to 'push' the product on them.

Caution: Never continue trying to overcome a powerful objection that the customer obviously has no intention of changing. If you continue to try you will become annoying and you will lose your opportunity to sell something to that customer. No one enjoys being annoyed.

Closing the Sale:

This is simply the 'summary' of the time you have spent with the customer. Usually, at this time, you and your customer are ready to 'sum up' what has taken place.

For instance, using the example above, if you overcame the customers' objection regarding the fabric of the suit you presented, then the following would be considered closing statements:

"It looks like the blue one is the one you are going to go with."

"I can see you're happy with the features and benefits of the blue one."





“Are you going to go with the blue or the grey?”
“Which one did you decide on?”

Note: The above statements could be considered part of a ‘trial closing’ which simply means that, if the responses are not favorable, you go back to presenting options and overcoming objections.

And then close the sale again. Sometimes this process can repeat itself a few times.

Success tip: If you want to gain a comfort level with the sales process ask a friend or relative to role play with you. They are the ‘customer’; you are the customer service associate.

The product you have to sell should be something you are very familiar with and something that you feel enthusiastic about.

The point of this role playing situation is not to turn you into a perfect salesperson –that will take time and practice on the sales floor – but it will be helpful to you to practice presenting the ‘product’ to your ‘customer’.

You can make up the features and benefits and get comfortable trying to convince your ‘customer’ of the value of the ‘product’. Being comfortable with the process also helps you to overcome any fear of rejection you may have.

A word about rejection is called for here: One of the biggest obstacles to new associates becoming successful in sales is their fear of being rejected by the customer.

You must always remember that the customer in your store will benefit from an interaction with you. Whether they are ‘just looking’ or are definitely searching for something you have for sale, you are the person they can look to for assistance, knowledge and information.

Provided you learn how to do it properly and politely there is no reason for the customer to reject you. Another thing – remember that if the customer does reject you, do not take personally.





You are in a business and it is your job to approach, assist and sell to customers.

Features and Benefits:

Features are the functionality and characteristics of the product or service you are selling. Benefits are the translation of the functionality and characteristics into actual “what does it do for me” type benefits to the customer.

Inexperienced salespeople sometimes make the mistake of constantly and endlessly listing feature after feature without telling the customer what benefits can be expected from those features.

Remember, not everyone understands your product or service as much as you do. Some of these features may even have industry specific lingo in them, again with which the customer is probably unfamiliar.

Failing to convert that lingo into understandable and clear benefits will overwhelm and ultimately annoy customers. As we mentioned earlier, annoyed customers do not buy and will probably go somewhere else, where they hope to get clearer communications.

It is very important to know all the features and benefits of your product and services, and once you've figured out what the customer is looking for, limit your feature/benefit listing to satisfy all their stated needs.



The Value of Product Knowledge

Again, while there are certainly exceptions, the majority of your customers know less about the product you are offering for sale than you do.

Read everything you can about the product you are selling. Ask questions to clarify anything you don't understand. You need to be **the expert in the customers' eyes.**





If you are perceived as the expert, the customer will feel more comfortable doing business with you. **Customers want to trust** the person who sells them something.

Customers are used to being duped, scammed, lied to, ignored, hounded, and generally treated like they are not important. If you treat them with the respect they deserve and share your expert knowledge, you have a very good chance of gaining a customer for a long time to come.

Handling Multiple Customers at the Same Time:

There will be times when customers in the store outnumber the sales associates on the floor. During these times you will be expected to serve more than one customer at a time.

You will not have the luxury of spending a lot of time with any of your customers so you will need to speed up the sales process. This can be challenging but there are some things you can do to make it work:

- 1) Be aware of where the other associates are in the store and whether they are occupied with a customer or not
- 2) Try not to act rushed or frazzled; take this in stride as if it happens all the time
- 3) Learn how to excuse yourself from one customer to look after another
- 4) Always go back to a customer you have excused yourself from so they don't feel abandoned
- 5) Sometimes you can 'transfer' or 'hand-off' a customer to another associate who is no longer occupied – you can say something like "I'm going to ask Samuel to show you our selection of suits."





And then introduce the customer to Samuel and tell him what you already know about the customers' needs. For example, when you approach Samuel with your customer, say something like "Samuel, this gentleman is looking for a suit for a wedding he is attending this weekend.

He wants something in dark blue. Would you show him what we have to offer?" Then excuse yourself and attend to another customer; perhaps one who has been waiting for you to return

- 6) Be upbeat, exceptionally courteous and as attentive as possible. Customers will understand that your time is limited when they see that your store is very busy. If you do your best to spend time with them and help them out as much as you can, they will appreciate your efforts.

The point here is that there are times when you cannot afford to spend large amounts of time with only one customer.

If you do, other customers will be unhappy, overall sales will suffer because many will leave and other associates will have to do more than their share to service customers.

It is very likely that your Store Manager has experienced many days when customers outnumber associates and s/he will have certain ideas about handling multiple customers. There may already be systems and guidelines in place for times like this. Ask and learn what you can.

When your store is very busy, co-operation, a team spirit and a great attitude will help everyone – store associates and customers alike.

Handling Customers at the Checkout:

We mentioned this briefly above, in the section regarding the positive shopping experience, but some things are worth repeating. The check out process deserves serious attention due to the fact that it is the last impression that your customer has of his experience in your store.





Customers want to check out of your store quickly. In this 'convenience oriented' society, it is crucial that the checkout experience is efficient and positive.

- ✚ be friendly
- ✚ be courteous
- ✚ be efficient

If you are friendly, courteous and efficient almost any difficulty can be overcome. For instance, when your cash registers (usually referred to as POS – point of sale) are malfunctioning, or the authorization of debit and credit transactions is unusually slow, you can ensure your customers are satisfied by being friendly, courteous and as efficient as you can possibly be.

Make sure that your customers know that **you value their time**. This is critical. Never assume the customer has time to waste.

Discretion: At the time of check out, a customer sometimes finds himself in an embarrassing or awkward situation – their credit or debit card may be declined, or they may not have enough cash.

This is where the skill and good judgment of the cashier or associate is put to the test. There are ways to handle these situations without further embarrassment to the customer.

And think about this...sometimes debit or credit cards are declined for reasons that are not obvious. Sometimes your stores' POS system is at fault; or perhaps the financial institution the customer deals with is at fault.

There are many examples, such as: if a debit card has been compromised without the customers' knowledge, the financial institution may cancel the debit card without first notifying the customer.

They do this for the customers' protection but it can lead to great embarrassment when the customer attempts to use the 'now cancelled' card and it is declined.





So, always remember that you are in no position to make the judgment as to the customers' financial situation. Any judgment you make could be wrong.

If a card is declined, there are things you can say – discreetly, of course – that will allow the customer to avoid embarrassment. Here are some examples of appropriate things to say:

"For some reason, our system is not accepting your card." And then...

"Would you like me to try it again?"

"Would you like to use a different method of payment?"

"Would you like me to hold the merchandise for you?"

All of these questions put the control of the situation into the hands of the customer. They can then proceed in the way that is most comfortable for them.

All of the following comments have been overheard in retail stores and they are perfect examples of comments that **must not** be made:

"Your card is declined."

"Your card is no good."

"Do you have cash?"

"I guess you'll have to come back after you pay your bill."

Take responsibility for your position: If you are a cashier, or if you are an associate who is acting as a cashier, you must know what you are doing and you must be perceived to know what you are doing. That may sound basic but it is far from it.

The cash desk must be well stocked and everything a cashier may need to refer to must be at their fingertips. It is very common for a cashier to give the impression that they are incompetent or uninformed. Usually the reasons for this stem from 1) lack of training or 2) lack of management attention to what is required at the cash desk or 3) a new procedure is not working as it was intended to and no one has reported it.





So, to avoid embarrassment and to avoid making customers wait for no good reason, take responsibility for your own training – always be the first to ask the Manager if there is anything new you need to know - and also ensure that you have everything you need at the cash desk before starting a shift.

How to Learn from Customer Complaints

A complaint from a customer may be considered a “bad thing”. It means your customer is not happy. That's why it's so important to figure out the reason for customer complaints.

If you want to make your customers happy, you have to start by understanding what you might be doing that's making them unhappy.

Some retailers believe that a lack of complaints means they must be doing everything right. Nothing could be further from the truth. Consider these statistics:

- 96% of customers don't complain about poor service.
- 90% of customers who receive inferior service won't come back to your store.

Think about it. Let's say you walk into a store and the staff doesn't wait on you, so you leave without buying. *Do you go back into the store and tell them that the reason you left was because they didn't wait on you?*

When you order a meal at a restaurant and it's only 90% of what you expected (not bad, but not great) . . . *do you send it back?*

Certainly, some would complain. Thank goodness for those few, because the reality is that most people just don't bother.





So, when you do get a complaint, consider that there may be 25 other customers out there who have the same criticism of your product or service, but haven't bothered to tell you.

They've just decided to shop elsewhere! As part of any service quality initiative, you must seek out customer feedback. Complaints are an integral part of that information and provide you with unparalleled opportunities to fix things.

When a customer complains about you in particular, be sure to consider it carefully before becoming defensive. Sometimes customers can teach us. Sometimes they are wrong. Regardless, we need to listen to customer complaints and learn whatever we can from them.

Telephone Etiquette:

This is an area where many, many service people go wrong. It is absolutely imperative that you understand how, and when, to use the telephone.

When the telephone rings while you are serving a customer at the cash desk you must always remember that the customer standing in front of you is paying you money for your merchandise.

That customer has spent time in your store and has decided to give up some of their money for the merchandise or service you offer. That customer is your priority.

Excuse yourself properly and quickly answer the telephone. Put the caller on hold and let them know that you will return immediately upon completing the transaction you are currently involved in.

An appropriate statement would be "Please hold for just a moment while I finish attending to this customer and I'll get right back to you."





Return to the customer in front of you and complete the transaction without seeming rushed or impatient. Only when you are completely finished with the customer in front of you – after you have thanked them for their business and invited them to return – should you go back to the telephone.



I am not suggesting that the telephone caller is not important, on the contrary, but you must prioritize.

At the cash desk, you cannot give two customers priority at the same time. If you try, you will likely provide less than excellent service to each.

The telephone caller will likely understand that you are involved with another customer and will be patient provided you are friendly and courteous and that you return to them as you said you would.

Under no circumstances...ever...should you conduct a telephone conversation with the receiver tucked between your chin and shoulder while you are processing a transaction with a customer in front of you. This shows tremendous disrespect for your customer and they will likely be insulted enough not to return to your store.

An important note regarding incoming telephone calls: Often an individual from your company's Head Office will call the store requesting information from you.

Sometimes it will be your Manager, District Manager, Vice President, or even the President/Owner of the company.

DO NOT LET THIS CHANGE YOUR TELEPHONE BEHAVIOR. Any one of your superiors or Head Office staff should understand that the customer in front of you is your priority.

If you find this is not the case you need to clarify the situation with your Manager.





The Lifetime Value of a Customer

Knowing how much a customer is worth to your store over the long-term is a great incentive to become more committed to keeping your customers happy.

Calculating the lifetime value of a customer is reasonably simple. Take the example of your local supermarket. A typical family of four will spend approximately \$200 each week on groceries and other household items. Given that they may be away for two weeks a year, that means they will shop at their supermarket for 50 weeks each year.

Over the course of a year, this single family will spend approximately \$10,000 at that supermarket. Now, let's assume that the average family stays in their community for 10 years. Without taking into account inflation, that one family is worth \$100,000 (\$10,000 per year times 10 years) to that supermarket.

Now imagine what type of service -- be it speed, friendliness or special assistance -- that family would get the next time they bought groceries if the cashier knew they were spending \$100,000 in the store (not just the \$200 they were spending that day).

It would probably be much better, wouldn't it? Suddenly, when you realize the value of customers to your business over the long-term, making decisions to benefit them becomes much easier. Take the time to figure out what a customer is worth to your business.

Store Maintenance and Cleanliness Standards:

Because the store is open to the public it is very important that the premises be kept clean and well maintained.





The best way to maintain these standards is to attend to them on a continuous basis. Major cleaning and maintenance should be done before or after business hours but many smaller tasks can be performed while the store is open.

Regular dusting, organizing, tidying, folding, hanging, etc. by all employees will help to keep the store in order without a huge time commitment on the part of just one or two employees.

Checklist:

- + glass on windows and doors
- + mirrors
- + equipment
- + floors
- + shelves
- + light fixtures
- + ceiling vents
- + cupboards/closets
- + counters
- + bathrooms
- + garbage containers



Customer Service as a Loss Prevention Technique

Loss prevention means 'to prevent losses of company assets'. Shoplifting creates losses of one of the company's most significant assets – their inventory.

To a new retail person the idea of dealing with a shoplifter (sometimes referred to as a booster depending on the methods) can seem quite scary but you really do not have a choice in the matter if you are to protect the company's assets.





Always remember that your safety is most important. Never put yourself in harms way to 'catch a thief'.

If dealing with a shoplifter conflicts with your ideas on customer service it is helpful to remember that great, focused customer service skills will help you through it. Shoplifters look like every other customer so when you see a customer who looks suspicious you need to pay very special attention to them.

- ✚ Be sure to make them aware of your presence through your greeting and approach.
- ✚ Make a mental note of their physical description in case you are asked to assist in the completion of a police report later on.
- ✚ Stay close enough to see what they are doing. Shoplifters like to hide behind racks and tables.
- ✚ Start a conversation which engages the suspicious individual. Ask the basic open ended questions as you normally would to determine their needs.
- ✚ Do not be deterred when the suspicious individual tries to make you go away. Continue to stay close and keep conversation going.

A real customer will probably enjoy your undivided attention but a shoplifter will likely become agitated because they won't be able to shoplift when you are showing so much interest in them.

If this is the case, the shoplifter will likely leave your store and go elsewhere to commit their crime.

Teams of shoplifters require a different approach. The point of team shoplifting is distraction or 'divide and conquer'.

One team member will demand the attention of one or more store associates or create a major disturbance that will leave the actual shoplifter(s) free to steal as much as they can carry while the disturbance is being dealt with.





How to spot Team Shoplifting:

- ✚ 3 or more individuals entering the store, usually heading in different directions; these teams rarely 'shop' together
- ✚ Usually all well dressed; possibly suits with oversized coats – some of these oversized coats have large, lined pouches sewn inside they may be carrying lined bags which will defeat an electronic alarm system (EAS); these bags may carry the name of a well known retailer but, upon closer examination, you can see the bag is homemade and the retailers name has been printed, fraudulently, on the front
- ✚ Unreasonable requests or demands for your attention

If you find yourself in this situation you will need to act according to the number of staff in your store at the time.

If possible one staff member should be dedicated to each of the 'shoppers'. Staff members should stay close to the suspects, make lots of conversation and maintain eye contact with the suspects bag or coat.

If you are alone, remember to stay calm and do not be distracted by whatever disturbance the 'shopper' is trying to create.

Place a call to the security department in your shopping centre and ask that they come to your store quickly.

Make a mental note of the physical descriptions, as above.

These teams absolutely do not want to be caught because their livelihood depends on their success and they cannot afford to become known to the police.

So, once detected they will likely run from the store as quickly as possible and move on to another store. If you are in a strip mall or stand alone store you will likely be able to get the license number of the getaway vehicle. However, do not put yourself in danger to do this.

Call the police and describe the incident.





You can become a major asset to your company by providing excellent customer service to every single customer who enters your store.

Customer service is the first, and most important, step you can take to protect your company's assets. If you use customer service and selling steps with every customer shoplifting incidents will be reduced.

Shoplifters case stores to find out their level of attention to customers. You definitely do not want your store to be known as one that ignores customers.

On the contrary, you want to be known as a store in which every customer is welcomed and attended to for the duration of their visit. This will not only inspire customers to visit you again and again, but it will signal shoplifters to stay away.

Proper Conduct of Employees

There are a few things that new and inexperienced retail employees often do that are not appropriate. Take a walk through any shopping mall and you will see examples.

Usually these things are done because the employee has had no prior experience or exposure to the retail environment and they simply do not know that these things are inappropriate.

Perhaps no one has ever told them. While many will realize that it is common sense not to do these things, some don't:

- ✚ inviting friends and family members in to chat while on duty
- ✚ using the company phone to call and chat with friends and relatives; sometimes these are long distance calls that will be charged to the company





- ✚ chewing gum or drinking water/soda/coffee on the sales floor
- ✚ offering to get friends or family a good price on merchandise
- ✚ keeping their cell phone turned on and even taking calls while on duty
- ✚ leaning on fixtures or counters
- ✚ standing at the cash desk while doing nothing

Some of the above behaviors are simply inappropriate but others constitute abuse of company property or privilege and, when discovered, would be just cause for dismissal.

Conversation

Too often, retail employees say and do things that they shouldn't. Here are some true examples of inappropriate situations/conversations:

- 1) The customer says "Hello, how are you?" to the cashier at a grocery store. The cashier responds with "Terrible. I'm really tired but my Manager made me come in to work anyway. She's unbelievable. I don't want to be here and I can't wait for my break."
- 2) The customer walks into the store and the associate says "Hi, don't come close to me, I think I'm sick and contagious. I want to get out of here but I can't."
- 3) Two associates are chatting while one of them is ringing in a purchase and the other is standing beside her waiting for the transaction to be concluded. The conversation does not include the customer.

Remember that your customer does not want to hear this type of thing and should not be subjected to it. And your employer certainly does not want you to talk like this, especially in front of customers.





Regardless of the problems or grievances you have with your employer or other employees, or even with customers you are not at liberty to discuss them in front of your customers. It just isn't appropriate so think carefully about what you say and who is around you when you say it.

Punctuality, Reliability and Flexibility:

Employees working in a retail store must understand that there are some special requirements when it comes to punctuality, reliability and flexibility.

The smooth operation of a retail store depends largely on the work schedule. The work schedule takes a lot of time and effort to prepare.

It must take into account the needs of the customers and the business, the availability and quality of life of staff members and management and the wage costs of the business. Once prepared, it may be changed frequently in order to accommodate many variables.

It is very important, therefore, that employees respect the work schedule.

If one employee is late for a shift, another may not be able to go home on time. If an employee does not show up at all, some other employee will have to stay or come in to work on a day they are not scheduled to work.

These things disrupt the business and the lives of the affected employees and, possibly, their families.

As a retail/customer service employee you must be flexible enough to change your work schedule when required.

There are many events which come up unexpectedly and the retailer's ability to provide the staffing required to meet the changing needs of the business will contribute to the success of the organization.

Some people will never understand or accept that work life is different for retail employees. In truth, many professions and occupations demand different things, sometimes undesirable things, of people working in their





field. Think about Doctors, Firefighters, Hotel and Restaurant workers and the hours and situations they must deal with.

The point here is that once you decide to accept a position in retail you must be prepared to work the shifts that are required. There is no nine to five or eight to four in retail. If that is what you want, do not even consider working in retail.

Success tip: If you want to get more hours or be considered for a pay increase remember that your Manager will consider your punctuality, reliability and flexibility in addition to your productivity when making a decision. In retail, these attributes cannot be underestimated.

Understanding and Meeting the Expectations of Your Employer:

First of all, you must ensure you understand what your employer expects of you. For example, what you are expected to wear, how you are supposed to handle certain situations, what you are accountable for, etc.



Your employer has a responsibility to let you know what is expected of you. However, depending on the Store Manager, it may be taken for granted that you know certain things already. Do not be afraid to ask questions for clarification if necessary.

Chances are you will be placed on probation for a certain length of time after starting your new job. If you pass your probationary period, you will be evaluated regularly.

Some Store Managers evaluate their people weekly. Others do it far less often. However, a formal evaluation once a year is pretty much a standard. You will be evaluated against certain standards and it is important for you to know exactly what those standards are.

There will probably be standards of behavior (like punctuality, friendliness, treatment of customers) and standards of performance (such as sales achieved against your target, units per transaction, average sale per





customer, etc.) If you don't know how you are being measured it will be difficult to be successful. Again, ask your employer.

Once you understand what is expected of you it is imperative that you live up to those expectations.

You cannot continue to work for an employer with whom you disagree about what you should, or are willing to, contribute. The employer decides what is expected of its employees.

It is very simple. If you do not resign from your position, you need to fulfill the requirements of the job by living up to the expectations.

Appearance – Dress Code and Grooming Standards:

Clean – First and foremost, you must be clean at all times – that means teeth, fingernails, body and hair.

Neat – Do not show up for work looking like you have just been dragged through a hedge.

Appropriate image for the business – Your appearance should reflect the image of your company, where possible and reasonable. The company you are working for will likely have established guidelines regarding your image. Be sure to find out what they are.

Pressed – Do not wear clothes that are wrinkled. This means that carrying your work clothes in the bottom of your backpack is out of the question.

Polished – You must appear professional and this requires that you look well put together and 'polished'. No rips or holes in your clothes, no chipped nail polish, no scuffed shoes, no hastily applied make-up, etc.

Posture – One of the easiest ways to determine if a person is enthusiastic and involved in their work is to look at their posture. A person who is slumped over and dragging their feet does not inspire confidence in customers.





Hair style – Be reasonable. This does not mean that hair should not be stylish or even trendy. Of course it can be, but it should never border on bizarre.

Piercings – These should be minimal. Depending on the type of retail business you are in you may get away with excessive piercings but, generally speaking, fewer piercings are preferred.

Tattoos – Cover them when possible. Your reasons for having tattoos on your body are personal. Tattoos are a private matter so keep them that way.

Comfort – Your clothing and shoes should be stylish but comfortable. You cannot be efficient if you are wearing clothes that are too tight or shoes that cause you to limp around half way through your shift. Retail can be tough on your feet and lower back. It pays to invest in proper shoes.

Make-up – The nature of your business may dictate what make-up is appropriate. If not, follow the 'less is better' doctrine – you'll be more comfortable and it will take you less time to get ready for work.



Belly tops – Unless your store is selling them and your Manager tells you that you can wear them, don't wear them. Customers did not come into your store to see your bare tummy.

Cleavage (female) or chest (male) bearing tops – Again, don't wear them. You are there to sell merchandise and provide service and not to advertise your physical attributes.

Success tip: When in doubt about what is appropriate just ask your Manager.





Seven Deadly Sins of Customer Service

1. Apathy: A bad attitude that says "I really don't-give-a-darn about you or your problems" and the customer gets the message "Do I look like I care?" from the sales associate. When boredom sets in sales associates need a reminder from their superiors about what their job really is and that they have an obligation to serve the customers.

2. Brush-Off: Trying to get rid of the customer by brushing-off his or her need or problem; trying to "slam-dunk" the customer with some standard procedure that doesn't solve

the problem but lets the service person off the hook for doing anything special.

3. Cold Shoulder: This term comes from an unfriendly practice from years ago. When an unwanted guest showed up at someone's home for a meal, the hostess would serve cold shoulder of lamb left over from the previous evening meal. This sent a message of hostility, unfriendliness, and basically says, "You're a nuisance; please go away." It is amazing to find that so many stores and restaurants select the most unfriendly person they can find for the greeter - hostess-cashier job, making sure the customer's first and last experiences are unsatisfactory ones.





4. Condescension: Treating the customer with a patronizing attitude. For some strange reason, some associates treat customers as if they are children. They speak to the customer as if they are dumb or just undeserving of proper, adult treatment.

5. Robotism: "Thank-you-have-a-nice-day-NEXT." Everyone has encountered the robot at one time or another. The robotic associate treats every customer the same; saying the same thing and going through the same routines with no personality involved whatsoever. Robots sometimes paste a smile on their face and keep it that way throughout every transaction – not a very natural look.

6. Policy Book: Putting the organizational rules above customer satisfaction, with no discretion on the part of the service person to make exceptions or use common sense. This is incredibly frustrating for customers because they are individuals; usually with unique issues that they need to have dealt with. No person wants to be treated like a number. Even if you cannot do what the customer wants you to do, you need to find a way to say it without quoting the rules from the dreaded 'policy book'. The reality is, your company policy is of very little interest to the customer who feels wronged.

7. Go here, go there, go everywhere: "Sorry, you'll have to call so-and-so." Or "You'll have to come back when the





Manager is here. We can't help you with that." If your customer has a problem, it needs to be taken care of at the first point of interaction with your company. As an associate you must take responsibility and see the customers' issue through to a satisfactory conclusion. Even though you may have to get other employees involved, it is up to you to have the issue taken care of and stay in communication with the customer.

When you make sure you are not committing any of the sins above, you are better than 75% of the people out there already.





Customer Experience Articles from DMSRetail





Customer Service and Empowerment

by Dianne Miethner, Senior Consultant, DMSRetail

I have recently been subjected to three of the most unbelievably bad customer service experiences of my life. In all three situations, large well known companies were involved. One is a prominent, on-line travel provider; one is a monopoly in the telephone service industry and the other is a huge conglomerate.

I will not bore you with all of the details because I am sure you have been through similar experiences. Almost everyone has. It's unbelievable, but true.

Being a Retail Management Consultant, I know my way around customer service issues and around company hierarchies so I managed to get my situations resolved, to my satisfaction, albeit many hours of my time were involved and my stress level was at a point where any Doctor would have administered medication on the spot.

The reason I am writing this story is because it is truly unfathomable, to me, that during these difficult economic times when consumers are holding their pocketbooks tighter than they have in many years, we have large companies who still do not get it!!

And I know why. The people who are answering the phones – usually





at a call centre in a country other than where the company and the customer are located – have not received proper training. Frankly, I don't care where they are located as long as they can solve problems, but they can't.

Don't get me wrong, every single one of the individuals that I spoke with was polite, somewhat knowledgeable and very aware of their company policies – that is why I heard exactly the same words from so many of them. Unfortunately, that is where it ended.

They were not properly trained. They did not know what to do for a customer who had an issue – you know the dreaded "issue" that is totally outside of the scope of anything they have ever been taught to cope with. So they drone on, repeating the same ineffectual thing that they have said several times already. The things they say in the hopes that you will completely understand that there is nothing they can do and you just need to go away and stop bothering them with your "issue".

Well, unfortunately for them, I was not one of those who would go away. No, I pushed and pushed to talk to people at higher and higher levels within the organization. All of this was done without being impolite. Perhaps I will send them a bill for my time, though.

The stunning fact is, when you go high enough up you will have your "issue" resolved. In all three cases, my "issue" was resolved. In





addition, I received apologies and gift certificates and a great deal of attention. Yes, it does happen so why weren't other employees, at lower levels, empowered to resolve my issues? It would have made me very satisfied, it would have saved the company time and money, and it would have shown that they are ready to do business in the years ahead. At this point I must tell you that my issues were not that complicated. In each case, there was an error on the part of the company. It was all documented clearly.

The thing is, I know that upper management would not want a customer with "issues" such as mine to go away. They would absolutely want to satisfy me because I am a very, very good customer with huge lifetime value to those companies.

So, what went wrong? The employees that I had to deal with, initially, were not properly trained and they were not empowered to help a customer unless the "issue" fit into one of the cookie cutter problem descriptions. Really, when a customer has a cookie cutter problem, they are usually quite content with an appropriate cookie cutter response and they go away happy.

Where is the training for human beings to deal with the other things that can, and will, go wrong? Why must customers work so hard to get





satisfaction? Why must they lose their valuable time, waste energy and experience high stress levels just to get their issue resolved?

Why is it, that when businesses are closing all over and those that are still in business are experiencing sharp declines in revenue and profit from prior years, that they are not able to understand that their people are not doing the job – the job of retaining the precious customers they have; the ones that are spending money even now?

It's very interesting to me that in a time where it is so important for employees to try to do everything right for their customer, training those employees is considered a luxury; an expense that they deem unnecessary. Of course, I realize that this sounds self serving but, truly, when you think about it, does it make sense?

Should companies really cut back on training their people in order to save a few dollars or should they realize that they need to increase specialized training in order to make it in this new world?

North American consumers – and probably consumers in most parts of the world – will not likely go back to their spending habits of the past. It has been predicted that this new economy has made a lot of consumers think long and hard about the waste and the consumerism and they are definitely re-thinking their lifestyles. They are thinking about what they really want and need. They don't want debt and they are trying to unclutter their lives by buying less. Gone are the days of





wanting and 'needing' everything they see.

So, if your company is not ready to adjust and train and get ready for the work ahead – the hard work of retaining the customers who are willing to spend their hard earned dollars on whatever it is you have to offer – then it's pretty much game over. This is a very serious issue and requires very serious attention from upper management. Think about it.

You can contact Dianne Miethner at dmiethner@dmsretail.com with your comments.





Retail Employees vs. Customers

By John Callaghan, Senior Consultant, DMSRetail

After viewing a 'down with retail' website today, I find myself very disturbed at the distance that has developed in the understanding between some retail employees and customers. Wild generalizations are being made such as 'customers have no respect for retail employees' and 'retail employees don't care about their customers'.

I believe strongly in customer satisfaction and I devote a lot of time and energy trying to develop those same beliefs in retail personnel through discussions and training programs.

Today, I read the bitter complaints of a wide cross section of retail employees. Some of these employees are clearly in the wrong business. While many of them have a few good points and - I must say, my empathy - the majority are intent on letting the poor behavior of a few miserable individuals sour their views on their jobs and the industry altogether.

Retail jobs, like any other jobs, are what the individuals make of them. There will always be the 'bad day' and the 'customer from hell'. That is not unique to retail.

It is true, of course that retail employees tend to be paid at the lower end of the wage scale and that is something that certainly should be





changed but that is not an excuse to adopt a 'poor me' attitude. Still, the low wages may be the basis for the intolerance of some. How many times have we heard 'They don't pay me enough to take this abuse.' But that just doesn't wash. How much should one be paid to take abuse, anyway?

Let's get the question of compensation out of the way because it cannot be allowed to be relevant in the area of customer service. As much as the issue warrants serious discussion and consideration it is simply not the absolute answer to all of our customer satisfaction concerns and, if we cannot move past it for the sake of discussion and progress, then we will forever be at a loss to get better.

Once an individual has accepted employment and has, obviously, agreed to the compensation for the position the rate of pay can not be used as an excuse for anything. When that rate of pay is no longer acceptable to the individual it is their duty to find a way to increase it or seek employment elsewhere.

Retail, of course, is open to the public making it an uncontrolled environment. Unless a person entering a store is carrying a weapon, or is acting in a wildly abusive manner, he/she is allowed to enter the premises. The retail employee may be subjected to some less than desirable behavior but they do not have to stand for being abused, ridiculed, threatened or mistreated in any way. The member of management who says they do does not understand their management role. All citizens deserve respect regardless of where





they work. There are ways to handle disruptive, abusive customers. Repeat offenders can be banned from your premises.

The key for retail employees who are dissatisfied and intent on painting all customers with the same brush is to realize they have two choices: 1) become a positive, enthusiastic member of the retail community and work toward a better understanding or 2) resign and start a career in a different industry. Basically, love it or leave it. Stop torturing yourself and those around you.

Customers are not a particular group that can be trained to act as a particular individual would like them to. Customers are not obligated to follow any retailer's policy manual. Customers are not the retail employees' enemy. Let's give this a little thought the next time we are tempted to make general comments about 'all' customers. We do want customers in our retail stores, don't we? That is the general idea after all.

You can contact John Callaghan at jcallaghan@dmsretail.com





Sales vs. Task Orientation

By Matt Parmaks, Senior Consultant, DMSRetail

Most people would agree that it is much more pleasant and rewarding to occupy one's time with activities that we find enjoyable or have a natural talent for than it is to engage in activities that we dislike or have no talent for at all. When faced with a choice of which activity to engage in it stands to reason that an individual will choose the former.

Many people choose careers that they find appealing and, even though they may still be faced with some undesirable tasks, for the most part they enjoy their work and probably strive to be successful.

Unfortunately, for some the situation is not so clear cut. They find themselves in careers, or jobs, that they do not find appealing and may not be driven to succeed. A large percentage of retail store employees fit into this group.

With the exception of self-serve retailers – those who have designed their business model around the self-serve concept which does not require sales associates to drive the business - store employees are required to actively promote and sell merchandise to their customers. The ability of store associates to perform the 'selling' activity will often make the difference between success and failure.

As stated above, if it is reasonable to expect people to do well in activities they enjoy, or at least, do not find difficult and unappealing,





then it would be reasonable for sales associates who enjoy selling to be more successful, and to make a bigger contribution than those who do not.

For the individual who does not enjoy selling-either because s/he does not have the skills or simply does not want to do it – a position in a retail store may still attract them due to ease of entry. Store Managers should be very wary of this individual.

There are so many tasks to be performed in a retail store that individuals, like the one just described, can easily make themselves quite useful. However, the task oriented associate will not help you succeed unless, of course, you have hired them strictly for the purpose of performing tasks that will allow selling associates more time, freedom and energy to pursue the real goal – sales and revenue generation. The luxury of having sales associates and service/maintenance associates is something few retailers can afford. With wage costs being such a large portion of their expense base, most retailers require associates to generate revenue.

Some retail Store Managers have lost sight of the real business goal. In many cases, they have lost sight because they are consumed by the realities of managing the store. This is to say that the overwhelming number of tasks to be completed seem to leave no time or energy for selling to the customer. Of course, a Manager who allows him/herself to become task driven cannot be allowed to continue in the position and probably does not really want to, truth be told. Again, with the





exception of the self-serve retail outlet, Store Managers must make every effort to ensure that the selling activity is going on in their store. This requires a consistent, unrelenting focus on sales and other key productivity indicators.

There are things that can be done, or practiced, by Store Managers in order to keep that focus.

The first, and most important, is to be a sales oriented individual yourself. You must role model excellent selling behaviors at all times. Talk about sales at every opportunity. Approach every conversation with sales top of mind. If you do not see yourself this way, you need to do whatever is necessary to become this way very quickly.

The second is to hire only real 'sales people' - people who enjoy selling and who know how to do it. This may mean that you have to work with them to make sure they perform their share of non-selling duties but this is definitely preferable to hiring task oriented individuals and then attempting to work with them to get them to sell which, by the way, is the sad state many, many Store Managers find themselves in. Hiring task oriented individuals is the least effective way to help the store reach its goals and will, almost certainly, prevent the Store Manager from becoming successful. Hiring sales oriented individuals, on the other hand, will naturally enable the consistent, unrelenting focus on sales to be maintained.





Next, make sure your expectations are crystal clear. If you tell an associate to clean, dust or otherwise maintain a particular space or thing, make it clear that task is to be stopped immediately upon the arrival of a customer. If you don't make it clear, the individual may think that your instruction to perform the task trumps the need to attend to the customer.

It is natural for some people to view everything in terms of the hierarchy they are in. To this type of person the Store Manager is the most important individual and any instruction or direction received from the Manager will be seen to be more important than anything they, themselves, might come up with – serving the customer, for instance. After all, the Store Manager is the person who hired and trained the associate; s/he is the one that reviews performance; s/he is the one making it possible for the associate to earn a living. This is why you need to make it clear that any task or direction coming from you is always secondary to serving a customer. Say it as often as you must just to get that expectation across. The level of success the store achieves depends on it.

When you visit retail stores you will find that most Managers have not been successful at making the expectation clear. Worse still, the Managers may not even have that expectation themselves. That is another story.

Let's assume that a store is staffed by individuals who believe they are sales people who want to sell but who are, in fact, task oriented. It is





easy to determine if this is the case simply by observing the activities taking place. If a customer enters a retail store and associates immediately leave the task they were performing to provide their undivided attention – and this does not mean that they crowd the customers, refusing to let them wander around comfortably, only that they are clearly available to assist should they be needed – then they are sales focused. They will find ways to start building rapport with the customer and will likely progress to other 'selling steps'. If, on the other hand, they say hello and continue with their task while the customer wanders around their store, they are not sales focused. These employees are expected to sell and they say they understand that but, as evidenced by their behavior, clearly they prefer to do tasks. They will even seek out more and more tasks rather than have to sell to customers. This is why so many retail stores are not able to provide quality shopping experiences for their customers – the task oriented individuals who may, indeed, be pleasant are not looking after customers...they are avoiding them. It's very difficult to be a productive sales person if you avoid customers or have as little to do with them as possible. These individuals always have something else to do that absolutely must be done because serving customers leads, or should lead, to selling to customers. If a person does not want to sell then they will try avoidance. In the event they cannot avoid the customer they will likely assist cheerfully and do their 'job'. But not sell.





A good sales person understands that appearing available to the customer is an absolute minimum. It is not good enough to say “let me know if you need anything” and then continue with a task. That would require the customer to ‘bother’ or ‘interrupt’ the associate and many people are not comfortable with that. Customers who may not be sure that they are ready to buy may feel that they should not occupy the associates time. I can’t begin to cover all of the possible reasons why a customer would not approach a ‘task consumed’ individual and it is not necessary to do so. Just suffice it to say that they may not. And, of course, some customers would interrupt the ‘task consumed’ individual just because. The point is successful sales people do not allow room for misunderstandings. They are perceived to be available and focused on the customer. Period.

Tasks have to be managed very carefully in retail stores. The work has to be done. The store must be cleaned and well merchandised. Paperwork has to be kept up to date. Stock must be received in a timely manner. The list goes on. All of these tasks are certainly important to the business and contribute a great deal to the success of the store. The Store Manager is responsible for managing in such a way as to allow associates to sell and to perform required tasks. There is no task that can be a top priority during open hours of operation. Building relationships with customers, selling to them, and treating them with the respect they deserve are top priorities during open hours of operation. Nothing else makes sense. *You can reach Matt Parmaks at mparmaks@dmsretail.com*





Customer Service Fanatics

By Dianne Miethner, Senior Consultant, *DMSRetail*

Be a Customer Service Fanatic and be proud of it! If more retail managers were Customer Service Fanatics we would see a much different picture in the service industry. All customers, not just a fortunate few, would be properly treated as they part with their hard-earned and over-taxed dollars. Isn't that the way it should be?

Why is poor customer service the standard? It would be so easy, and much more productive, to have excellent customer service as the standard. How can management allow their companies to fall into the hands of people who are out there destroying their image and alienating their customers? Why are the hiring practices so bad? It may be difficult to find great people, but it is not impossible.

Try implementing these straight forward and foolproof 'first steps' for maintaining consistently high standards of customer service:

- 1.** Hire people who can smile- this one is pretty easy, isn't it?
- 2.** Hire people who are well groomed and who take pride in their appearance – another easy one.





3. Hire people who speak clearly – this one only requires that you listen.

4. Hire people who are able to promote/sell the company's product or service with ease – and you find this out during the interview when you hand over your pen and tell the candidate to sell it to you, or at least let you know, enthusiastically, how wonderful the pen is!

If you have completed 1) through 4), congratulate yourself for hiring individuals who are pleasant, enthusiastic, well groomed and well spoken - it's a great start.

5. Train the new employee quickly – just enough for them to be competent, and not disadvantaged, on your sales floor (or dining area, or whatever the case may be). This one requires that you know what you expect and how to train for success in your company. If not, you need help before being allowed to hire people. Stop hiring immediately and give the task to someone else. Re-examine your own 'training' needs.

6. Watch and listen to the individual as they interact with your customers-you MUST do this; it is not optional and it cannot be delegated.

7. Praise the individual for what was done well and coach them on what was not.





8. Watch and listen again (immediately)– if they are looking after your customers properly, praise them again and continue to do so for the rest of their career with your company- and, of course, now you need to provide more extensive training.

9. If they are not looking after your customers properly – invoke your zero-tolerance policy – and you certainly should have one - terminate them immediately and don't look back. DO NOT FEEL BAD about firing – it's your duty to protect your company and your customers. Now, proceed to the customer(s) who has been subjected to the 'bad' ex-employee, however slightly, and do everything you can to turn their experience around. This is another MUST.

These hiring and initial performance review practices are just the start. Maintaining excellent customer service standards requires that you retain excellent employees. There are many non-monetary ways to retain excellent employees – but that is another story, for another time.

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