

The Essence of Retail

The saying: “*Nothing happens until something is sold*” is cliché because, well...it’s true.

Of all the aspects involved in running a successful home furnishings business, sales is arguably the most important, especially in today’s economy. While this truism does point out the vital role of sales, it’s not an accurate depiction of retail. Actually, lots happens before something is sold.

When considering all the people both directly and indirectly involved in retail, it would be practically impossible to count them. Just pick one finished good and trace its components and materials back to their original source and try to count the number of people and actions involved in bringing it to the point of sale.

All that effort culminates in a single conversation between one shopper and one RSA (retail sales associate) at a time. It’s when the sale is closed that the ownership of the goods is transferred from the supply side to the demand side of the equation. Simple, yet profound, it is the Essence of Retail.

What’s the Point?

The real goal for retailers that want to increase volume, market share and profits is to expand their base of loyal customers and develop long term relationships with them.

With that as the number one priority, retailers should view every aspect of business as a means of facilitating, supporting and enabling the sales staff to increase the likelihood of closing sales. A litmus test for making good decisions is to always ask the question “*Does this help us serve our customers?*”

So through that lens, let’s take at some ways to create a successful sales program.

Sales Staff

For most shoppers, the retail sales staff maybe the only touchpoint. They are the ambassadors for the entire company.

But, with the nature of retail, long hours, evenings weekends and holidays, it’s not easy to find people that want to make retail sales a long term career. Retailers wanting a top notch sales staff must make it worth their while, not only monetarily, but also with quality of life issues.

Preparation

Obviously, the sales staff must be prepared, but retailers can also prepare their shoppers by the messages they send out. Advertising that focuses upon price, discounts, financing swings the door with transactional customers seeking the best deal.

A better, inspiring message with lifestyle images can evoke the emotion to compel shoppers to want to improve their quality of life as their primary reason to visit at a store.

In today's world, many shoppers are better prepared and more informed than some RSA's. Consumers are using the plethora of information on internet are often armed and ready for battle.

To avoid losing a power struggle with a savvy shopper, RSA's should regularly spend researching competitors and brands in the same manner as consumers to stay informed.

Shoppers that perceive the confidence and competence of a well trained knowledgeable sales associate most often will allow her or him to take the lead. Combining these qualities with compassion and caring is what instills trust.

Daily Preparation

Shoppers immediately begin to draw conclusions about a retailer from the moment they enter the parking lot. It's important that every detail be objectively examined, improved or enhanced and maintained on a daily basis. Many "Just lookers" may have seen something they didn't like.

Sales associates should arrive early, make sure everything is in place, familiarize themselves with all pertinent information about sales, promotions, delivery, pricing changes and be ready willing and able to serve when the door opens.

Sales Training

Traditional sales training, product knowledge and selling skills, is no longer sufficient. Training for success in the future must be taken to a new level. It is an arduous and ongoing task, but worth the effort.

Here are some ideas:

- Objective Training
Consider seeking out third party training services, like *The Furniture Training Company*, that specialize in improving the overall level of training skills.
- Diversity Training

The new frontier of training includes learning about other cultures and perspectives in order to better relate and be of service to all those that are kind enough to give an opportunity to earn their business.

- Psychology, Communications and Human Relations
To reach the top level of competence, RSA's must learn and understand the motivation and attitude of consumers, and how to better relate and communicate with them.

A New Selling Process

To be truly successful a companies emphasis should be upon serving the customer instead of selling to them. Paradoxically, retailers with this paradigm are more successful than those that have success as their goal. Consumers can perceive motive.

People want to feel that they have been given the best opportunity, information and advice for their own particular circumstance rather than having been run through the same "system" as everyone else.

Try replacing the selling-steps approach with "guided discovery"—conversations with people rather than presentations to shoppers using open ended questions and more listening than talking. It is a collaborative effort with the goal of not just satisfying, but exceeding customers' expectations

Pricing and Discounting

Retailers that do allow for individual price discounts must be careful. It's wise to address pricing and discounts as a policy matter. Along with quality of product and customer service, fair pricing practices play an integral role in the credibility and reputation of a company.

Consider creating a clearly defined and written policy that may contain some leeway, but otherwise should be adhered to without exception.

Post Sale

The sale is not complete until the customer has received the goods and is satisfied with them. RSA's working with customer service, delivery and finance must follow up every sale to ensure total customer satisfaction.

RSA's can gather the information to keep and attract new customers by seeking testimonials and referrals. A post sale interview is a great way to find out what the customer liked or disliked, what could be improved upon, what what their future needs may be.

It's of utmost importance to stay connected with customers using social media tools. There is an abundance of information available on that topic.

Continued Improvement

One of the best ways to increase performance is to have each RSA track their selling performance on a daily basis. i.e. Number of ups, closing rate, average ticket, returns, etc. It's just human nature that once someone becomes aware of their performance, improvement follows.

Schedule regular meetings asking RSA's to share information on specific selling situations, and then use role playing to recreate, improve everyones selling skills.

Going Outside the Box

Smart retailers don't just sit back wishing and hoping for customers. They proactively seek it out by getting involved with local events, causes and organizations.

More consumers are choosing to do business with companies that want to make a positive difference in the environment and the community. It's a great way to gain exposure and attract new customers.

All Aboard

All employees should spend some time on the sales floor observing and meeting customers face to face to see first hand the real reason they have a job and a paycheck. Conversely every sales associate should spend time in every department to learn how each works together to facilitate that most important aspect of retail, Sales.