

5 tips to equip your front-line staff for superior service

While shopping centres and stores are preparing for the festive season rush by investing in advertising, marketing and merchandising, an often overlooked aspect of retail is staff training. This is according to Laure Schonfeld, a Human Resources professional, entrepreneur, training development specialist and self-proclaimed 'global shopper'.



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“I am sure I am not the only one who has experienced poor customer service at store level. It unfortunately gets worse over the festive period when malls introduce extended-shopping hours. Staff who have long commutes home become irate and they are not willing to assist customers optimally let alone smile. With the millions spent by brands, retailers and malls to woo prospective customers, it is all lost in a second by incompetent and unhelpful staff employed to work in the stores,” she says.

Technology has now breathed new life into customer insight, enabling an increasing degree of personal service which is carried out in new ways and delivered through smart devices via personalised text messages and emails. As retailers, brands and malls invest to inform and understand customers better, it is becoming apparent that they are forgetting to inform and understand employees. Laure` says that in many cases she has witnessed, staff are hired by demand and not by their abilities to sell products, goods or services.

“There are certain brands and stores whose staff have excellent customer service. I was taken aback by a recent visit to a well-established building supply store. I went in for a pool cleaning product and a store assistant went out of his way to assist me, saving me time and money in the process. The store assistant in question greeted me with a smile, asked me to explain my issue and offered a number of options for me to review. For me, this is what an ideal retail experience should be,” she notes.

Laure offers the following points for retailers and brands to consider when hiring and training retail staff:

1. Recruit for attitude and train for skill

- It pays off in recruiting prospective employees with the correct attitude. Candidates with the right attitude who are open to learning and who share and believe in the company’s values are better to recruit than an ‘excellent salesperson’ with a

negative attitude. This is because it is virtually impossible to train a negative person to have a positive attitude or modify their default attitude and disposition.

- Conduct group interviews which allow you to observe how people interact with each other, in this way you could assess the peoples' communication and people skills more than what would be possible during a one-on-one interview.

2. Align employees' and customers' needs

- Work with store operations managers to understand frontline staff's needs. Front-line staff need to be moulded into the company's desired corporate image, as they are in direct contact with the customers. The key players in retail are the front-line employees, and their concerns and needs must be noted and understood.

- Senior managers must visit all retail outlets and stores on a regular basis to meet with store managers and their teams.
- Senior managers must visit all retail outlets and stores to observe employees' customer service. This is to identify if they conform to training practices and to address training needs/gaps that arisen from these observations.
- Store managers and the individual employees can be a rich source of information to a brand or retailer about what works, what doesn't and what seems to encourage customers to come back for more. Human Resources must establish and maintain an open-door policy for feedback to allow all employees access to provide information, 360-degree assessments and feedback.



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3. Incentive programmes to ensure employees are motivated

- Employee retention is a very important issue in the retail industry as skilled employees find other positions in the industry which pays higher wages. Management should identify employees with potential and skills and assist and come up with incentives to retain these employees, as frustration within employees regarding career progression and opportunities within the company would lead to a lack in customer service and unnecessary labour turn over and re-training of new incumbents.
- Human Resource managers do not have the mandate to increase salaries, but could get a mandate from the company to offer employees desirable positions or cross training or rotation of positions in other stores or allow employees to take lateral transfers to other stores to benefit their personal needs.

4. Training and development of employees

- It is important to create training programmes to strengthen the quality of work (customer service) within an organisation. Training and development includes assessing training needs, creating training manuals, facilitating instruction and ensuring training objectives have been met.
- Encourage employees to grow in the company via regular performance reviews and employee awards programmes.
- Training programmes should include modules that enable employees to know their customers and how to deal with their different personalities.
- All employees and managers to be trained on positive psychology in the work place.
- Part of new incumbents' induction should include spending a good amount of time in a front-line role in order to get a good understanding of the business and its customers.
- Brands and retailers need to invest in developing the emotional intelligence (EI) of its front-line staff, as EI is an important factor when it comes to serving customers, especially while dealing with emotions of customers.

5. Legalities and its impact on customer service

- The fast pace environment in many retail businesses could result in non-compliance to employment law practices and it is the duty of Human Resources to be the first line of defence to address common issues, such as excessive hours worked, fatigue, discrimination and harassment, which is only a few issues, as these issues could not only result in costly lawsuits, but could impact on the well-being and health and safety of employees, which in return could have a direct negative effect on customer service.

Creating memorable experiences for customers is key to ensure continuous support and improved profits. Earlier this year, the SACSC hosted neuro-scientist Ian Rheeder to share his research and findings at the Gauteng Chapter Networking Breakfast held at the Balalaika Hotel. Rheeder echoed the points raised by Laure.

During his presentation, he shared finding from when he entered well-known stores with hidden cameras on his person. Using the cameras, he was able to record interactions with staff from a person-to-person view. "Retailers can market and advertise till they're blue in the face, but if the people on the floor are not happy, trust me, your customers won't be happy either. Start on the floor, and encourage staff to smile," he said.

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