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15 Impressive Strategies To Get The Most Out Of Your Retail Employee Training

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Too many employers approach retail sales training without clear goals and paths to success in mind. They may know what they want the end result to be—more sales—but they're not quite sure how to get there. The end result is a training program that focuses on general concepts like 'value every guest' and vague ideas like 'make them a friend'. By the end of the training cycle, employees have heard what is expected of them in broad terms but may have no idea how to actually meet those expectations.

So the training is ineffective and, for many, worthless.

To be truly effective, retail employee training must set clear expectations and provide practical, actionable information for the employees to use. Better retailers should not want to create robots, like one multi-national brand that requires every employee to bark out the same nine questions over and over again until they have memorized them. Nor do you want to leave it up to every individual to do their own thing.

The training program must be specific enough to reduce or eliminate any room for interpretation, but must include enough freedom to let the employee bring out the best of their own personality to each unique customer. This accomplishes dual goals: Employees are all operating within the same guidelines, not their individual interpretation of some vague concepts, and employees can immediately act on what they've learned instead of wasting time trying to figure out what they're supposed to do.

Employee training is an investment. It consumes time from owners, managers, and employees, and costs money to plan and execute. For that reason, many retailers give mere lip service to training and accept high turnover rates as par for the course. It doesn't have to be that way.

Like any investment in your retail operation, you must expect a high return on employee training. That means creating a program that yields consistent, repeatable results as quickly as possible. Examining the problems that can arise while planning a retail employee training program, and some strategies and tricks to improve the training, can help you maximize the effectiveness of your program.

A Lack Of Definition

Retail employee training is typically used in one of three situations: initial training, problem solving, and improvement. While there can be overlap between any or all of these, they're usually standalone situations that result in standalone training solutions. To be successful, all of them must be approached in a thoughtful, deliberate way. All too often, they're implemented haphazardly—often as a reaction to something that went really wrong.

Initial Training

This is the first training that an employee goes through when starting out at a business, and is often referred to as onboarding. New hires are often given a brief overview of company policies, have some minimal product training, and then shadow a more experienced salesperson to learn the ropes. Unfortunately, these initial programs, which lay the foundation for the salesperson's entire future on the sales floor, are nowadays surprisingly light on details. The employees aren't given much in-depth information on the products and services they're selling, and they don't get much training or experience in dealing with different customers in different situations. Due to this lack of specificity and actionable information, the salesperson is forced to learn as they go. This compromises the goal of creating an exceptional experience for both the employee and the customer, and can be disastrous for the retailer.

Problem Solving

This type of training is born out of the need to remedy an issue on the sales floor, and it is almost always reactionary. Whether it's slumping conversions, slow-moving merchandise, or customer complaints, this training typically addresses a very narrow range of specific issues. In almost every situation, the problems being addressed can be traced back to the initial training. This is, in effect, a training program designed as a stopgap to fix the problems with the first training program. The problem is that it only addresses the results of those problems and not the root cause. It may deal with the specific features of a particular line of merchandise, but not give actionable information on how all sales should be approached. It may tell employees how to deal with difficult customers, but not train them to identify and defuse customers before they become difficult. Again, without actionable information that can be applied universally, this training only acts as a stopgap until other problems arise. Which they inevitably do.

Improvement

This training approach can seem like a retailer's dream; things are going good, now how do I make them great? Of course, this ignores the obvious question, why aren't they going great to begin with? This type of training can be infuriatingly vague to a sales team. It often entails telling employees that they're doing a good job, but now just do everything a little better. Improvement should come naturally through the experience of executing the strategies they've learned during their initial training. If the foundation is strong, then building upon it is a simple, organic process. If it's necessary to retrain employees in how to sell, then the foundation wasn't strong enough to begin with. This isn't to say that continued training isn't a wise endeavor—it certainly is. However, that training should be used to reinforce the solid principles they've already learned and not to instill even more vague concepts and ideas into the salesforce.

Retail sales training is a great thing when done correctly. If done incorrectly, it can leave employees confused about your expectations and what, exactly, they must do to meet them. Employees in this situation often vacillate between chaos and paralysis. If concepts are left open to interpretation, employees may make different interpretations in each situation, creating a lack of consistency for customers. With no clear direction, employees often fall into delivering the minimum standards of answering questions and performing stock checks. On the other end of the spectrum, they may find that they simply can't interpret the concepts, so they freeze up on the sales floor. Either way, your customers don't get the experience they expect and deserve.

Vague Concepts Lead To Specific Problems

A lack of definition in any training program can lead to very definite problems on the sales floor. These problems will have a wide variety of symptoms, including:

- Low Conversions

- Low Per-Ticket Sales

- Lack of Repeat Customers

- Frequent Discounts

- Stagnant Merchandise

- Few Add-On Sales

All of these symptoms lead to one inevitable result—decreased revenues. Without specific, actionable information, salespeople don't have the tools they need to provide customer service that converts lookers to buyers. They won't know how to upsell, how to identify customers' motivators to buy, or how to create an experience that customers want to repeat. Without those tools and knowledge, salespeople will always be working at a disadvantage. That disadvantage will be clear to customers as well.

Starting Off Strong

Avoiding these problems isn't as difficult as it may seem. It involves creating a well-planned and specific training program designed to convey real, actionable information in a meaningful way. Fortunately, you're not starting out entirely from scratch. Other people have made these mistakes in the past, and others have learned from them. Over time, a lot of strategies and tricks have been discovered that will help you create a more effective retail employee training program. By incorporating these tricks and strategies into any training program, that program can become the rock-solid foundation for your salespeople to build upon.

The Tricks Of The Trade

If all customers want is a product, they can find it online. So, why do they go to stores? They go to stores because they want an overall shopping experience. Baby Boomers especially want to be catered to for a period of time, and they want to have an interpersonal experience. If all your salespeople do is point out items and give dry descriptions, then there's really no experience for the customer. Teach your salespeople how to make customers feel special and they'll be back to enjoy that feeling again and again.

To create consistent, exceptional customer experiences, you need a solid retail employee sales training program from Day One. Setting it up can seem overwhelming at first, but it's well worth the effort in the long run. Incorporating the following tricks and strategies into your training program will ensure that your employees have the tools they need to confidently engage with customers of all stripes, resulting in better revenues for your stores.

Define Expectations

1

What do you want from your employees? Answers like 'more conversions' and 'better customer experiences' don't address the question. These are vague concepts that don't give your employees much to go on. Be as specific as possible. Answer the 'how's that your employees will be asking in their minds. If you want more conversions, tell your salespeople exactly what methods you want them to employ to achieve that result. Salespeople who know what's expected of them act more confidently and feel greater job satisfaction. That always translates into better customer outcomes.

Teach Verbal Communication

2

Most people use a completely different mode of address when at work versus being around friends. Unfortunately, there can be bleed through. Calling a customer 'dude' isn't going to work on the sales floor 99% of the time in a luxury retailer. A training program should cover how customers are to be viewed, what terms are to be used when discussing merchandise (better value vs. cheaper) and, perhaps most importantly, how to listen when the customer talks. A talking customer is telling your salesperson everything they need to know to close the sale—they just have to actively listen.

Teach Non-Verbal Communication

3

Body language can give your salespeople a wealth of information about the customer. Crossed arms can indicate a closed attitude, meaning that the customer won't trust the salesperson, won't be convinced, and won't buy when the employee tries to close the sale. A customer who is looking at other merchandise or their phone is either distracted or disinterested because your salesperson hasn't captured their attention. Reading these cues can tell your salesperson where the customer is in the buying cycle. Once they know where the customer stands, they can develop a strategy to move them into the selling process.

Encourage Engagement

4

Too many salespeople adopt a 'wait and see' attitude. They stand around waiting for customers to approach them. What happens if the customer can't find the product or information they need? At best, the

customer, already aggravated by the experience, finally approaches your salesperson. At worst, they look up the product online and buy it from another retailer while still standing in your store. It only takes a few seconds for your employee to engage a customer, learn a lot of information, and lay the groundwork for becoming a trusted advisor.

Comprehensive Product Knowledge

5

To become a trusted advisor, salespeople need to know what they're talking about. A basic knowledge of the products they're selling just won't cut it. They need to have an in-depth understanding of the products, options, and value to the customer. When a customer asks a question, the salesperson needs to be able to answer it with wisdom, not just a list of features. If they can't, the customer will turn to Google. Once they're online, there's nothing to stop them from pressing the button and ordering the product while still standing in your store.

Comprehensive Service Knowledge

6

The same is true for the services your business offers. Do you offer warranties? What are the terms? Do you offer installation? How is it scheduled and what is the process? If salespeople don't know the ins and outs of the services you offer, suggestively talking about adding on these services ends up looking like an attempt at making a quota. Knowing how a service works is crucial to explaining the value of the service and selling it.

Create Personas

7 Knowing who your customers are is the first step to knowing how to sell to them. Aside from the very basic 'people with money', you need to develop a detailed understanding of the customers you want to attract. Your salespeople need to know how to align their personalities with the personality of the person they're selling to. Certain personalities clash, while others mesh. Having your salespeople practice adapting and selling to different personalities will give them the ability to speak to any selling situation. Using these personas, you can role-play with your salespeople and teach them to interact with the different buyers they're likely to encounter.

Challenge Customer Perceptions

8 Every customer comes into your store with their own preconceived notions. Some people will always gravitate toward the cheapest items since they assume that nothing lasts and quality is just a word. Your salespeople, armed with their product and customer knowledge, can challenge this notion. They can demonstrate how higher-priced items offer greater long-term value. A customer looking for a cheap, disposable watch may leave with a luxury timepiece, now convinced that it is a high quality, long lasting item.

Push Value Selling

9 Value selling is the skill of explaining the benefits of an item to the customer and steering the discussion away from the price of the item. Left to their own devices, most customers will view items in terms of how much money it takes out of their wallets. A salesperson trained in value selling (and also trained in how to build rapport), can show the customer how much the item will provide value in terms of utility, prestige, or other considerations.

Stress Additional Value

10

The value of many products can be enhanced with the addition of other items. Well-trained salespeople will know which items go well together, and which are popular pairings. A nice dress could become a great ensemble with the addition of a handbag and shoes. Someone buying a luxury timepiece may want the peace of mind that comes with custom engraving. These add-ons increase the value of the item and the per ticket sales of the store.

Encourage Pride

11

The media loves to look down on retail employees. They're mocked in movies, TV shows, and online. This can make it easy for them to look down on themselves. How they feel about their job is reflected in everything from the way they dress to their posture. You may have to step in and help them overcome their poor self-image. Begin by connecting the fact that doing a good job and providing valuable service to customers ensures earning a living for themselves. Go on to stress that whether they work in retail for three months or three years, there is no better place for developing talking skills and people rapport. Having these skills should make them proud—it's up to you to make sure they know that.

Cultivate a Culture of Success

12

Some retailers constantly pit salespeople against each other. Others adopt a laissez-faire attitude. The best retail employee training engenders camaraderie and teamwork. Salespeople should be working

together to provide the best experiences for customers and the highest revenues for the store. When they're doing both, they also reap the benefits. While friendly competition is acceptable and expected, it shouldn't be allowed to devolve into a dog-eat-dog atmosphere.

Limit Training To Bite-Sized Bits

13

The days of putting in a DVD and telling an employee to watch and learn, or having them read a sales manual are over. Attention spans are short, and the best training programs are broken down into very small segments that build on each other. A learner does not progress until they master each step.

Know The Top 10 Premium Items

14

There is simply no way a part-time employee (or even many full-time employees) can know everything about every item. They never could. That's why many people bemoan untrained employees who know less than the customer walking in with their smartphone. Your early stages of training need to go deep in product knowledge on your top premium (i.e. expensive) items. That way, an employee can build confidence on the items that matter the most.

Know The Top 10 Profitable Sellers

15 Knowledge is power. An employee is surrounded by merchandise they may never have owned or cared to own. Teach them all about the ten most profitable items that are best-sellers. That way if they get stuck with a product they are unfamiliar with, they can switch off to the ones they know customers have found value in purchasing.

Some retailers look at training as something to get done. To get through. A finite process that happens upon hiring.

The danger in this is that selling is really about psychology. It is fluid. Awareness of the salesperson's biases and habits coupled with the awareness of selling styles and customer clues are a process.

Just like buying a diet book and reading about cutting carbs and fat won't help you lose weight until you actually limit them, retail sales training on its own won't help you sell more until the training is used, monitored, and consistently reinforced with a culture of constant learning.

SECTION V

Success Through Specificity

Successful retail employee training programs don't depend on vague guidelines and concepts. They're built from the ground up with clear expectations and methods to meet those expectations. It's the difference between building a house from a rough sketch on a cocktail napkin and building one from blueprints. While both methods may create similar structures, you can only be sure of the solidity of the one built from blueprints.

Retail employees use their training as the blueprints for success. The more details they have, the less guesswork and doubt will be involved. With a solid, actionable plan in hand, they can work with confidence and assurance to bring the best of themselves to every selling situation. This will impact every interaction they have, whether it's with customers, managers, vendors, or others. In the end, they'll have the tools they need to meet any challenge they face in your retail store.

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