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Finding, Hiring, and Training Good People

*Gen Xers come into a retail environment well informed.
They do research on the Internet, especially on bigger ticket items.
They'll come in with price-comparison charts
that they have printed out.
But they still need guidance from a trusted retailer.
Customer service can make or break a retailer.*
—JENNIFER GANSHIRT, *American Demographics* (05/04)

YOU MIGHT THINK that finding the right location, stocking your

store, and pleasing customers are going to be your most daunting challenges when opening a retail store, but think again. The biggest challenge in retailing today is hiring and training qualified people. No organization is stagnant, and today's employee turnover is higher than ever. Being the best and selling the most means recruiting and retaining the best.

Practices such as carefully screening new hires, thoroughly testing applicants, personally meeting each one, and, of course, ensuring that their services are fairly remunerating, lie at the core of recruiting the best employees. Retaining the best includes treating employees with respect, listening to their suggestions, occasionally weeding out the bad apples, and rewarding good performance.

The commitment to excellence starts with you, but since you can't be everywhere at once, quality must filter down through your valued deputies. Hiring less than the best reflects poorly not only on your organization, but also on you. Here are some things to keep in mind that you can tell and demonstrate to your current staff:

- **Always be hiring.** You always have an opening for someone who is very good. Great people always justify their pay, whether it applies to increasing the average sale, or to running the backroom with greater efficiency and expertise to save money. Also, great people help raise the bar for the entire staff, present and future.
- **Never consider your store fully staffed.** Even if you feel you are fully staffed, you should always be in the recruiting mode—looking for great people. Remember, in retailing, you always have to expect someone to leave. Even if your staff loves you and loves the work, a number are

bound to leave for any number of personal reasons over which you have no control. When that happens, having a spare, fully qualified replacement already on hand is a Godsend.

- **Strive for excellence.** Your existing staff needs to know you will always hire a great person. If they know you are on a quest for excellence, employees will feel good about themselves for being on your team and yet know that they need to *keep* producing to stay on the team.

- **Use a reward system.** Recognize and reward your current staff monthly or as events call for it. Do not wait until the end of the year to tell them they did well. Recognize hard work and solid performance as it happens. Don't make rewards just an event; make it a mood that permeates the entire premises.

- **Remain focused.** Don't go overboard in trying to keep employees. A little turnover can sometimes be the best for both parties. Your retail store should be an energizing environment; you do not want people on your staff who make it stale or take it for granted.

- **Recognize your strengths.** Every business has assets that attract employees, enticing them to work there. Make your staff constantly aware of those benefits by creating a colorful brochure that lists all your employee benefits, such as discounts, flexible hours, fun working conditions, ample performance rewards, etc. Have your staff hand out these brochures to all potential hires. Those prospective employees will believe your employees more readily than they will believe you—and your current employees will be reminded how good they have it.

Ask Not What Your Employees Can Do for YOU:

What Can YOU Do for THEM?

*A good listener is not only popular everywhere,
but after a while he knows something.*

—WILSON MIZNER

Many first-time retailers see the hiring process as little more than a power play. "I'm the boss, you work for me. What can YOU bring to the organization?"

While it's important to know that the buck stops with you, it's just as important to know what the person who is sitting across from you is feeling.

People work where they are happy, rewarded, and fulfilled. Will your store foster such feelings? As you are getting ready to hire, keep in mind what job applicants are looking for in today's job market:

- **Above average pay.** When you offer minimum or very low wages, job applicants immediately get the message that you don't really value your employees. Ask yourself, how motivated would you feel if you were applying to work in your store? Of course, it is bad business to overpay, but it is just as bad to underpay.

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- **A clean, safe environment.** Because customers want to shop in this type of environment, this is how you need to keep your store. This should be an easy sell.

- **A job close to home.** With the ever-increasing traffic on the roads, escalating cost of gasoline, and added travel time, many prospective

hires are willing to work for less money if the job is conveniently located near where they live. Try to recruit from your store's neighborhood.

However, if your store is in a neighborhood where there are few, if any, potential employees (as may happen if you run an expensive boutique in an upscale area), consider hiring employees from a single location further away and then arranging for a car or small bus to pick them up and return them home every day.

- **A job that is fun.** People who like their work may stay in a job even though they know they can make more money elsewhere. Therefore, a fun environment reduces turnover. Feeling part of a team whose members work hard yet enjoy what they do and enjoy each other helps humanize a crazy work place. New employers often think that employees who are having fun are “goofing off” instead of working, but that may not be the truth. Check it out. If your employees are laughing but remain quickly responsive to your customers, you have fostered the atmosphere you want.

- **Respectful management.** Everyone wants to feel like a part of the team. For that reason, let everyone know that you listen and value their opinions. It will make them feel important and an important contributor to the team.

- **Appreciation of employee work.** Good employees are lost and the remaining employees' attitudes become more cynical if they perceive that they are working very hard but “no one cares.” As a rule, people like working hard. If we stand around with nothing to do, time drags. However, there is no worse feeling than working extremely hard, getting everything just right, and then having your achievement ignored. Don't expect employees to give 110% if you're not willing to commend them for it.

There are many simple, quick, and inexpensive ways to reward stellar performance. Gift certificates to local merchants or restaurants, an “employee of the week/month” reward, free passes to a movie theater, or just a private conference in which you look them in the eye and say, “Your work matters, good job, and I'm paying attention.” All those are wonderful ways to show employees your appreciation.

- **A place where pride matters.** Self-esteem is a driving factor in building long-term employee relationships. If your store—from the way you treat the customers to the merchandise you sell—is one everyone can be proud of, your employees will in turn reward you by staying a long time. Pride in your store starts with you. Don't be above picking up a piece of litter, helping out at the cash registers if the line is too long, or opening the front door for a customer. Leading by example shows not only pride in your store, but pride in yourself and your employees.

Where to Start Looking?

So now you know what you want from an employee and, in turn, what an employee wants from you. But where to start *looking* for them? There are several different ways to find the right people for your store:

- **Employee referrals.** If your employees are happy and admire the high standards you expect, they can quickly become your most effective “recruiting army.” This has the benefit that the referral is usually someone you can trust because the employee who refers them won't want to wind up with egg on their face by bringing you someone unqualified or unreliable. Just remember that, if an employee brings in a recruit

who works out and thereby saves you the expense of advertising or paying a recruiter's fee, in all fairness you should reward the finder with a "referral fee."

- **Customer referrals.** This is probably the most overlooked type of referral in retailing, perhaps because storeowners are too embarrassed to tell their loyal customers that they need help. However, part of what

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makes the customer feel connected to the store is the sense of family that comes from an honest exchange of ideas. You may be surprised at how helpful your customers may be. Not only are they keen to continue to receive superior service, but they may well know just the right recruit, perhaps their own high school aged child or a friend who's just reentering the work force. So both of you win. Just as your employees are compensated, if a customer brings in a good employee, you should reward that customer in some way. Of course, you shouldn't try to pay them, that's too crass, but a gift of merchandise or a gift certificate would be appropriate. It's a simple gesture, really just a token, but it's sure to be appreciated, and much cheaper than running an ad!

- **Networking with community organizations.** As you grow, you may eventually have to reach beyond your employees and customers to find good help. Contact both community agencies and government or religious groups that help people find work. Leaders of churches also know people looking for work. Your state's unemployment office may have state-sponsored programs available to help you find employees.

Many cities and states offer welfare-to-work programs, Job Corps centers, and one-stop career centers. Senior citizen groups may have members who would be grateful for part-time employment. Let all the local, civic-minded groups know that your business is always on the lookout for great employees. Not only is this an excellent way to find staffers, but just look how many organizations will know about your store!

- **Internet job listings.** There are several commercial Web sites that list local employment opportunities. For a quick jump start, check out www.monster.com, www.careerbuilder.com, or www.jobbing.com. Before paying to be listed on these types of sites, however, check to see if your community has some free sites where you can list your opportunities instead. (Unfortunately for thrifty business owners, the best known of these is no longer free.) Nevertheless, www.craigslist.com remains an outstanding resource. This is a general bulletin board that started in the San Francisco Bay area. Their Web address will start you in Northern California, but just click on any of the major cities listed to go to the area of your choice. It is a free general-use bulletin board that runs the gamut from dating to general classified ads to job notices and is especially popular with creative and wired types. While everything on the site was once free for both posters and responders, they have recently begun charging to place help-wanted ads. Nevertheless, it's well worth investigating, particularly if you're located in a major, somewhat edgy city like Los Angeles, New York, or Seattle.

- **Student employment.** Many high schools and most universities have career counseling offices where, depending on the type of employee you are looking for, you can post your job for free. Also, think about taking an ad out in the school newspaper for a minimum cost. They may also have a Web site where you can post your job for free. Around campus there may be bulletin boards where you can post flyers. Again,

not only are you conducting a job search, but you are also earning more free advertising.

- **Traditional newspaper ads.** Obviously, your local newspaper would be more than happy to accept your paid classified ad. And, in fact, this is where most people start their job search. Make sure you put the ad under the proper heading. Try to be as specific as possible so you attract the right people and are not drowned in a sea of applications from people whose credentials are wide of the mark. If you don't want to be interrupted all day with phone calls, only put a fax number or e-mail address for the contact information.

- **Non-traditional newspaper ads.** Some of your best potential employees may not be looking for a job but, if they see your ad as they read the newspaper in their daily routine, it may trigger a reason to talk with you. Try running an ad in the lifestyle section of the paper or possibly the sports section to attract this reluctant, but potentially worthwhile, group of future employees.

- **Job fairs.** More and more service clubs and chambers of commerce are sponsoring job fairs. They can be excellent vehicles for finding employees. Local schools also may hold job fairs. Even prisons are holding job fairs to help inmates find jobs prior to their release. Rehabilitated prisoners can turn out to be your most loyal employees. (Also, there may be some financial benefits with tax credits in hiring these "higher-risk" people.)

- **Poach from other companies.** Whenever you receive outstanding service from an employee at another store, give them your business card with a note on the back saying, "Thanks for the great service. My company is always looking for outstanding people. If you are ever thinking of changing your job, please call me." If the person is happy with their current job, you've just made his or her day. If not, you've found a new employee. And, even if the person doesn't want the job, he or she may know someone else who does.

What to Start Looking for:

Ten Characteristics of the Ideal Recruit

Remember, it is impossible to *manage* effectively without *hiring* effectively. As I have said, you can't be everywhere, all the time. You can't be in the store at all times. Therefore you *must* hire good people to represent you to your customers.

The goal, then, is to hire individuals with the personality and service-minded disposition necessary to provide excellent customer service. Here are ten qualities you should be looking for and the probing questions to ask yourself before offering anyone a job:

- **Service minded.** Have the individual's past accomplishments shown a positive attitude and reliability?

- **Motivated.** Is he or she in retail for the right reasons (because of a love for the work) or for all the wrong ones (because no other job is easily found or it seems like the best way to get some neat clothes at a discount)?

- **Self-directed.** Is this the sort of person who will provide excellent service even when nobody's watching?

- **Relationship oriented.** Does the individual seem naturally warm, adept at making polite small talk? Or does he or she sound phony, as if

just mouthing nice things to say instead of meaning them?

- **Attention to detail.** Does he or she sweat the small stuff? In retail, it's all about the details.
- **Team player.** Do they seem like they will get along with everyone, or are they just out for themselves?
- **Technical knowledge or aptitude for same.** Can he or she master the technical details required to back up that smile, such as working the cash register, locating an item, or learning what it takes to answer customers questions?
- **Approachable and confident.** Is this someone others feel good about confiding in not only about their retail needs, but also about personal needs?
- **Energy.** Does he or she have the physical and mental energy necessary to do the work?
- **Willing to improve—continuously.** Is this someone who will be up to the challenge of continually evolving as your store (hopefully) improves itself year after year?

Q & A for Your New Talent

The most important quality in a retail job candidate is the ability to communicate effectively, not only with your customers but also with you and the entire team. Here are some questions you can ask to help identify the traits that would make the applicant a great employee. Remember to follow up on all of these items with open-ended questions such as “Tell me more about . . .” or “What does that mean?” The idea is to keep applicants talking because the interview is not about you, it is about them:

- **What did you like most about your last job?** You're in trouble if they shrug and answer “breaks” or “paid vacations.”
- **What did you like least about your last job?** Here is where you pick up any negative attitudes. Anything that sounds like “I had to work too hard” or “My boss never lets me relax” spells trouble.
- **Why did you take your last job?** This gives you real insight into why he or she is applying with you now.
- **What do you consider the most important element of your job?** This will tell you what excites them about retail.
- **What do you look for in a supervisor?** This is actually a question that lets you see if you have the traits to manage this person.
- **Where would you like to be in three years?** This is a trick question in that it may reveal if someone is *not* committed to working for you for a long time. For example, you may find out they are moving out of state at the end of the year. The right answer, of course, is “Working right here for you with more responsibility and making more money.”
- **What are your goals?** Most candidates can't answer this clearly and/or concisely, so it is designed to give you a chance to see how they react when they do not know the answer—something that often arises on the floor of any retail establishment.
- **If I were to hire you, can you describe your ideal job?** Listen carefully to this answer because, again, it will give you insight into what excites this person. This way you will know where to position him on the staff.

Top Ten Traits of Effective Retail Employees

The top ten traits you need for successful retail employees are listed

below. You may or may not exhibit all of these yourself; nobody's perfect. Chances are that the majority will ring true. In any case, never be afraid to hire someone who is smarter or more appropriate to the task than you. You're still the boss! And your company needs great employees to make your business continue to grow. Your ideal employee will possess:

1. **A positive attitude.** Shopping should be fun; so should working in a store. Can your applicant be positive the whole time he or she is on the floor?
 2. **Common sense.** You can't train common sense; people either have it or they don't. Common sense is a vital skill in retail, where instincts as much as rules define a busy sales floor.
 3. **People skills.** Retail is all about communication and is the ultimate "people business."
 4. **Sales ability.** Whether you're paying on commission or a straight hourly wage, retail is sales and sales is retail. You may not want an employee whose "hard sell" approach comes off as too aggressive and alienates customers, but you do want people who can convince customers to buy, without annoying them. Everyone has a different style of selling. For example, one of the best sales people I ever met had a severe stammer, but he used it to his advantage: people were so keen to finish his sentences, they sold themselves.
"Would you p-p-prefer to p-p-pay by c-c-cash or c-c-credit c-c-ca—"
"Oh, credit card, certainly. Credit card," the customer would say, determined to bring things to a close, even if they hadn't previously been sure they wanted to buy.
The point is, however they do it, every employee should have making the sale the overriding goal
 5. **Strong communication skills.** If, during the interview, you sense a lack of communication, this may not be the applicant for you.
 6. **High level of motivation.** A good employee must want the job and must be motivated to succeed.
 7. **Product knowledge or the ability to pick up this knowledge quickly.** New products are a boon to the retail business, and failed products are its bane. You want someone who treats a dog of an onion slicer with the same enthusiasm as a spiffy new coffee grinder.
 8. **Ability to move up in the organization.** You want someone committed to achievement, just as you are, and who isn't above starting at the bottom to get to the top.
 9. **Leadership qualities.** Can this applicant supervise underlings, or even peers, without abusing his or her power and sounding demeaning?
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10. **The ability to be a self-starter.** This is a term we hear a lot, but what does it really mean? Basically this term describes people who won't let a display sit empty even if you didn't specifically tell them to fill it.

Motivating Your Staff

Once you've assembled your "dream team" of employees, you'll have to create a good work environment to keep them. The following are some strategies to help you motivate your staff:

- **Hold brainstorming sessions.** None of us has all the answers, all the time, and good employees are close to customers and often see issues we may miss. Therefore, whether you are looking for new ideas or seeking

solutions to something you sense is not right, don't be afraid to ask for your staff's input. Far from appearing weak, you will show that you trust and value their opinion. Having your employees participate in problem solving or generating ideas gives them a sense of being a valued part of the business, and thus, more connected and are more likely to be loyal.

- **Conduct training, both in-house and outside the business.** With continued training and education, employees become more skilled, efficient, enthusiastic about their job, and even more dependable. Instore training is great, but don't hesitate to send them to an outside seminar or trade show. It may be costly, but good training pays off in the long run.

- **Make the work environment fun.** A job turns into a career only if employees are enjoying themselves and feel like part of a larger team. Bring in lunch every once in awhile or have everyone pitch in for a potluck lunch. Even something as simple as a break room that's always stocked with a full bowl of candy or other snacks can go a long way toward cheering up an otherwise dour workforce. Run group contests where the entire team wins something. Be creative, be unique, most of all—don't afraid to be *fun!*

An acquaintance had a problem with several members of his staff who, while otherwise good employees, were habitually late to work. He tried everything, including bribes and threats. Eventually, he hit upon a stroke of near genius.

"If even one of you is late, you'll have to buy me coffee and donuts in the morning. But if you're all on time, I'll have to buy coffee and donuts for all of you," he challenged. The result: his staff cheered with glee as he ironically feigned sullen reluctance and bought donuts for eighty-seven out of ninety days. Naturally, the reluctance was all a show to entertain his crew—he couldn't have been happier to buy the donuts. His total cost, he told me, was about a quarter of what the unsuccessful on-time bonus he had offered would have cost him.

- **Treat everyone as individuals.** Everyone is different, with different needs and different strengths. People are motivated in different ways: security, money, prestige, friendship, stimulation, etc. Therefore, you may well have to treat everyone differently, although always with fairness. Never lose sight of the fact that teamwork is what ultimately makes a retail business successful. When you care about your people, they will care about you, your customers, *and* your business.

- **Establish standards of operation.** Chaos reigns where rules are unclear or invisible. Many times employees make mistakes because they do not know which boundaries apply. How much of a discount can they offer on a damaged good? When is a customer's harassment too much? Rules need to be established that are workable and consistent so employees can feel independent and free to succeed (within controlled limits) at what they do best—selling.

- **Make to-do lists for everyone.** Daily and weekly task lists are one of the best tools retailers have to increase both productivity and profitability. These lists should itemize both selling tasks and those non-selling tasks on which employees can work when not dealing with customers. Remember, working hard is more fun than standing around idle. Prioritize the lists so the most important projects are accomplished first. Far from seeing them as a drag, employees will feel a sense of

accomplishment when they complete their tasks. Don't forget to check up on these lists because if you don't, employee morale will suffer and even collapse. The worst thing that can happen to morale is that certain employees *always* complete their tasks with no reward, while others *never* complete their tasks with no punishment.

- **Be an effective manager of people.** Supervisors have to wear many hats. They are coaches, mentors, and advisors. Motivation by fear does not work with this generation and a dictatorial style will scare away employees in no time. On the other hand, employees actually want strong leadership. You're not a dictator; you are the boss. Let your staff know that you do not have all the answers, that you want to tap into their knowledge and experience, but that once you've made a decision, that's it.

- **Assign employee mentors.** Everyone needs someone they can trust who they can go to with questions, someone to guide them through tough workplace issues when you are not around or when, as the boss, you seem too intimidating to them. Therefore, employee mentors are a wonderful asset to any retail store.

- **Avoid petty rules.** Nothing turns people off more than rules that do not make sense. Get rid of rules that do not have good reasoning behind them, but keep and explain the reasons for the rules that help employees perform better.

- **Praise good employees.** There are several ways to praise your workers. Face to face is obviously the easiest technique. A personal thank you note goes a long way as well, especially if you make it public by posting it on your bulletin board. Public praise at an employee meeting works well. An official letter to a college or to a potential future employer extolling a student employee is always much appreciated. If your letter gets the student the job, other students will line up around the block to work for your organization! In all of this, remember that praise should be immediate. The longer you wait, the less effective it will be.

Motivating Yourself:

The Eight Principles of Continuous Improvement

Continuously improving the production of your employees requires constant attention and respect. And that starts with you. If you follow the next eight steps, your employees are sure to follow *you*. Here are eight principles of continuous self-improvement:

- **Stress teamwork.** You can't do it all yourself, nor should you try. Work as a team at improving and share the duties, as well as the successes, of your store.

- **Focus on the customers.** When the customer is the focus, the focus is on target. Always.

- **Acknowledge problems openly.** A problem won't go away just because you cover it up. Don't blame, hide, or lie. Admit the problem and move on with full determination to solve it.

- **Always make improvements.** Never stop improving. Learn from your mistakes, learn from customers, learn from seminars, learn from classes, learn from books, learn from tapes—just never stop learning to improve.

- **Inform every staff member.** Through meetings, memos, e-mails, and informal discussions, inform your staff members of steps you're taking for continuous improvement, both personally and professionally.
- **Develop self-discipline.** Start with yourself. Continuously improve, and demand the same from your co-workers and staff.
- **Recruit the right individuals.** Develop a winning team and, as appropriate, add to that winning team with more winners. Don't be afraid to terminate those who are dragging the store down.
- **Enable every staff member.** Don't just tell your staff what to do, give them the tools to do it by establishing rules and leading by example.

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Selling Success

Don't doubt for a minute that retailing is a business of *selling*. Contrary to popular opinion, great salespeople do not have a certain look, a certain style, or certain dress code. They don't drive a certain car or live in a certain part of town. But what they all *do* have in common is the desire to serve the customer.

There are no universal traits of a great salesperson. They come in all shapes and sizes. Some are impeccably dressed, some relatively sloppy. But, in your store, you want not only someone who can sell, but also a person who can fit with your team and add to your store's solid reputation. Thus, your sales people should:

- **Look professional.** The image of the salespeople is vital to your store's own image. Whether it's a store uniform, apron, three-piece suit, or the clothes the store sells, you should specify the dress code.
- **Never ignore customers.** A great salesperson is always selling, but selling doesn't mean pressuring. Customers are people, and selling is a people business. So why would a great salesperson ever ignore a customer?
- **Greet customers by name where possible.** Depending on the amount of traffic you see, this could be impossible or easy. Either way, salespeople always try to establish relationships with their customers.
- **Be friendly and willing to listen to customers.** They understand the importance of serving the customer, and know that to best serve a customer they must first listen to that customer.
- **Suggest another item if the product the customer wants is not available.** This is where knowing your inventory is important. Employees should be familiar with all of the store's products, new and old, and where to find them.
- **Help the customer buy multiple items by suggesting related goods.** Any employee can sell a tarp to someone who comes in to buy a tarp, but it takes a salesperson to find out why the person is buying a tarp and then sell them the brushes, rollers, paint, and all the rest of the stuff they need for their home improvement project.
- **Always thank the customer.** No one should ever take a customer for granted. Without customers, even Wal-Mart would have to close up shop. Customers are always to be thanked, even after a complaint is resolved.
- **Follow up with the customers to make sure they were satisfied.** It's not enough to send a customer on his way with a bag of goods. Great salespeople want to know what they're doing right and especially what they're doing wrong. A phone call to that tarp buyer asking how his or her home improvement is going would work wonders.

Getting Customers in the Mood to Buy

Training salespeople is as much an art as a science. The salesperson's challenge is to turn "lookers" into "buyers." Customers are in the store because the merchandising concept attracted them. But whether or not they actually buy something is still up to your sales staff.

The days of the pushy salesperson are gone. Customers want easy, no-hassle service from people who are non-threatening and nonaggressive. To convert people from looking to buying, that is, to first get the customers into the mood to buy and then to close the sale, good salespeople:

- Talk about what the customer wants to talk about.
- Focus on what the customer wants, not necessarily on what they need.
- Never try to prove they are better or know more than the customer.
- Treat people the way *they* would like to be treated.

The Likeability Factor

Customers often have problems. They complain. They are dissatisfied.

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Whether this is really the store's problem or the emotional baggage customers brought with them is not always easy to understand. One thing is sure, those problems will be easier to solve if the customer likes the salesperson.

Salespeople can get customers to like them by:

- **Leaving their ego at the door.** Customers don't like arrogant or know-it-all salespeople. It's not their job to make your salespeople feel better about themselves. Instead, it's the other way around. Your staff must be easily approachable.
- **Paying attention to details.** Whether or not they verbalize it, customers really do appreciate the little things. Notifying them of new merchandise that may interest them, remembering their birthdays, sharing good news about something you have in common—all of this goes a long way toward closing the current sale and the next one as well.
- **Extending sincere compliments.** People like doing business with happy, bubbly personalities, and they enjoy sincere compliments. Sincerity is a rare commodity. If customers can find it in your store, they'll find a reason to come back. Beware of salespeople who flatter insincerely; few of us like a sycophant.
- **Using laughter, the great social lubricant.** Have fun with the customers. People love to do business with people who laugh and have a good time. And remember, when you're having fun, time really does fly.
- **Making a good impression right away.** The goal with new customers is to get them talking so you can find out their wants and needs. Never treat a new customer with any less enthusiasm than you would your best customer. Customers *do* judge a book by its cover, so never miss the opportunity to make a great impression.
- **Using the "feel good" factor.** Customers buy with their emotions, and the most successful salespeople are the ones who make customers *feel* good about doing business with their company.
- **Maintaining self-control.** Salespeople must be very careful not to take their frustration out on the next customer if the previous one has caused a major heartache. This is called "last customer residue." So, for the moment, forget what went wrong with the last customer and move quickly on to the new customer with an added portion of charm—just

to make sure none of your prior annoyance accidentally bleeds through.

What NOT to Say to Customers

There's a TV show called *What NOT to Wear*. My version is What NOT to Say to a Customer. Knowing what not to say is as important as knowing what to say. Here is a list of comments that drive customers away and should never come out of a salesperson's mouth:

- "You could never afford this."
- "I only work here . . ."
- "Everything we have is out on the shelves."
- "It's over there."
- "We would need cash from you."
- *They* instead of *we*. For example: "Do you sell these in blue?" "No, *they* don't." (The store is every employee's responsibility—and property.) *We* should always be the term.)

The Five Steps of the Selling Process

It may seem confusing, but, in fact, the retail selling process is made up of five steps: the greeting, bonding and asking questions, making suggestions, overcoming objections, and closing the sale. Here we discuss each of these five in more detail:

- **Greeting customers.** When customers walk through the door, be sure to express gratitude for their coming in. If the store is extremely busy, acknowledge them with a wave or quick "hello." At the very least, smile! Let them know someone will be right with them. Customers understand if you are busy, they just don't want to be ignored.
- **Creating a bond and asking questions.** To sell something you need to

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know something about the customer and what they need. Remember that the customers may walk out with products completely different from what they came in for. The more you know the more you can help them select which product is right for them. Without getting pushy, you need to know who the item is for and the needs of the buyer. Make sure the customer does most of the talking. There's nothing worse than a retail salesperson who takes a customer's well-meaning, "How are you?" and turns it into a five-minute discussion of his or her personal life. That's a sure way to kill a sale.

- **Making suggestions based on what you learn from the customer.** Show the merchandise with style and enthusiasm. Demonstrate product knowledge and personalize your presentation to the customer based on what he or she says, not on what you assume.

- **Overcoming objections.** If the objection is that the price is lower in another store, match it if you can verify it. If the customer objects to the product's quality, recognize that some customers need a choice—that items may look better to them when compared to something similar. The key is not to give up when other options exist.

- **Closing the sale.** This is the most difficult and important part of selling. Most people are actually afraid to close because, like most of us, they fear rejection. As long as they keep the customer talking, they feel as if the sale may yet happen. Of course, they are wrong. If they let the customer vacillate too long, premature buyers remorse sets in (especially if the item was being bought on impulse), and the customer walks away.

The vital thing to remember when asking for the order (closing the sale), is not to ask a question to which a plausible answer is “no.” Do not ask, “Would you like to buy this product?” If you do, you are encouraging a “no” answer just as much as a “yes” answer. Rather, ask a question to which either response is the one you want to hear. “Would you prefer to pay by cash or credit card?” is a classic. “Should I wrap up the red or the blue?”, “Would you like this gift wrapped or as is?”, “After we make the alterations, should I send it home or would you like to pick it up here?” These are all “closers” because they assume the sale has already been made and now we’re only dealing with the post-purchase details.

Of course, there are other ways to nudge the teetering buyer forward, especially when it is too early to use the either/or closer. “Let’s just do this” you might say, or “Everyone’s buying it” or “Will you be using it during the day or at night?” And then, whatever the answer, “Well, great. Then would you prefer to pay by cash or credit card?”

When Customers Complain: Five Strategies of Complaint Management

In the wondrous world of retail there is really only one sure truth: customers *will* complain. It may be for a variety of reasons, and not always due to anything you have done. It could be something from their personal lives, or what side of the bed they got up on, a late shipment causing a product delay, a rainy day. No matter the cause, when customers complain, the following five strategies of complaint management will go a long way toward resolving the problem and making sure it never happens again:

- **Accept personal responsibility.** First and foremost, you are the agent responsible for solving the problem. Passing the buck only aggravates the issue; personal accountability solves it.
- **Listen.** Learning to listen is critical to soothing the ego or dealing with the issues of an aggravated or unhappy customer. Try to listen not only to what the customer is saying, but also to what’s behind what they are saying. It’s a learned skill, but a vital one to your continued success.
- **Apologize.** No matter how hard it is, or whose fault it was, or the circumstances surrounding the complaint, or the time of day, or how hungry you are, or how close to the end of your shift it is, *always* apologize to the customer for any inconvenience.
- **Fix it, and then some.** Unfortunately, apologizing is never enough. Fixing the problem is the only solution a customer will accept.

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- **Avoid it the next time.** Complaint management means handling the problem so effectively that it doesn’t happen again. Learn from mistakes, and you’ll have to deal with complaint management less often and satisfied customers more often.

The Exit Interview

No matter how well you find, hire, and train good people, inevitably you *will* lose staff to illness, family issues, relocation, and even to other businesses. The trick is not to fight it. Instead, embrace it. One of the best tools you have for people who leave your store is the all-important exit interview. Here you can learn some valuable lessons. The leaver is no longer inhibited from telling you the truth. “I’m leaving because I can’t

stand the assistant manager, Suzy. Whenever you're away, she spends all her time talking to her boyfriend." This is information you wouldn't get nearly as easily from a current employee. Of course, you'll want to check this charge out before accusing Suzy; the leaver may have been vindictive and untruthful. The point is, what you could learn from a departing employee may help you keep other valuable employees.

Don't be afraid to ask for, and hear, the truth. It may be unpleasant, but knowing there are problems you haven't observed, employee resentment, or other issues, could lead to improvements that will save your business in the long run. Provided you solve the problems, that is.

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