

10 Retail Training Techniques to Reinvent the Customer Experience and Increase Sales Revenue



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It's not uncommon for retailers to discover that their sales figures aren't living up to their projections or expectations. The internet-age of shopping, along with the recession, has caused many owners to rethink their sales goals. Many retailers have opted to try and compete with online retailers in a head-to-head battle of low prices. This is a losing proposition for brick and mortar retailers, as online fulfillment centers can almost always undercut brick and mortar stores. To compete for customer loyalty and dollars, retailers need to reexamine their sales processes, and find ways to differentiate themselves from the glut of online outlets.

There are simply too many places to buy too much of the same thing.

This differentiation must occur on the sales floor. Salespeople must be trained and be motivated to sell the value of the experience, not just the features of the product. It's the people that make a brick and mortar experience different from an online experience. Whether that difference is for good or bad will depend on the training of the sales staff.

Difficulties in meeting sales projections can almost always be traced back to problems with the sales process. That process begins with the training programs that have been implemented. Sales aren't made or lost on the floor, they're made or lost in the training room.

This white paper will describe the symptoms of a flawed training program and offer solutions for better aligning sales training with customer expectations. Once implemented, the techniques described will bolster salesperson confidence, improve customer experiences, and improve revenue.

SYMPTOMS OF A LARGER PROBLEM

High Single-unit Sales: The largest expenditure of time and effort goes into getting a customer to make a visit to your store. If a single purchase is the only one made, then the ratio of cost to profit remains high. A lot of single-item receipts means that the sales staff is exerting enormous effort to make just a few sales. Having broken the ice with the customer by completing a transaction, salespeople should have an easier time encouraging them to buy additional items.

If a retailer is finding that they have a lot of single-item purchases, it's a symptom of a larger problem. For whatever reason, customers aren't making additional purchases. A knowledgeable, engaged salesperson will encourage additional purchases and create a shopping experience that promotes customer loyalty. If this isn't happening, it's likely that a breakdown has occurred in the retail sales training program.

Frequent Sales: Discounts are a frequent tactic used to draw customers into a store. They are also a lose-lose proposition for the store. They not only cut into the immediate profits on discounted items, they also reduce the overall value of those items. An item that can be sold for 10% off will always be viewed as 10% less valuable to the consumer. If the item is returned to its original price, customers may simply wait for another discount, or buy a similar, lower-priced item. Using discounts to generate sales is a lot like filling a sinking boat with sand to force out the water.

Stores that frequently employ discounts aren't demonstrating value to their customers. Whether it's the value of the product, the value of the experience, or a combination of the two, something is missing. In essence they are incenting shoppers to buy in spite of the experience. Retailers rely on salespeople to explain value to potential customers, not just the amount saved. This may be the value of the product itself, the value of the product in solving a problem the customer has, or the value of buying the product today, from their physical store where the product is on-hand for them to look at, touch, or try on. However value is expressed, it must be expressed in such a way that the customer understands it, believes it, and is willing to pay full-price for it. For this to happen, salespeople must be trained to convey the value of the products, they must believe in the value of the products, and they must have confidence.

A FEW WORDS ABOUT VALUE SELLING

All too often, salespeople are dragged into a discussion about the price of an item. The customer wants to know what buying the item will take from them, in terms of cold, hard cash. Well trained salespeople know how to turn this paradigm on its head. They steer the conversation toward what the item will give the customer—whether it's utility, satisfaction, status, or any one of a thousand different benefits.

This is the basis of value selling; it's not about what an item costs, it's about what an item *provides*. Identifying the customers motivators to buy and then relating the benefits of that item to those motivators is the heart of value selling. Without this skill, salespeople will almost always have to sell based solely on price and the customer's immediate needs.

IDENTIFYING THE PROBLEM

These symptoms point directly to foundational problems in the retail sales training process. Salespeople aren't giving the customers what they want and, in turn, those customers aren't giving the business what it needs. Given the various and often outdated ways that retailers approach retail sales training, it's of little surprise that many salespeople are unable to compete in this rapidly changing market.

Looking at the three most popular training processes reveals just how inadequate they can be:

The Training Manual: Most stores have a few of these dusty relics hanging around. Written in dry, academic tones, these manuals outline the most basic concepts a salesperson is expected to "master." They are frequently out of date and read like stereo instructions. What little information a new hire can glean from them is quickly forgotten in the hubbub of the sales floor.

The Training Video: In terms of engagement, these videos only edge out the training manuals because they have sound and colors. They are often just a video depiction of actors or employees carrying out the actions outlined in the manual. Often as outdated as the manuals, they take a lot of time to watch and can't hope to convey more than a narrow range of scenarios. Many were created by people who never had to sell on the sales floor, so their value to someone actually having to sell on the sales floor is limited at best.

Shadow Training: One of the most popular methods of training is where the new hire is paired with a more experienced salesperson. Under the best conditions, they are paired with a salesperson who has the right temperament and experience and is trained to teach other people. Under most conditions, the new hire is simply paired with whomever is available. Typically, this type of training is seen as a burden by the experienced salesperson (who is now devoting time to training instead of earning), as an ordeal by the trainee (who must stand there quietly, learning through osmosis), and as an interruption by customers who feel like guinea pigs in a laboratory.

There are multiple problems with all three of these training processes. They convey different information to everyone who uses them; they are hard to test and track; they are time consuming, and they don't deliver great results.

Salespeople are the public face of the company, the front lines of customer relations, and they define the company for everyone they encounter. Their training determines how a retailer is viewed. The limits of these training programs create a front line force that is poorly informed, inconsistent, and most importantly lacking in confidence. That's why you see so many associates stacking merchandise and staying behind the counter-away from customers.

SEARCHING FOR SALES SOLUTIONS

For training to be effective, it must be part of an ongoing process of improvement. A once-and-done training period leaves plenty of time for salespeople to fall into bad habits on the sales floor. A training program that is coupled with performance monitoring can stop bad habits before they form or, worse yet, get passed on to other employees. Professional athletes train constantly under the guidance of experts and have their training and on-field performance monitored. This isn't done to punish the athlete, it's done to promote their absolute best performance. The same type of regimen can be applied to the sales training process, encouraging salespeople to apply the following techniques for reinventing the customer experience and increasing revenue.

When evaluating a sales training program for your employees, you should make sure that the following techniques are employed and emphasized. While some customization may be necessary, the following ten items will provide a rock-solid foundation for a high-quality training experience. Built upon these fundamentals, you can be sure that your salespeople are getting the information they need to succeed.

Proper retail sales training would include:

1

Building Rapport: Disconnected sales associates will create customers who are connected...but to the internet. Most shoppers carry smartphones and can shop for better deals while standing on the sales floor. More and more mobile apps let customers scan barcodes to find better prices on merchandise. If salespeople aren't giving those customers a reason to make an in-store purchase, the customer is just a few thumb presses from making the purchase elsewhere...without having to leave the store.

To avoid this, salespeople must engage with customers immediately. They must be attentive and truly listen to the customer's needs and concerns. Rapport building takes time and a willingness to listen. Once that rapport is built, trust naturally follows. Once a customer trusts a salesperson, a great experience is born and loyalty is created. Most people can understand that concept, but the devil is in the details - your training has to tell your employees exactly how to accomplish that engagement.

2

Emphasize Value: If a customer can't see the value in a product, they'll be hard pressed to pay full price for it. They'll ask for discounts, wait for the item to be marked down, or buy it somewhere that sells it for less. Either way, your business ends up losing money, and perhaps, a loyal customer.

Salespeople need to understand the importance of selling value over price. Having built a relationship with the customer, the sales associate should know enough to begin connecting the customer to the item, not to its price.

3

Honesty is the Only Policy: A false claim or exaggeration by a salesperson about a product they are unfamiliar with can be disproven in the time it takes to do a Google search on a smartphone. This could happen right in front of your salesperson, leading to embarrassment for your store and its staff.

A properly trained salesperson knows about their products and the value inherent in them. They know how to connect with customers first so they can convey the value of the products. If they're properly trained, they have no need to lie or exaggerate to close the sale.

4

Adding On: Low per-ticket averages due to an abundance of single-item purchases points to a failure to upsell or cross-sell. If the salesperson has already put in the effort to build a rapport with the customer, that rapport should translate into additional purchases.

Once again, this relates directly to the salesperson's ability to engage with the customer and understand their needs. Knowing the value the product holds for the customer, the premium value, the salesperson should also use that information to sell additional items that will enhance the experience of the product for the customer. Proper training will teach them how to add value and raise the average number of items per customer.

5

Continual Learning: Every sales interaction has an outcome. Whether it's positive or negative, it's still an outcome that must be tracked and analyzed. Reviewing those outcomes is the only way to glean lessons from both success and failure.

Salespeople need to be trained to be in a constant state of self-analysis. They should be reviewing the techniques they've learned and then applying them in real-world sales situations. Through this process, they can learn the important distinction between theory and practice.

6

Expert Training: The most common training processes have too many limitations to be consistently effective. They leave gaps in the knowledge base and aren't evenly applied to all salespeople. Customers will notice these gaps, and inconsistent experiences will almost always drive away repeat customers.

The best salesperson on your sales floor probably has no experience training other salespeople. If they aren't trained to train, how reliably can they communicate the skills and knowledge that have made them a success? They can't. Sales skills aren't learned through observation; they're learned through study and practice, preferably with professional guidance.

7

Extra Effort: Online shopping was once seen as destined to kill the retail industry. Yet, in spite of this, many retail stores continue to thrive. Why? Because shoppers in a brick and mortar retail store are looking for something extra... something they can't get online. That extra something is delivered by salespeople.

Identifying a customer's wants and not just their needs is integral to success on the sales floor. Customers rarely are transparent about their desires, so salespeople need to be trained to employ a little psychology. That's because when customers make a purchase, they are unconsciously upgrading their lives. Correctly identifying a customer's dreams demonstrates the salesperson's value to the customer. From there, demonstrating the value of a product is much easier.

8

Never Desperate: Customers don't want to feel pressured into making a purchase. If they sense that the salesperson is desperate to close the sale and is using closing techniques, that creates its own unwanted pressure. Instead of feeling sympathetic toward the salesperson, they'll feel turned off by the entire buying experience. And your store.

Salespeople should exude confidence, not desperation...even if they work on commission. That confidence comes from solid training and a belief in the value of what they're selling. When a customer senses that a salesperson is truly confident in themselves and the value of their product, they'll begin to feel that confidence as well. After all, selling is nothing more than a transference of feeling.

9

Wooing Customers: Customer relationships are just that – relationships. They take effort to establish and care to cultivate. An approach that is too aggressive or thoughtless will squander the opportunity to make a sale and drive customers away. A greeting or encounter that is too passive will make the customer feel neglected. To be successful, a proper balance must be struck. This isn't something that good salespeople are born with, it's something they learn.

10

Repeatability: Whatever training program you choose, it must be consistent and repeatable. Every salesperson should hit the floor with the same skills and knowledge. Performance evaluations are only meaningful if everyone is starting from the same baseline. If every employee has different training, how can you hope to compare their sales skills?

The best training programs use modules that convey the same information to every employee. They also include testing that lets you know that everyone is on the same page—before they set foot on the sales floor. With this kind of program, you can truly compare employee performance on an “apples-to-apples” basis.

IMPLEMENTING THE SOLUTIONS

Putting these techniques into practice requires a standardized, repeatable training process that certifies the learner not only has been exposed to the training but also demonstrates their understanding of the training. The process must next evaluate progress of success on the sales floor.

Without these key components, there's no guarantee that salespeople are entering the floor with the requisite skills and no way to rapidly identify a lapse into poor sales habits.

A sink-or-swim approach doesn't work with retail sales training. Giving trainees the minimum skills and hoping they'll learn the rest from experience opens your business up to a lot of dissatisfied customers. On the sales floor, there is little room for error, and mistakes can permanently alienate customers and give your store bad

word-of-mouth. Once a salesperson starts to wait on a customer, it's too late to find out whether they have the necessary skills and knowledge to properly represent your business and its products.

RETAIL TRAINING BEST PRACTICES

Retail training programs will vary widely from one brand to the next. They can even vary from one store to the next. These customizations can make it difficult to say what is the best approach to a retail sales training program. However, there are some basic features common to the most successful training programs:

- **Time:** Lengthy training videos and materials can overwhelm trainees, and take up an inordinate amount of their time and their trainer's time. Training programs should be broken up into small, easily absorbed sections that convey the needed skills without a lot of fluff or filler.
- **Comprehensiveness:** During shadow training, videos, and manual training, certain situations may be overlooked. A properly structured training program must include a variety of situations.
- **Constant Presence:** Manuals, videos, and trainers are only available during business hours. Trainees have little opportunity to review materials and brush up on previous sections. Some of the best training programs offer a 24/7 online presence, accessible from any internet connection. Trainees and seasoned salespeople alike can benefit from the training program from anywhere, at any time.
- **Perfect Pacing:** Everyone learns better when allowed to move at their own pace. Classroom sessions, training videos, and shadow training don't offer this option. To be truly effective, a retail sales training program must move at the pace of the learner, not the teacher.
- **Engagement:** Boring classroom lectures make learning difficult. Shadow training requires the trainee to learn by watching somebody else work. Neither of these approaches are particularly engaging. Successful retail sales training programs are interactive and require the trainee to become an active part of the learning process.



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PROBLEM SOLVING

Problems on the sales floor can almost always be traced to problems in the training program. Businesses that are suffering low per-customer transactions or other sales issues would do well to examine how their training is being conducted. None of the problems that businesses face in training are insurmountable, and they don't require replacing your sales staff.

Salespeople aren't born, they're made; and they can be made better. A properly structured and monitored retail sales training program will do just that.

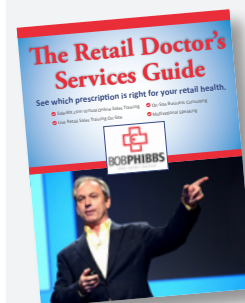
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Bob Phibbs, The Retail Doctor, is a nationally recognized business strategist, customer service expert, sales coach, marketing mentor, retail author, and motivational business speaker.

In 1994, Bob Phibbs started his own retail consulting company, his brainchild, The Retail Doctor. "I believe we can make the world a better place by improving the skills of the people working in retail," is one of his favorite quotes.

Over the years, the Retail Doctor has helped thousands of businesses in every major industry to strengthen their business structure, close more sales, and stay far ahead of their competition.

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