

Don't sell stuff, satisfy customer needs!

Practical ways to run a truly customer-centred store

by Jim Danahy

TWO KINDS OF RETAILERS

I travel and work with retailers all over North America and believe there are basically two kinds. Which are you?

Stuff-Centred Retailers put merchandise at the centre of the business. The result is that when buying habits change, customers leave the retailer behind like yesterday's news.

Customer-centred retailers put the customer at the centre of their businesses like the hub of a wheel. In this environment, everything you do – from merchandise selection and pricing, to special services, returns policies, store layout and even store location – is like a spoke that must be anchored to customer needs. When you stay abreast of your customers' needs, you will never fall out of step.

CUSTOMER-CENTREDNESS

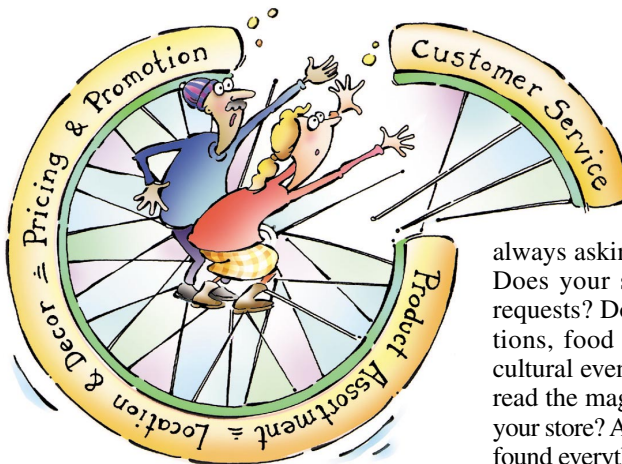
Nearly 70 years ago, Mahatma Gandhi penned the best description of customer-centredness I've seen:

“ A customer is the MOST IMPORTANT visitor on our premises.
They are not dependent on us.
WE ARE DEPENDENT ON THEM.
They are not an interruption on our work.
They are the purpose of it.
They are not an outsider on our business.
They are part of it.
We are not doing them a favour by serving them.
They are **DOING US A FAVOUR** by giving us the opportunity to do so. ”

Mahatma Gandhi

CARE IS KEY

Always make decisions with your customers' welfare as your first concern, then evaluate profitability – never the other way



around. If they believe you care sincerely, you'll win. Care is the key to lasting customer patronage and forgiveness when you or your staff make mistakes.

CALL A STAFF MEETING TO INTRODUCE YOUR STAFF TO THE "NEW BOSS"

Don't explain anything in advance except to say that you will be introducing their new boss. Use a simple flip chart or sheet of bristol board and markers to hand draw a stick drawing of Connie and Connor. Emphasize that Connie and Connor pay everyone's salary.

CONNIE AND CONNOR CUSTOMER!

Explain to everyone that this isn't a prescription for chaos! You will still be making operating decisions, but you will be using customer needs as a "compass" to guide those decisions, and you need their insights about what Connie and Connor want.

REMEMBER YOUR PLACE... IN CONNIE AND CONNOR'S LIVES!

Remember your primary role is to make life a little easier for your local customers. Re-examine your store from top to bottom with the customer's perspective in mind. Is it always clean and easy to get around? Are sections well signed for someone in a

hurry? Is merchandise easy to get at? Is all merchandise clearly priced? Are people

always asking for things you don't carry? Does your staff keep track of customer requests? Do you carry specialty publications, food and other products for local cultural events and ethnic groups? Do you read the magazines your customers buy in your store? Are you asking customers if they found everything they were looking for?

BEING CHEERFUL...

A SECRET WEAPON IN CONVENIENCE RETAIL

Research shows that consumers don't expect high levels of service from convenience stores. Wow your customers with a consistently uplifting experience in your store. Train and reward staff to act like hosts – treat customers as welcome guests. Always, always greet customers with a smile when they enter the store. Notice customers who appear to be searching without success. Kids are a big part of your business – treat them with respect. At the cash, ask if customers got everything they were looking for. Offer to make special orders for regular customers.

To paraphrase John F. Kennedy –

“ Ask not how you can make customers loyal to you, ask only how you can be known as loyal to your customers! ”

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