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CHAIN STORE AGE

Delivering customer-centric customer service in a downturn

By Katherine Field

(July 27, 2009) The year 2009 has proven to be a tough retail environment. And by all accounts, the road to the end of the year won't be a lot easier.

Retailers have responded to the challenge by reducing overhead, most predictably in the areas of staff and employee hours. As competition heats up for every consumer dollar, customer service becomes the prime differentiator, moving retailers to embrace customer-centricity as never before.

Workforce management is one tactical tool retailers are using to align their organizations toward customer-centricity, especially in the areas of scheduling to meet customer activity patterns and peak demand. However, it isn't the only tool in the toolbox. In fact, a trusty standby may be the best tool yet -- old-fashioned training and development.

Workforce management enables companies to have the right staffing levels on the sales floor to meet customer demand. However, the employees must still interact with the customer. Will the employees skillfully guide customers through product selection and effectively identify and leverage upsell opportunities? Or will they merely serve as stock-keepers and cashiers? In this tight economy, lost sales and missed upsells matter, because they produce slow-moving inventory categories that erode retail margins.

"Winning organizations use highly targeted T&D programs to increase the performance of their staff," said Bill Sherman, co-founder of Intology LLC, a Henderson, Nev.-based outsourcing training provider. "In a downturn, it's tempting to consider cutting T&D expenses. But, front-line employees serve as the face of your organization to the customer. So, customer-centricity requires a genuine commitment to T&D."

Customer-centricity requires retail employees to provide a seamless, high-quality experience for the store's customers. According to Sherman, this approach requires employees who understand the store's products, deliver exceptional customer service and use store technology efficiently.

"To meet these objectives, T&D programs will have to understand the employees' best learning styles, and move beyond traditional classroom (or warehouse workshop) trainings utilizing product manuals, PowerPoint and role-play in order to engage today's learners, especially Millennials," Sherman added.

He advised that the following T&D approaches be considered:

- Virtual retail environments with product "hot spots" can prompt a trainee with features and benefits information for upsell opportunities.
- Simulations provide an arena for simulated interactions with customers (ranging from potential buyers to irate patrons). "Millennials spend more time online than they do watching television; they are accustomed to online games that provide immediate feedback on performance, allowing them to adjust their behaviors in order to succeed," said Sherman. By providing an online game environment, complete with scores, this type of program aligns best with their learning style, he added. "Since younger workers often lack the customer interaction skills that years of experience provide, virtual environments can help them polish up their customer-centricity skills before

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ever encountering a living, breathing (and paying) customer.”

- Simulation training on POS systems, price scanning or inventory-control systems provides hands-on learning before new employees hit the retail floor.

Often, major change events -- such as new product launches, changes in POS systems or inventory-management systems -- produce training requirements that exceed the company's internal T&D capabilities, be it the need for skills in 3-D simulations or simply a need for more trainers in multiple locations for changes in processes or systems.

In these cases, “Outsourced training providers minimize stress and burnout on already overtaxed in-house resources,” said Sherman. “Skilled trainers can assimilate company culture and business practices into training programs.”

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