

RETAIL GREETERS: SALES BUILDERS OR CUSTOMER TURNOFF?

Do you need greeters or should you avoid them? That is the perplexing question many retail organizations are struggling with today. Often touted in the press as the perennial example of the benefits to employing greeters, Walmart has hung on to its practice faithfully. But does it work and if so, will merely placing any warm body with a forced smile at the door to your store do the trick of converting entering customers into satisfied shoppers?

Not necessarily, there is much more to successfully using retail greeters to affect a significant difference in your bottom line. The basic problem lies with retailers who do not adequately define what it is they hope to accomplish. Retailers and greeters need to fully understand their function.

Establishing goodwill with customers is the sole reason for using greeters. Four fundamental purposes and their corresponding methods for using greeters must be applied in order to accomplish this goal.

These are:

1. Acknowledge the customer.

Purpose – Most of us pass much of our time in a very impersonal world. Unless we live in a small, rural community or have celebrity status, we receive little personal acknowledgment. From the gas station, which in most cases is now pay at the pump self serve, to the grocery, department or discount store, we have become nameless. Even when a store clerk or restaurant server holds our identity, in the form of a credit card, firmly in the palm of their hand, it is a rare occasion when they take the initiative to address us by name. All too often, our credit card and receipt are returned with little more than a blank stare and monotone "Thank you."

Method – Establishing eye contact on a one to one basis is the key. Far too often greeters do not grab the customer's attention by looking them squarely in the eye. Greeters may be preoccupied or self-conscious and

thus fail to establish this critical first contact. Pushing a shopping cart into the customer's path or thrusting a sale circular into their hands does not establish real contact, at least not in the positive sense.

2. Give the store a friendly atmosphere.

Purpose – We all want to shop in a friendly place, but what does that mean? When we think friendly we do not picture a store with the staff gushing all over us or where we feel pressured into buying. We usually do not want to be sold on anything. We instead want the opportunity to sell ourselves on whatever needs we came into the store to fill and the benefits we can expect from making a good purchase decision. A friendly atmosphere simply means a place where we feel welcome, comfortable, free to browse around and shop.

Method – We create this friendly, but non-threatening environment by greeting the customer warmly and personally, not mechanically. A feigned, half-hearted or forced smile is a dead giveaway to the entering customer that you rather they would go away and not bother you. Customers entering the store may be in a hurry, themselves preoccupied or even in a bad mood. The greeter's job is to change that customer's mindset, if only for a moment, by eliciting from them a responsive smile to that of the greeter. I will venture that you too have experienced this. You fly through the door of a store, stressed and anxious from being behind schedule and having three more stops to make on your way home, when suddenly you are arrested by the warm smile and genuine "hello" of an unknown individual adding to your life a much needed ray of sunshine at that moment. No, your harried schedule and tardiness haven't magically disappeared, but the ice is broken and you smile back with a momentary sigh of relief because of one friendly, personal greeting. Some stores have opted to take this a giant step further. In the U.K., ASDA supermarkets recently began advertising for 100 talented actors and actresses to serve as greeters. According to Sally Hopson, Director of Customer Services at ASDA: "Greeters give the first impression of ASDA when a customer walks through the door. If we can find someone who can make our customers smile and their shopping trip more fun, then that's what we will do."

3. Inform and offer help as needed.

Purpose – Frequently we do need help from the store's employees. While no one wants to be hounded by overzealous salespeople, it is even more frustrating to want to buy something and be unable to find anyone willing or competent to help. I have walked out of stores vowing never to return for this reason more than any other. Having sold myself, now all I want is some assistance so that the purchase can be completed.

Method – The solution here is simply to first offer information and then if necessary, follow up with direct assistance. A perfect example is my local ACE hardware store. A few years ago Home Depot built a new mega store on the hill directly overshadowing the local ACE store. Now, I also shop the Home Depot store as they have lumber and many construction items the hardware store does not carry, but for items the ACE store sells, I am a loyal customer. Why? Simply because when I walk in the door there is always someone at the cash register and if they are not serving a customer, they will turn and say "Hello." Then as I walk toward the main aisle, invariably someone will greet me and ask if there is anything they can help me find. I am in that store every week and most of time I know exactly what I want and where to find it, but I also know that in the event I need help their employees are always willing and ready to assist me. Greeters should not only welcome and acknowledge entering customers, but they can also help by asking questions, updating customers on the latest offers and sales and telling them what is new and exciting in the store since their last visit.

4. To empower the customer.

Purpose – Today people want to control their own destiny, including when they are shopping in our stores. Give them the ability to do this and they will respond positively.

Method – As I said before, customers today do not want to be sold; they want to be empowered to decide for themselves. We need to do everything possible to enable them to do this. Victoria's Secret understands this perfectly. Their customers are divided into two very distinct groups, women who generally know what they want in the store typically only requiring help with colors and sizes and men who, in general, have no clue as to what

they are there for and are often embarrassed at even being in the store. Victoria Secret's sales staff is well trained to handle both types of customer and tend to be especially adept at making their male customers feel at ease. A true attitude of being helpful, of having the customer's best interest at heart and of serving their needs ensures this outcome. Nothing encourages me to make a buying decision more than when I sense that the salesperson is looking out for my best interests, rather than just trying to make a sale. This is because good, old fashioned TRUST is the foundation that builds customer relationships over the long term.

We have all had negative experiences with greeters including car dealerships where salespeople eyed us up and down like vultures to determine whether we were a bona fide buyer or just a tire kicker before we even walked in the door and computer stores, where for instance, sales personnel seldom take the time or interest to listen to our questions, preferring to simply push the newest hardware and software gadgetry at us.

Whether or not you have appointed greeters at the door of your establishment, it is essential that every employee understand and actively practice these four principles of establishing goodwill with every customer they encounter. In so doing, they will give your store a small town, friendly personality that delivers a caring, positive experience shoppers will want to return for again and again.



John Di Frances is an internationally recognized expert on Strategic Business Issues. His professional career spans thirty years of global corporate, nonprofit, academic and government agency experience in senior executive and industry leadership positions. John advises senior executives globally and is a prominent professional speaker. Since 1983 he has served as the Managing Partner of DI FRANCES & ASSOCIATES, LLC.