

MEETING & GREETING - CUSTOMER SERVICE FUNDAMENTALS

Do retail greeters help to boost customer satisfaction? That is the question many retail organizations are wrestling with today. A highly visible model, Walmart has maintained the practice of employing greeters for some years. Has it worked? Yes, but this initiative is not followed in every store. Were results inconsistent?

While many shoppers appreciate having someone offer them a cart, here, the measure of success depends upon the individual performance of the greeter. To avoid uninspiring outcomes, when training the greeter, retailers need to clearly communicate what it is they are trying to accomplish. As in any sales initiative, both retailers and employees must fully understand that the greeter's function is more than just handing a cart to a customer. They play a vital role in establishing goodwill with customers. Here are four fundamentals for successfully greeting and meeting the customer:

1. Acknowledge the customer.

Need – 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 pay at the pump self-serve gas station, to the grocery, discount or department store, we have no identity. Even when a store clerk or restaurant server holds our credit card firmly in the palm of his or her hand, we are rarely addressed by name. All too often, our credit card and receipt are returned with little more than a blank stare, and at best a monotone "Thank you."

Solution – Establishing eye contact on a one-to-one basis is 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 with no real eye contact will not leave a positive impression. However, eye contact with a genuine smile is always a winning combination.

2. Maintain a friendly environment.

Need – Sales employees are also greeters. People like to shop in a friendly environment, but what does that mean? When we think "friendly," we don't necessarily picture a store with the staff gushing all over us or pressuring us to buy. However, customers do appreciate a friendly hello from a sales person just to let them know he or she is there. They can, at the very least, guide you to the right department when the store is unfamiliar.

One of the most disheartening experiences a shopper can have is to be made 'invisible.' Have you ever tried to gain the attention of a sales person who will not acknowledge you at all? Is it so difficult to offer a brief apology and, "I'll be with you in a moment?" Another 'invisible' scenario occurs when a sales person quickly turns and walks in the opposite direction as you approach them with a question. Infuriating! The answer? Training, training, training!

A greeter soon discovers that customers vary. The customer entering your store may be in a hurry, stressed or gruff. The greeter's job is to change that customer's mindset, if only for a moment, by eliciting from them a responsive smile. You may relate to this situation. You fly through the door of a store anxious and running late, when suddenly you are arrested by a smile and warm "hello". That smile imparts a much needed ray of sunshine to the end of a long and tedious day. Of course, your circumstances haven't magically disappeared, but somehow the darkness lifts and with a sigh of relief, you smile back. All because of one friendly, personal gesture.

Some stores have opted to take a wildly innovative approach to welcoming customers. In the U.K., ASDA supermarkets advertised 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. Offer help and information

Need – Often, we do require assistance from a sales person. While no one likes to be hounded to buy something, it is even more frustrating to be prepared to make a purchase and then unable to find anyone to serve you. I have walked out of stores vowing never to return for this reason more than any other. Where do all the sales people go? How can they just disappear?

Solution – The answer here is for the sales person to first offer information, then remain within range and when necessary, follow-up with direct assistance. A perfect example would be my favorite ACE hardware store. A few years ago Home Depot built a new mega store on the hill directly above the local ACE store. I sometimes shop the Home Depot store as they carry lumber and many construction items the hardware store does not, but for items the local ACE store sells, I remain a loyal customer. Why? Because when I walk through 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 almost every week. I usually know exactly what I want and where to find it, but in the event I need help, knowledgeable employees are willing and ready to assist me. Greeters should not only welcome entering customers, but they can also help by asking questions and updating customers on the latest offers and sales.

4. Empower the customer

Need – Today, people want to control their own destiny, especially when they are shopping. Give them the ability to do this and they will respond positively.

Solution– As I said before, customers today do not want to be sold, but rather empowered to make an informed decision. We need to do everything possible to enable them to do this. Victoria's Secret understands this perfectly. Their customers are divided into two distinct groups, women who generally know what they want in the store typically requiring help with only colors and sizes and men who, in general, have no clue as to what they should buy and are often embarrassed at being there. Victoria Secret's sales staff is well trained to handle both groups. They are especially adept at making their male customers feel at ease. An attitude of having the customer's best interest at heart and making every effort to meet their needs ensures success.

In a buying decision, nothing encourages me more than knowing that a salesperson is looking out for my best interests and not just trying to make a sale. This is because old-fashioned 'Trust' is the best foundation for good customer relationships in the long term. Unfortunate encounters with greeters, for instance, car dealership sales people sizing us up to decide whether or not we're worth the trouble (So, maybe I did just clean out the garage!) or frustrating tussles with disengaged computer store personnel unwilling to solve our dilemma, are a definite turn-off. A quality sales person/greeter is always willing take the time to be a good listener and diligent problem solver. Again, this is personal service and certainly one of the best ways to create customer loyalty.

Whether or not you have appointed greeters at the door of your establishment, it is imperative that all your employees fully understand and actively practice these four fundamentals for establishing goodwill with every customer they meet. In so doing, your store will project a genuine "small town" friendliness that will bring shoppers back again and again.

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