

3 Ways To Build Next Years Holiday Sales!

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Holiday time, it's the most wonderful time of the year, isn't it? If you are a retailer, it can be the most frustrating 60 days. Just like clockwork this year, the media hounds started just before Thanksgiving, trying to predict what retail sales were going to be. The interviews and quotes began and retailers are doing everything they can to produce a sales increase before the last cash register rings at the end of December.

Funny, but this same scenario has been occurring each year just like holiday celebrations and Aunt Edna's fruitcake. And by the way, if you are part of the Gen X and Y generations, cash registers did "ring" after each and every sale was made and on Christmas Eve it made the whole store sound like a bell choir.

Retailers this year are publishing extra discount coupons by the truckloads and shoppers have shopped early for those items that retailers were afraid to buy in depth. Now they are second guessing those decisions. Ah, this is retail.

As I took a few minutes this week to run some errands, I was highly aware of what these companies did to retain my business throughout the year and what some of them did to lose me as a customer. Here is what I found.

1. RECOGNIZE ME! My first two experiences had to do with dry cleaners. One I use for regular cleaning as they are inexpensive and close by. I found it interesting that as I pulled into a parking space near the front of the store, the girl that always waits on me had already pulled my slip and had pulled my order before I got to the door! Good thing I wasn't going into the video store next door! Talk about efficiency! The second dry cleaner I use for my very good clothes. I also use them for my son's band uniform. On many Monday mornings the sales associate and I have had a discussion about the previous Friday night's football game and how those white uniforms are a challenge to keep clean.

This week I was picking up a suit of mine. As usual, the employee was pleasant and efficient. But as she was ringing up the sale, she mentioned that they had taken extra care to cover the buttons on my suit so they wouldn't get scratched. As I left, she said, "Thanks Mrs. Obarski and have a great holiday!"

Both cleaners recognized me and both were efficient and both will get my business next year, you

can count on that.

2. **MAKE ME FEEL COMFORTABLE!** My next stop was at a "dollar" store. I find these stores intriguing. It is amazing how many pieces of inventory are in these stores and how fast that inventory turns. This was my first time in the store since it opened. As I entered the store, I immediately realized that the store's layout was going to make shopping a challenge. The floor plan was in a chevron shape which meant each aisle was at a 45 degree angle. This was a very inefficient way to merchandise the store and expect shoppers to feel at ease while shopping. By the time I had walked to the back of the store I couldn't wait to get out of this ridiculous maze. Don't make it hard for customers to spend money in your store.

3. **THE FINAL THREE FEET!** "The final 3 feet"-- the distance between the customer and the associate- is the most crucial piece of real estate in customer relations", states Jeffrey Pfeffer, Professor of Organizational Behavior at Stanford University's Graduate School of Business in his article, "The Face Of Your Business" in the December, 2002 issue of Business 2.0.

It is the final three feet that can help build or break a business relationship.

At my last store, the woman behind the counter kept calling me "sweetie". She must have said it four times and then said the same thing to the woman behind me. I am sure she uses that term with everyone she knows. Unfortunately, she does not know me well enough to use that term with me.

Teach your employees the proper way to greet a customer and err on the side of professional versus overly friendly.

The holidays will come and go and January will bring reduced staffing, smaller inventories and budget cuts. It always does. Practice the previous priceless ways to build your business and you won't be panicked next year when the holidays roll around. You may just be the person quoted as saying, "Our business has been experiencing an increase each month this year, and we are expecting great things this holiday season!"

Happy Holidays!

Anne M. Obarski is the "Eye" on Performance. She is an author, professional speaker, retail consultant and Executive Director of Merchandise Concepts. Anne works with companies who are people ,performance, profit focused and she helps leaders see their businesses through their customers' eyes. Anne's mystery shoppers have secretly "snooped" over 2000 stores searching for excellence in customer service. Reach Anne at <http://www.merchandiseconcepts.com> or <mailto:anne@merchandiseconcepts.com>

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