

Retail Business is Show Business!

By Anne M. Obarski

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I never realized how much "theater" is really in retailing! I was in a management meeting the other day and one of the store managers said when he is working with a customer he makes sure that his back is never facing the front of the store where he might miss a customer coming through the door. He went further on to say that is a way to keep watch over the whole store when scheduling is tight but also helps to be more observant of possible shoplifters!

He was so right! This is a basic "staging" technique that whenever you are on stage your body should be facing the audience as much as possible at all times. The audience needs to hear you as well as have you make eye contact with them. This is where true communication begins.

Retail sales people are turning into "task" employees. With payroll being trimmed right and left, employees are expected to do more than wait on customers. They are expected to "run the show". So if this is the future of retailing then here are some more tips to help you "break a leg"!

The Actors! I think the casting job must be the hardest for any director. They have to deal with egos, and personalities and demands. So does any good store manager or Human Resource manager! With the pool of potential employees dwindling it is very important to do the best when you hire but also to train, train, train.

I am finding that more and more companies are abandoning their training departments. They are putting that responsibility on either a store manager or a regional manager. Many times that job just doesn't get done and it turns into OTJT or on the job training. But who trains the manager? You can't be in a play unless you know the script. The same should be in any business. All employees should know the following:

- [] The company mission and vision statement. What do you stand for?
- [] All company procedures and policies.
- [] The company "non-negotiables". These are the things that every employee should be able to do. Specific ways to greet the customer, answer the phone, transfer calls or handle complaints. They should know when to call for a manager and when they can make their own decisions or do "improv"!
- [] Whatever they are trained to-do, they should be able to be tested on it and be held accountable for it.

I don't know a person who goes to the theater and doesn't come out saying to someone else, "Did you like it?" Most of the time that question really refers to what the audience thought about the

performance of the actors.

Were they able to draw you in, develop a relationship with you and make you feel like you truly knew them by the end of the play? Sometimes that means watching them change roles! That is what a good retail employee can do.

They greet the customer, maybe while doing other tasks. They follow-up while they are walking past the customer on their way to do another duty. They polish mirrors, fold clothes, check fitting rooms, put out inventory, train new associates and yes, ring up sales. What is their performance like? Can you evaluate it?

All in all, did they make their audience feel special? The challenge of multi-tasking is not letting the customer feel like an interruption to their day. The days of having a large staff in any business are gone. So it is so important to never turn your back on a customer, no matter how busy you are. Your audience is watching!

The Stage: There is something about going to a Broadway show that is mesmerizing! The props, the costumes, the orchestra, the set design all create the excitement that you go to the theater for. Retail stores are not much different. Merchandising has really gone high tech! Fixturing, flooring, lighting and floor layout all contribute to the ambiance of the store. Customers expect that. It is not unusual to see headsets on Old Navy employees so they can quickly respond to a customer's needs.

When was the last time you looked at your store as a stage? How is the lighting? Is it old and inadequate? What about the fixtures? Do they feature merchandise or have they become another place to "house" merchandise? Is there music playing in the store or is there dead silence? Have you really looked at "who" your customer is and then decided what music you would like to have on in your store to attract them?

Pretend you are coming to your store like you would to the theater. Look at everything from the glass on the front door, to the smell in the store, to the staging within the store. Would you pay for front row seats or does it look like an afternoon matinee?

The Script: I have always wondered how actors can do the same play night after night and still make it look like it is opening night! Inside I know they must be tired of saying the same lines, over and over again. But I bet if you would talk to an actor they would say that it is not the lines but the audience that makes it fresh every time. I would also imagine that if an actor could see the people in the audience and recognize repeat attendees, that would be an added encouragement!

So it is with people in any sales position. It is exciting the first day on the job! But each day has to be like "opening night" even when you just don't feel like it. I am sure you can relate to the following story.

The other day I walked into a golf shop to look for a pair of shorts. I was "greeted" by a man standing next to the cash wrap with his arms folded in front of him. He looked like a statue! He said, "Hi, how are you"? with about as much excitement as someone who had just had a root canal!

I walked all around the store, picked out a pair of shorts, tried them on and came back to the wrap desk. He never moved. It was amazing! He looked like a store prop. Luckily a gal from the ladies area came to suggest a top to go with the shorts I was buying. She then said, "Did you get a chance to see the new fall group we got in"? She then said, "Well you just HAVE to see it", and I followed her all around the clothing section like a puppy.

The entire time the other associate stayed planted in that one spot as other customers came and went. The gal I was working with recognized another male customer and caught his attention as he was walking out the door. "Tell your wife we have two new Tahama groups that just came in", she said with a big smile. He said, "thanks for letting me know, I'll send her in!"

You see, Annette didn't have a "script" or canned questions to ask customers. She was able to build relationships and carry on conversations that made you want to spend time and eventually money with her. She also did something else. Through her sincere personality, she built trust.

I didn't spend very much money that day, but you can bet I just shared this story with millions of readers who have had the same experience. Sales associates who are merely, on stage ready for the day to be over and then the true "actors" who love their job and want to perform at their best, every day, in front of every audience. You can bet I'll be back in her "audience" many more times and I'll be sure to tell everyone I know, "You have to go see Annette!"

Who are your actors? What does your stage look like? Are their scripts more than just memorized? Curtain going up! It's show time!

Anne M. Obarski is the "Eye on Retail Performance". She is an author, professional speaker, retail consultant and Executive Director of Merchandise Concepts. Anne works with companies who are performance, profit and people focused and she helps leaders see their businesses through their customers' eyes. Anne's mystery shoppers have secretly "snooped" in 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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