



RETAIL

The Second-Oldest Profession

**7 Timeless Principles
to WIN in Retail Today**

Flora Delaney has always been a thought leader and solution provider for successful retailers. This book is a must-read for all of us who works in any capacity in the retail marketplace."

Stuart Straus, CEO, Compass Health Brands

I've seen tremendous change in retailing with consolidation, technology advances, and a retailer's success defined by how they can better meet their customers' needs and shopping preferences in an increasingly dynamic environment. Flora is an original thinker and identifying insights is part of her DNA. Her book provides practical advice that will improve the operations and business results of any online or brick-and-mortar retailer.

Don Kauffold, SVP Sales and Marketing, Candle-lite Company

"If you're a small retailer, you may feel like an endangered species. But following these practical principles will give you command over new skills for winning in retail now and in the future."

Amanda Brinkman, small business marketing expert and Host
of Small Business Revolution - Main Street

"I am so happy Flora Delaney wrote this book. It is what has been needed in the retail world. It is a real world guide based on real experience! I am anxious to buy copies of the book for my entire management team."

Rudy Simondi, President, Flips



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7 TIMELESS PRINCIPLES TO WIN IN RETAIL TODAY
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RETAIL

The Second-Oldest Profession

7 Timeless Principles to WIN in Retail Today

BY
FLORA DELANEY



Why Read This Book

I'm tired of experts telling me retail is dead. It isn't dead. It cannot die. As long as people are not self-sufficient and there is a bartering system that trades money or something of value for desired goods, retail will never die. So, don't believe the pundits.

If you are struggling ... If you feel as if you and your team are working hard but you are not getting the results you want, you will find hundreds of specific things you can do today to WIN in retail. Throughout the book, look for **WIN Today** to find those immediate actions you can take to improve your business and win over customers. **WIN Today** elements act like a retail coach urging you to take steps to improve your retail business.

This book is for you if you:

- Own your own retail business– and wear many hats
- Manage a team that is always busy – but is not achieving the results you want
- Aspire to a career in retail and want to understand how it all fits together
- Need help developing inexperienced managers and new hires to succeed quickly
- Feel overwhelmed with multiple priorities in your retail operation
- Are a vendor and want to be a better partner to your retail customers

Dedication

To the people who kindly taught me so much about this industry.
I am thinking of Gary Goff, Steve Frenda, Bob Kelly, Bob Shipley,
Don Kauffold, Dale Byrne, Jerry Friedler, Kevin Freeland, Vivian Rank,
Mike Madden, Rob Willey, Connie Fuhrman and many others.



But especially: Geoff Kleinman.
This book is dedicated to you.

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RETAIL: The Second Oldest Profession

Introduction

Retail is “the second-oldest profession.” As you might expect in such an enduring business, getting it right comes down to a precise command of a few timeless basics. Truth is, great retail principles are the same around the world. And – if we had a time machine – they would be the same in the past and into the future. As a retailer, I am confident that I could create and conduct a successful store in any part of the world and at any point in time if I stay true to the 7 Timeless Principles.

Before you can be a retail master, you need to tackle the basics. This book shares fundamental advice on getting retail right. Read it if you are a new store employee, recently promoted from the stores into the confusion of a corporate retail position or a store owner. The 7 Timeless Principles are true if you are a brick-and-mortar store or a digital retailer without a physical storefront. This book provides guidance and immediate actions you can take to WIN Today in retail. Follow the suggestions and your retail enterprise will succeed.

This book is meant to provide you with guidance and sound advice to help you **WIN Today**. The suggestions and insights provided will give you understanding of how the diverse elements of retail fit together and how to succeed. Most retailers will see across-the-board improvements in sales, margins, customer experience and employee engagement just by refocusing on the 7 Timeless Principles covered in this book.

These principles work as effectively with single-door retailers as with Fortune 500 giants like Walmart and Amazon. An “aha” moment in my career was when I realized I kept having the same conversation whether I was talking to a boutique owner in her own shop or the chief operating officer of a chain of 9,500 stores. It all comes down to:

1. Delivering a strong strategy
2. Treating your customers well
3. Selecting and showcasing compelling products
4. Pricing them attractively
5. Engaging a competent team
6. Being relevant to your customers
7. Running your company soundly

This book will be particularly valuable to busy people who either work in retail stores or support those people who work in retail stores. Because I know you are busy, the information is in easy-to-digest sections. They can be read and reviewed as part of a formal training session or as your

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own self-directed education while on breaks. You do not necessarily have to read them in order to learn and try new techniques. Keep this book handy and use it with new hires or when you need easy answers that really work for new situations you face. When you feel challenged or stuck, turn to this book to find the tools you need to move forward.

The focus is always on simple, straight-forward fundamentals and core ideas. While the book is not called *Zen and the Art of Retailing* ... it could be. Like a Zen master who teaches students through stories, the simplest principles are the most powerful.. In today's technology-driven retail sector, a gift for cutting through to the eternal truths of retail is what will set highly regarded leaders apart. Concentrated focus on these 7 Timeless Principles divides enduring retail brands from the folks who will close their doors in a few years. Businesses built around the 7 Timeless Principles will serve many future generations of customers.

In providing a concise review of retail, I have purposefully omitted critical functions such as human resources, information systems, payroll and accounting, financial management, supply chain, logistics and more in order to focus on those customer-facing retail capabilities that make the industry unique. While many of the examples are most applicable to brick-and-mortar retail, online retailers will find plenty here that applies directly to their business model. Let's face it, in a profession as old as retail, these 7 Timeless Principles are valid in every channel. The interpretation or tools may change, but the principles do not.

Chapter 1 is about choosing and delivering a strategy. Your store's strategy is a guiding light in every decision. What you will uniquely bring to your customers and how you will defend that position against your competition are what will define your retail brand.

Chapter 2 is my favorite topic: treating your customers well. Treat them like they were your family. I imagine you want to be fair, honest and helpful to your family – but not taken advantage of. Customer service is where you build your reputation.

Chapter 3 is the heart and soul of both online and brick-and-mortar retailing. Selecting and showcasing products that tempt your shoppers makes your store a destination. How you treat your vendors can sustain you during rough times. Make your store or website a seeker's delight to keep customers returning.

Chapter 4 addresses the touchy issue of making money. Let's face it. That's why we are retailers. We need to make money. Competition usually pinches pricing first. Here's how to deliver the goods and be proud of the money you put in the bank.

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Chapter 5 tackles that emotionally difficult, wonderful, terrible, rewarding, disappointing resource: people. Your team will lead you to prosperity or keep you in the trenches for the rest of your career. Leadership and management are skills everyone can practice and build.

Chapter 6 is about the most simple hospitality in retail: marketing. In all its varied forms and channels, marketing is about inviting customers and welcoming them back. Just as you would for family.

Chapter 7 is not as dreary and mundane as operations sounds. It is about keeping a store running like a Porsche engine. Learn the techniques the best operators use to make their store or website a focused system that cranks out happy shoppers and profit.

Too many managers think their job is “running the store.” They couldn’t be more wrong. A manager’s job is creating the team that runs the store. It’s running the system of the store. One that meets the needs of a particular set of customers better than any other store or website on the planet.

Retail can get unnecessarily fragmented. Early in their careers, employees are told to focus on buying or operations or merchandising. Software vendors and service providers expand those fractures with solutions that focus on just one thing: creating planograms or optimizing prices or forecasting promotional sales. Retail executives and owners struggle with aligning so many different perspectives within their organization. The average staff member cannot see across all the different components to understand how to integrate and prioritize resources. This book is meant to help connect the dots for people who work inside a fragmented retail organization.

Great retailers last beyond the bubbles and trends. They adapt and serve generations of shoppers. They understand how to orchestrate the intersection of every element in this book: strategy, customer service, merchandising, pricing, managing, marketing and operations.

A retailer may be excellent at selecting an attractive range of products and pricing them well, but if their customer service is lacking, they will not thrive. They might run a tight ship and have an attentive staff. But if their pricing is out of line, customers will abandon them over time. Every one of these 7 Timeless Principles harmonizes to make a retailer profitable and enduring.

For each retailer, store or manager there will be areas of this book where they excel and areas where they lag competition. To be great, every retailer must work on their fundamentals each day and with each new generation of employees.

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Falling short in one or two areas will show up in the customer's experience. You cannot hide a sloppy back room operation when you can't find products featured in the weekly advertisement. You cannot hide an unfocused marketing campaign when new customers dry up. No successful retailer succeeds in some of these areas and not others. They are all important and they all work together.

Like a gardener, store managers must attend to every component. Gardeners know they must site their plants well, water them, fertilize them, weed them, prevent pests and monitor their plants carefully. A gardener who breaks ground, scatters seeds and then waits for autumn will be disappointed in the harvest. Store managers must know when to freshen their assortment, lower (or raise) prices, reward employees, cut back hours, drop a coupon and order more inventory to create the profit "harvest" they want.

If you are truthful, there will be an area that you simply prefer less than the others. That's natural. Everyone has things they enjoy doing more than others. Maybe you love working the sales floor or operating an efficient back room. Like most of us, you probably have delegated the tasks you do not enjoy to someone else. Or you ignore that portion of the operation. Or you put the things you do not like to do on autopilot so you don't have to think about it.

Let's say the portion of the work you most dislike is marketing and advertising. It seems expensive, requires creativity or is difficult to see results. Chances are, you are just repeating what you have done in the past. It requires minimal effort and "checks the box" for getting it done. But because the effort drains you – instead of energizing you – it isn't a focus area for you. That will be evident when you look at new customer rates. Every area where we minimize focus and resources will eventually impact the overall business.

Maybe you love marketing. You are out in the community drumming up new business and never miss an opportunity to network and build relationships with potential new customers. But inside the store, your disgruntled staff's sloppy customer service is leading to lower conversion rates and transactions. Over time, no matter how many new customers you invite into the store, the mediocre service will reduce your sales.

Do you love doing some work because it is where you derive satisfaction but ignore others because it is difficult or "not worth it?" If you cannot bring yourself to manage the website or marketing, it is time to find a service or employee who can take on that responsibility. To believe you will change "because you should" may not be within you. It takes honest self-assessment to realize what you can and cannot do on your own.

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Often paying for an outside service will bring all the value we need to free ourselves of the tasks we hate.

The point is, every aspect of this book needs attention from a retailer to deliver an excellent store or website. Armed with the advice and insight from this book, you will have expert guidance on specific action you can take to make your store more profitable and fun to operate than ever before. You can make improvements. No matter your position within the store or your current conditions. Each idea in this book will help you make changes that will make you more effective, a better leader within your team and a smarter retailer. Your customers will reward you and all you have to do is just focus on 7 Timeless Principles.

WIN Today

To address your store, first track your time. Where do you honestly spend most of your time? If it is vendor management, who is supervising the staff? If it is merchandising, who is maintaining the back-room operations? Simply track your time for a week and then look at how the rest of the store is managed. Use a time tracker like this to help you aggregate your tasks.

Focus Area	Example	Time
Sales and customer service	Working the sales floor, helping online customers, resolving customer issues, assembling and executing web orders	
Website/online maintenance	Setting up promotions and sales, managing product descriptions and images, managing online inventory	
Vendor management	Working with suppliers, placing orders, paying and reconciling invoices	
Staff management	Setting schedules, coaching and training, hiring	
Merchandising	Cleaning and restocking shelves and displays, changing price tags, selecting and setting up new items	
Operations	Receiving product, conducting	

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	inventory, cleaning the store and back room, remanufacturing and creating product for sale	
Marketing	Setting up ads, social media posts, networking outside the store, cold and warm calls	

If you track your time for 2 weeks, as a store manager or owner, your time should ideally be split like this:

Target	Focus Area
15-20%	Sales and customer service
5-10%	Website/online management
5-10%	Vendor management
35-50%	Staff management
10-15%	Merchandising
10-15%	Operations
15-20%	Marketing

Naturally, your time will vary. Both seasonally and from these guidelines. But if your time study shows focus areas that are over- or under-focused, consider it a warning. Use your time tracker as you complete this book.



7 Timeless Principles

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Timeless Principle 2: Customer Service

Treat Your Customers Well

Whether your retail organization is entirely digital or a gas station convenience store that relies on walk-ins, it requires customers. And while every one of the 7 Timeless Principles are needed to have a well-run retail business, this is the one that will sink the business ... even if you are getting the other six right.

Every customer wants to be seen as a unique person who is valued by your company. It doesn't matter whether you use automated chatbots to solve customer issues or rely on a commission sales force to attend to customers. It really is as simple as treating customers with care and concern. Trouble is, most of the people hired in the retail sector to provide mission-critical attention for customers are being hired at minimum wage – many in their first job. Their experience as both consumers and helpful assistants may be extremely limited. Put them in a store where they see the seasoned employees gossiping at the cash register or back room and how will they learn their true role in the company?

Customer service is one of the most immediately transformative Timeless Principles. One customer at a time. One transaction at a time. Each one a chance to improve the encounter for a customer who may return because of their good experience. If your last customer was a nightmare, or if you have been rebuffed with a “just looking” from the last dozen customers, the next one can be the one that you connect with and really enjoy helping. The reason this is the first chapter after *Timeless Principle 1: Strategy* is because it is the one that can start to deliver results the same day you begin to emphasize it. This isn't a slow burn. Start to improve customer service today and you can improve your sales results today.

Retail employees who excel at engaging with their customers also enjoy their job more. They get to talk to folks, solve problems for them and make helpful suggestions. They get to learn more about the products they sell and how customers use them. Frankly, their shifts go by faster because they focus on helping the people in front of them and not on watching the clock. When customer-facing employees are in the zone, they bounce from one customer to the next, knocking them out with attention and possibly changing the course of the day for their customers.

The saying “hire for attitude, train for skill” is keenly true for selecting

C U S T O M E R S E R V I C E

customer-facing staff. The best are self-motivated and positive, able to bounce back throughout the day to provide continuously excellent service. People who are strongly empathetic and able to put themselves in the customer's shoes make fast connections and advocate for their customers. Stores that are winning with customer service have more fun. Contests, inside jokes and daily (even hourly) goals make each day interesting. Managers watch to find the best combination of employees that makes the sales floor a productive buzz. Call centers track every interaction to uncover those people who seem to naturally deliver results for their customers and the company.

The timeless quality of great customer service is that it builds relationships with your customers. Real emotions that get stirred up with powerful customer service: gratitude, respect, trust. Those emotions are meaningful to all generations and all income brackets.

This chapter is meant to fire you up if you work directly with customers or to get your attention and focus if you work in a part of the company that services the folks who do. At the end of the day, it isn't the CEO, stockholders or the manager who determine the outcome of your retail operation. It is your customers. You want them to come back to you because they can rely on customer service that always treats them well.

Excellent Customer Service for Your G-U-E-S-T

In the heady first days of a new employee's training, it is typical to spend time covering cash register transactions, delivery protocol and how to stock shelves. Too often, the most basic driver of retail success is overlooked: customer service. Truth is, in the most successful retailers, a new employee cannot even be on the sales floor until they have been trained in how to interact with customers.

During the natural course of a year, even seasoned employees and managers become lazy about greeting and extending service to *every* customer. Top-flight store managers know that being vigilant about offering exceptional customer service every day with every customer makes the cash register ring. A simple, flexible and mandatory customer service plan that is reinforced with every employee is critical.

Begin by communicating to your team and your new employees that delivering a great customer experience is the ***number one focus***. In other words, all other retail tasks (merchandising, pricing, back room operations – *any* other job) should be seen as a distraction that always should be postponed to give excellent customer service. Demonstrate that to your employees by always excusing yourself and taking care of customers so they see that customer service is a natural part of your store's culture. Challenge the team to create a new regular customer for the store with every single shift they work. Help them understand the value of having each customer re-visit the store just one more time per year than normal.

Set basic expectations for what great customer service means by remembering the G-U-E-S-T mnemonic.

G – Greet

Use the 10/10 rule. Welcome your customers within 10 seconds of entering your store and within 10 seconds of coming within 10 feet of you. Your goal is to make your customer feel welcomed and acknowledged. Besides being polite and friendly, shoplifters will generally shy away from stores where they are greeted and engaged in conversation with store employees. So in addition to doing the right thing for your legitimate customers, you will be defending your store's bottom line. Greetings should be authentic. Include your name as a fundamental element of building a relationship with a customer. In addition to "I'm William, welcome to ABC Shop," include a true comment, such as "You look like you're in a hurry" or "It's a hot day today, right?" Just as important: smile.

And when you are busy with another customer, still greet a customer

CUSTOMER SERVICE

and acknowledge a customer. That sounds like “Hello there. I am with this customer now, but as soon as I get freed up, I’ll be happy to help you.” Customers who know you see them feel welcomed, even if you are the only one ringing up customers.

U – Understand

Find out why your customer has come into your store today. Let them know that they can work with you – a knowledgeable, caring person – or that they can shop on their own. It’s as simple as “What brings you in today?” or “How can I help you this morning?” Make and maintain eye contact. If your customer wishes to shop on their own, let them know they need only ask and you would be happy to assist. If they are lingering, return to them and see how they are doing. If they merely ask for the location of a product *walk* them to the items, instead of telling them the aisle number. Otherwise, consider yourself ready to advance to the Explore phase.

E – Explore

Ask questions to find out what product will best meet their needs. Here is where your expertise can shine. Ask about how they intend to use something. Be genuinely interested in a recipe, party or gardening question to zero in on their needs. Focus on listening skills and product knowledge to set you apart from your competition in this stage. More importantly, it is where you can outdistance yourself from low-priced internet retailers. Once your customer knows that you understand their exact needs, they will be more likely to listen to your suggestions.

If you cannot answer their questions, make a smooth handoff to someone who can. Use names to keep the conversation friendly. “Robert is our plumbing expert. I’ll put you in his capable hands and I am sure he can help you today.”

Be conversational, relaxed and friendly. Remember to delay suggesting solutions until you have asked questions and your customer is sure you understand their needs. Asking questions indicates that you care about their situation and you are willing to listen.

Have an open mind. Remember that what you think is affordable may not be what they think is affordable. Conversely, do not judge what a customer can purchase based on what they are wearing or how they look. A way to think about that is to treat every customer who walks through the door as if they are a millionaire who just happens to be walking into your store on their casual day.

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S – Suggest

Confidently recommend two or three products that will meet your customer's needs. It is good to give your customer choices. For example, a good/better/best offering could sound like "This is our highest quality paint solution because it has the most pigment and gives a truly deep color. But if you simply need this for a quick coat before you move, this is a great choice for its price and value." Or you can make a suggestion based on their earlier answers, which could sound like "Since you said you seem to often find yourself battling insect damage in your garden, you may want to take advantage of our jumbo pack which offers enough for the entire summer at less than double the price."

If you cannot narrow your recommendations down to less than three choices, you should remain in the explore phase. Continue asking questions about their budget, situation, experience with past products, etc. until you are confident that you can suggest two to three items that will exactly match their needs. Too often, store associates rush into the suggest phase and end up pointing out eight to twelve items on the shelf. If that is all they can offer, a customer is no better off than reading all the packages on the shelves themselves!

If the product the customer wants is not in stock, offer an alternative. Then, offer to order the product – and deliver it! – for optimal customer service. It is a store's best defense to keep customers from completing their sale at another store or online. Plus, home or business delivery can knit a bond to a customer like no other transaction.

The Suggest phase is also where you should offer add-on sales that make sense for the customer's situation. Having a party? Offer mixers, ice and paper goods. Going to a wedding? Do they need shoes or undergarments? Working in the yard? Suggest gloves, sunscreen or insect repellent. Before the customer goes to the cash register be sure to complete this phase by asking if there is anything else they are looking for or need. Do not assume the first reason they gave is the only one for being in the store. To increase sales, offer to carry items to the cash register to allow them to continue to shop unburdened.

T – Thank

Show your appreciation and thank each customer for selecting your store. Make sure each customer feels valued to build loyalty. First, ensure that they were well taken care of: "Is there anything else you hoped to find today?"

When finishing the transaction, thank the customer, bag or box their purchase and, if possible, offer to carry it to their car. If someone else will

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do that, make a smooth handoff: “William will be able to help you out from here. Thank you for your business today.”

As you think about your competition and how to keep or build a thriving business, your G-U-E-S-T should be your focus. Make customer service the core of your store’s culture to be your best every day. It takes time, but with the right reinforcement, it simply becomes “how we work here” at your store. As the process gains momentum, new employees will find themselves learning and modeling from the more experienced employees. As it becomes more natural, it becomes easier for everyone to be more genuine and have fun. And people who are having fun and gaining a sense of accomplishment are much more likely to stay in their job.

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Use the G-U-E-S-T model with every customer for one entire shift. Challenge yourself to recognize the phases as you and your customer pass through each one. Most people confirm that the G-U-E-S-T model makes their time on the sales floor pass more quickly and makes their job more interesting. Team members enjoy their job more and sell more product when they truly engage with customers and increase their product knowledge, creating a virtuous cycle.

Note: Just because a significant portion of the customers you engage with brush you off or do not engage with your G-U-E-S-T approach, that does not mean it isn’t successful. Greeting and thanking each customer, even if they were self-directed and introverted while in the store, is still a meaningful goal when implementing the G-U-E-S-T model.

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Three Customers and What They *Really* Need

For retailers, there are three main customer types: individual consumers, small businesses (including home offices) and institutional customers like schools, hospitals and nonprofit organizations. Delivering an integrated solution for each customer type is key to a stable revenue base in all economic conditions.

Here are five ways to meet the needs of each customer type:

Individual Consumers

Have what I need in stock. As a consumer, I really don't have a schedule for replenishing stuff. When I run out, I need it. So always have what I rely on you for in stock to make your store top of mind when I need to replenish my supplies.

Treat me well. I have two main choices when I need supplies: the internet or a store like yours. The internet is reliable and easy – but I certainly do not get personalized service. You can make me feel special by remembering me, talking to me (and listening) and making thoughtful recommendations. Throw in home delivery or help me get it to the car and why would I choose an internet reseller?

Set your prices fairly. I *love* a deal and a sale. What I do not love is paying full price one week only to discover that if I had waited a few more days I could have paid 20% less! You know what I buy (based on my past sales history) so tell me when my favorites will be on sale at your store. Remind me and invite me (without shouting!) and I will reward you with my loyalty.

Be more than a store. Connect with me on Facebook, Twitter or the community bulletin board. I actually like knowing my shopkeepers. So advertise in my church bulletin or school newspaper. Seeing you at community events makes me trust you more than a faceless big-box store or internet reseller.

Make me feel good about giving you my business. Remind me that when I shop with you my money stays in my neighborhood or my planet is greener or that my kid's school benefits from your sales. If I have a problem, please don't hassle me. Stand by your products and make amends when there are issues. Really mean it when you say *thank you*.

Small Businesses

Remember my timelines are short. I don't really have a 3- or 5-year plan. I'm ashamed to say a lot of my decisions are made in the moment. So when you talk to me about return on investment (ROI) or

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long-term savings, I am more likely to just want to hear how you can solve the problem I have right now. Be practical. Once we establish a rhythm, we can talk about the future.

Help me buy a solution instead of a price. Sure, I want the lowest price I can get, doesn't everyone? But if you can help me understand how you deliver a better value, I will listen and even pay more money if it is the right thing to do. Talk to me in a language I can understand and please don't use words like "synergy" or "value proposition."

Make me look good. I use your products to help me in my own business. I can't afford a failure because I use cheap materials. Give me a high-quality product and help me look better than my competitors. Give me pointers to be even better.

Reward my loyalty. Because I am a small business person myself, I like doing business with other companies that value simple, affordable solutions. Once I make the decision to shop with you, don't give me a reason to reconsider that choice. Please don't treat me differently after I become a customer by throwing me over to a newbie sales person. When I send a new customer your way, recognize that and reward me in return.

Recognize that I wear many hats. Being a purchasing agent is only one of dozens of roles I play each day. Make it easy for me to get on to other tasks I have by making shopping and paying for your products simple. Remember what I purchased before and my supply requirements, my preferred payment type and deliver products to me on an as-need basis. Streamline my interactions with your shop. I will be loyal even as I quickly transition away from you each time we meet.

Institutions

Be patient. I cannot move quickly. Rules and processes are in place to govern nearly every business decision. Even if you are the best supplier, I may not be able to move fast. Understand that my hands are tied and you may have to wait for approvals. But realize that once you are an approved vendor, you will be rewarded with my business.

Help me think things through. I need to stretch every dollar I spend so unexpected charges are a nightmare. If we can be thorough and creative by developing an everyday low price program that guarantees each purchase is as cost-effective as possible, you can win my business.

Know that decision-makers change. Even once you have my business, it is a good idea to keep educating our leadership team on why you are still our best resource. Our directors and managers change often and the airtight pitch you gave last year may be completely new to our leadership this year. Keep educating us.

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Align to our mission. Nearly as important as keeping our cost down is partnership with like-minded organizations. Help us fundraise, market or donate to our causes. We need support beyond a reliable supply chain.

Be a trusted expert. We have so many other things to do beyond purchasing the things we buy from you. Tell us what we need to know (the good and the bad) in a straightforward fashion to help us weed through the details and get to the essential. Help us use common sense to make good decisions so we can focus on our mission.

Every customer wants to be treated as a unique individual. But if you can recognize the patterns of different shopping groups, you can be better prepared with providing the kind of service they need and build the loyalty you want.

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Review your top customers and see how they can be grouped into similar types. Think about the solutions you offer each type of shopper. Is there something you can do or offer them that would better meet their needs?

If your solutions and offerings are the same to all customers in all groups, devise a way to be more focused on their needs. Create a defensible offering before a competitor exploits your lack of distinction in the future.

It Isn't Retail Without Sales

Maximizing your sales from each customer is an important part of succeeding in retail – but you need to make sure you maximize their experience along with it. A happy customer will be back for more – even if you sell a durable good that is repurchased on a very long sales cycle. The best way to improve your sales is to focus on your current customers. It takes a lot more effort to secure a new customer than to keep a current customer coming back for more.

Using the G-U-E-S-T model, always give the best service you can. Unscrupulous sales people – especially with durable goods sales like cars and furniture - can take advantage of a poorly informed customer. But as soon as they learn better, customers take their business elsewhere. And in the age of instant social media, their experience will get magnified to their network quickly. Besides, do you really want to be the store that sells to stupid customers? The store that will stay in business is the one that sells to the smartest and most influential customers. Keep your customers well informed and educated.

If you operate in an industry where shoppers' visits are infrequent, think about how you spend your marketing and adjust your marketing goals. It is unrealistic to try to build visits like a grocer could. Most specialty retail customers shop in a store two or three times a year. So with that in mind, rather than trying to increase shopper visits, maximize the sale per customer. Ensure that your sales people have a complete solution so that a television purchase is also a speaker, wiring and digital download bundle or a sewing machine purchase also includes lessons, a variety pack of thread and fabrics.

Changing outcomes can be as simple as changing your sales mindset. While you may be thinking of *closing sales*, a more effective strategy is to think of *opening customers*. Opening a customer to buying one product from you will transfer to other products. That means larger transactions and more repeat purchases. When you think about opening customers and not just closing sales, you make choices that will keep your customers for the long term.

Great retail salespeople are communicators in both directions: listening and explaining. To succeed, sell yourself, then your company, then the price. If you do not sell the first two, then all you can do is sell on price. Always remember: people want what you are selling. Your customers have choices about where to do business. But customers come to you because they need what you are selling and they think you will have their solution. Someone, somewhere will make the sale – it may as

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well be you!

If you make the decision to tell your customers *only* about prices, you leave yourself open to being undercut and lose customers. Any competitor can take your customers by slashing prices. When you make the choice about trust, expertise and a relationship, it will be very hard for competitors to take your customers away. Sales, then, is about selling yourself and building a relationship – not about selling products.

Salespeople are valued when they have knowledge, experience and honesty. Honesty is the most important of the three. Customers want to interact with someone who will make them feel good about their purchase. Some customers want to make an environmentally sound choice, others want a smart value-quality equation, some want to support a local business. Your goal as a salesperson is to help each customer understand how their choice fits into their goal and then find out more about other needs that could also be fulfilled.

Eco-conscious shoppers might want to know more about the ethics and values of the products you also sell. Value-quality shoppers might want to hear more about upcoming promotions where their money will go further. Community-oriented shoppers might want to hear more about local charities you support. You gain their trust by treating them individually. Then they will be more receptive to listening to your ideas about other products that will help make their lives easier.

How do you build a relationship? How do you sell? It is just like dating. It's a four-word sales course.

Ready?

Ask questions. Then listen.

Would you expect a second date if you spent the first date talking only about yourself? Of course not. Too many retail conversations are like that.

They sound like this:

Salesperson: "Thanks for coming in today. Can I help you?"

Customer: "I need to replace this cyan cartridge."

Salesperson: "That's on the wall to the right. We are having a buy 2 get 1 free sale on those cartridges this week. Also, we are now carrying a new line of printers that are 10% off when you sign up for our mailing list. And Tuesday is senior discount day for customers over 65."

Customer: "OK."

Customer: (Grabs cartridge, completes the transaction and wonders if she looks over 65.)

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What a missed opportunity for opening a new customer! It could have gone like this:

Salesperson: "Thanks for coming in today. Can I help you?"

Customer: "I need to replace this cyan cartridge."

Salesperson: "Sure, they are on the wall to the right. How recently did you also replace the yellow and magenta one?"

Customer: "I don't know."

Salesperson: "Because we are having a buy 2 get 1 free sale on those cartridges this week and getting all the colors at once will save you another purchase in a week or so. Typically, colors run out at roughly the same time unless you have been doing an unusual print job. Do you think you have been using a lot of cyan on recent prints?"

Customer: "I don't know."

Salesperson: "Well the sale ends Saturday, so, of course it is up to you. You will have to replace the other colors eventually so if you want to get them at this special price, I'd recommend that."

Customer considers her choice then grabs all three cartridges and completes the transaction.

Salesperson: "Smart move to get them at this price. We usually put them on sale twice a year, so remember that in June – or I could put your name on the mailing list and you'd get notified the next time they go on sale, if you'd like."

(I see the start of a relationship – don't you? The salesperson is becoming a trusted advisor to this customer.)

When you ask the right questions, (*then listen!*) your customers will tell you how to sell to them. Think of how these questions lead to insight into what each customer needs:

Do you want delivery overnight or would you prefer to wait a few days to get the reduced price?

Do you have to replace this regularly or is it in spurts?

How critical is it if you run out of product? Do you have time to repurchase or do you always need to have a back-up supply?

Selling effectively comes down to four words: *Ask questions, then listen.*

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Write down six questions that could be natural conversation openers for customers. Create open-ended questions so they tell you more about the products they are looking for and how they will use them. Practice asking questions and then patiently waiting for customers to answer them.

Today, do two things: Ask questions. Then listen.

Shh. I'm Listening for Sales

Think about the reputation of a great employee or coworker. Often the highest retail compliment is “they really engage with their customers.” But what is the secret ingredient that elevates an ordinary customer conversation to an exceptional one? It is as simple as listening.

Communication is 90% nonverbal. That means if you are not watching while someone is speaking, you are only getting 10% of what is being communicated. And yet, how many of us try to listen while we text, while we read emails or stock shelves? As a manager, one of the most important things you can do is to coach your team members to be better at engaging and helping customers. To begin, your employees must know how to listen with intention.

Mindful Listening

Listening is simple to practice and can be done anytime people are talking to each other in the same room.

1. Face the customer so you can see him or her speak.
2. Notice how their voice and nonverbal expressions communicate emotion and passion. You can tell which elements of what someone is saying is most important to them by their:
 - Voice rising or lowering in pitch
 - Voice rising or lowering in volume
 - Gestures
 - Expressions in the eyes and mouth
 - How they sit and lean
 - By how they hold their hands, fingers, feet and legs
3. Notice what's not being said. Can you tell when they are leaving things out?

If you notice that something has distracted you, that you drifted off, or that you realized you were spending time thinking about what you wanted to say, just come back to listening. If you need to ask for something to be repeated, do so.

This practice is especially strong with customers. The power of stopping and giving complete attention to a customer immediately gives the interaction meaning. It tells the customer that they are more important than anything else in the store.

When the customer has finished speaking, they want to know that you heard them. As the listener, you can strengthen your relationship with your customer by accurately reflecting what was said. It builds trust and

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encourages customers to say more, sometimes even without follow-up questions.

How to Reflect

When you are reflecting, you are repeating back what you think meant the most to the customer.

You can tell what was most important to the speaker by what they said *and* how they said it.

1. Only reflect back two or three things.
2. Use their words not yours.
3. Don't evaluate or translate what they said. Just reflect back what they said showing that you heard them ... that you cared enough to listen and remember what they said.
4. One way to do this is to use the person's name and then say, "What I heard you say was ... "

Employees who use this technique, open the door to creating relationships with customers. In truth, relationships with customers is the unicorn that all great retailers seek. National and multi-national retailers invest millions of dollars into customer relationship management (CRM) solutions. These analytic predictive computer models attempt to "listen" to customers by processing their sales history and predicting their upcoming needs and preferred shopping patterns. To employees that practice mindful listening, getting close to their customers and knowing them well enough to predict their patterns comes naturally.

Coaching excellent listening skills to improve customer service requires managers that employ those same skills when interacting with their own employees. Certainly, most of us would be appalled to see our employees "listening" and nodding while a customer talked without looking at the customer. Yet that simple focus is often missing in most of our conversations with our employees when they "interrupt" our tasks to communicate. Your employees will model the behavior and culture you set. So, learning how to mindfully listen when they talk will reinforce the expectation to do the same with customers.

Coaching the team to use mindful listening requires you to see yourself as a coach – not a player. A coach does not go onto the field to play alongside the team. A coach carefully watches the players, noting their strengths and the patterns that they need to adjust to become better and more valuable to the team. As a manager, shatter the illusion that you have to be focused on tasks to be productive. Set aside time to watch your team interact with customers. Are your employees listening and fully

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present with their customers? Watch body language and listen for your employees to reflect back what they hear before attempting to resolve issues for customers. After such sessions, give immediate feedback on what you saw.

As you coach, avoid using words like “shouldn’t” and “stop.” Instead, coach employees by prefacing your conversation by telling them you want them to be more effective at selling, solving problems, thinking on their feet, etc. Then explain what you saw and provide pointers on different ways to react to similar situations in the future that would be more effective. After all, that is your goal. To make them better at what they are doing so that they can succeed in their role and you can be confident in their ability to manage customers.

Finally, once you are certain that your employees are adept at listening and engaging with their customers in full focus, you must also arm them with the knowledge to answer issues and questions that their customers have.

Here are two examples when an employee does not know enough to help.

In the first, a customer spends 10 minutes describing a detailed description of a problem or request to an employee who responds with “I’m afraid I don’t know the answer. Let me get James to help.” The customer will only be frustrated that they need to explain it a second time to James. So, the first action is to ensure that there is continual learning on the team and that all employees have access to materials and training that builds their product knowledge. In other words, work toward educating all your employees so the situation doesn’t happen.

Should there have to be a customer transition on the sales floor from one employee to the other, the way to do that is to have employee 1 explain the situation to employee 2 with as much detail as is necessary to help employee 2 “catch up” on the facts. Employee 1 should introduce the customer by name and be able to represent the customer if they have been listening well. Employee 1 should check in with the customer to make sure they agree with their summary of the situation. Employee 1 should not excuse himself from the dialog until employee 2 says “I understand. I can take it from here. Thank you, [name of employee 1]” and then give their full attention to the customer. In this situation, the customer feels entirely cared for, does not have to re-explain their situation, the employees are seen as treating each other with respect and the customer is seamlessly moved along toward their solution without being given a reason to leave the store or look elsewhere for help. If the store isn’t too busy, employee 1

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could stay with the transaction to listen and learn from employee 2 for the future.

In the second scenario when an employee does not know enough to help, the employee may offer too many solutions. In those situations, employees may be deluded into thinking that reading packages to the customer or shelf labels is helpful. ("Well, this one is \$49.99 for a standard cleaner and this one is \$89.99 for a professional cleaner.") Obvious eye-rolling answers rarely meet the needs of your customers. Instead, an employee needs to learn that professional cleaners are more attractive to customers who have high-volume situations while standard cleaners are more attractive for customers looking to minimize their out-of-pocket expense. Teaching employees more about the features and benefits of the products they sell will make them more effective in building those elusive customer relationships that build loyalty.

Finally, make it a standard of operation in your store that living, breathing customers in front of you are always more important than whomever is on the phone. When a phone rings while assisting a customer, let the phone roll to voicemail. Better yet, have a procedure in place to have the call forward to the next person on staff who can answer it without interrupting a customer transaction. Never give the impression to a customer that they are less important than someone calling the store.

A series of engaged conversations with customers build relationships which in turn create loyalty that is resistant to any competitor who has a low-price promotion once in a while. To build that kind of loyalty, all you have to do is listen.

WIN Today

Challenge yourself to be 100% present for every conversation on the sales floor. Whenever you engage with team members or customers, stop what you are doing, make eye contact and listen well. Reflect back what the person says and use that to recommend solutions.

Watch when team members hand off customers to one another. Coach your team to make smooth customer handoffs on the sales floor. Compliment good handoffs and demonstrate how to do them with every shift change.

The Angry Customer and You

Everyone in retail has those stories: the angry customer encounter. Sometimes funny – usually ugly. Your staff can learn strategies to prepare for the inevitable and bounce back quickly.

Working in the retail sector means handling customer complaints. It is as inevitable as opening the store and taking out the rubbish. So, it makes sense to teach your staff how to handle those conversations early in their career. If you do not spend time training and then practicing how to handle angry customers, your staff will have to learn on the sales floor. And that is never a good idea.

Here are the keys to helping your staff manage the rough waters of difficult customers.

Recognize the Signs

Some customers can return to the store or make a phone call and have a perfectly rational conversation about their situation. Others are in a much more emotional place. If they are screaming, swearing, panicked, accusing or abusive, it is easy to diagnose the situation. Crying or chin-wobbling is another common emotional response. As soon as you or your staff recognize the signs, it is time to begin the resolution process outlined here.

If a staff member is in over their head, they need to engage a manager. Speed is important. Try to quickly suspend the dialog with the customer and find a manager. Customers will only become more belligerent if they have to repeat their story.

Manage Yourself

First, store staff or phone reps need to separate themselves personally from the caller and their emotions. The customer is emotional, but you do not have to be. Stay calm and listen to their story. If there is abusive language or swearing, tell the customer that while you wish to help them, you cannot assist if they continue with their language. Be logical and neutral but by all means, hold firm to creating a conversation of mutual respect.

Staying cool and collected while being *screamed* at is difficult. But staying focused on the facts – not the emotions – is the only way to resolve the issue at hand. If you want to bring this ugly scene to its conclusion quickly, you need to understand what the problem is and what the customer wants.

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If possible, remember that emotions like anger and crying usually are covering other deeper feelings of embarrassment or fear. In our industry, there could be anxiety over their job or reputation if they have purchased an (expensive) incorrect item for their company. Or they could be facing serious deadlines for a client and are afraid that their work will be inadequate if the final presentation isn't printed. In any case, it is important to remember that no matter what they are saying it isn't about *you* personally. The more you match your customer in pitch and tone, the longer the resolution will take and the longer you postpone the de-escalation.

Finally, be hyper-aware of your body language. Crossing your arms is a natural – almost instinctive – posture to protect yourself from a verbal attack. Force your arms to your sides. Similarly, restrain yourself from holding up your palm in a “halt!” fashion or placing your hands on your hips, both of which connote not listening. The best thing to do is look directly at the person and nod while listening to nonverbally de-escalate their hostility.

Patience

To bring your customer around and let them run their course, it is important to give them the time to tell their entire story. When it is confusing, ask open-ended questions and continually check in with them by re-stating what you have heard and asking, “is that right?” Remember you are not prosecuting or trying to arrive at a solution at this point. Use questions to uncover their remembrance of the situation. Don't back them into a corner with leading questions. The longer you listen and ask questions, the more they will come to see that you are trying to understand their problem. Plus, you will get more details, which can help resolve the issue.

Energy

It may be natural for some staff members to passively listen when a customer is angry or upset while other meet that same emotion with similar intensity. Instead channel your own energy to show the customer that their issue is important and urgent. Tell customers that you will find a solution for them and that it has your full attention. Be empathetic and understanding of their situation. In other words, be an advocate for the customer. Help them see that they are not alone. You are also going to shoulder their issue and together you will both try to get it solved. It doesn't mean you must apologize or take full responsibility if, indeed, the customer was also at fault (such as when they purchase the wrong item).

C U S T O M E R S E R V I C E

That sounds like:

“Well, that doesn’t sound good at all. Let’s work together to get to the bottom of this right away.”

“This is troubling. Let me ask you some questions so I can understand what happened and then we can work together to find a solution.”

“I understand. This is not a good situation. I am here to help you – so let me see what I can do.”

Compassion

When there is a solution, smile and move swiftly to complete the transaction. Let the customer know you are glad that it has been corrected. Should the issue be escalated above you, know that you have done all that you can and prepare to engage with your next customer.

Have compassion for them and yourself.

If it has been a heated exchange, give yourself time to cool off before handling the next customer by getting a drink of water. Stretch your neck and shoulders where you have been holding tension. Touch your toes. Physically release the tension in your body to prepare for the rest of your shift.

One of the best things about working in retail is being able to solve customer problems. It happens when you help them select the right item to purchase in the first place. Or help them when a transaction goes astray. It takes a special person to succeed in retail. If you and your staff stay positive in the face of difficult customers, you will have a flourishing career in retail.

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Make sure that staff members understand their empowerment around resolving customer issues. Many retailers will allow associates to do anything except issue refunds without involving a manager. Discuss how to handle angry customers at the next staff meeting in a positive way to keep employees from dissolving into gossip and dejection. Talk about specific behaviors that will not be tolerated, such as swearing, physical contact or destroying property. Have a plan for how to communicate and escalate such issues.

Finally, take the time to talk about how to “come down” from those emotional engagements so that employees understand how to help one another and themselves. When you see an employee in a difficult engagement with a customer, watch to see if they need assistance. Sometimes jumping in as a manager only serves to disempower your employees. Consider a code word or sign that employees can use when they do or do not need help with a difficult customer.

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Ringling it Up!

It is rare to find a delightful cashier who is personable and efficient *and* makes a customer connection! But if you think that great cashiers are born, not made, think again. Rid your sales counter of the sullen cashier who dutifully executes a sales transaction without a glimmer of personality.

To begin: hire a cashier who is energetic. A shift at the sales counter is long indeed for a person who isn't accustomed to standing and smiling. As you interview candidates, take note of their posture, their disposition and their eye contact. Ask questions about their past experience with difficult customers and long shifts. Great cashiers know that a long shift is easier and goes by faster when they see each customer encounter as a chance to talk to someone and to have a small conversation. Experienced cashiers may have games they like to do such as guessing if the person will like or hate the weather or will pay with a credit card or cash. Even that small indicator shows that the candidate knows to talk with each customer by concentrating on each person as an individual.

As a manager, you set the tone for customer interactions. If the staff sees that you are friendly, approachable and engaged with customers, they will be as well. If you think interacting with customers is someone else's job, then they will as well. Start with yourself as you think about quality customer interactions.

The Non-Negotiables

Cashiers are the "face" of your business. As the last (and sometimes, only) person they will see at your store, you need to remind them that they should be friendly, helpful and appreciative of every customer. Remind your cashiers that while every customer is different, every single customer deserves the same thing: *a smile*. It is small. It is free. And it is the one thing you can deliver without fail for every customer.

Be First to Greet

Just as a guest is always welcomed into the home by the host, the customer is always greeted *first* by the associate. This is easy to recognize and monitor as a manager. If a customer is the first to greet, you have an issue. Address it quickly with your staff and set the expectation that they should always be the first to greet the customer.

Honesty, Accuracy, Efficiency

These must be present – and in this order! Cashiers must be

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scrupulously honest. *Always check references.* Honesty is a matter of character. A cashier that is accurate and efficient, but dishonest is a business liability. Accurate transactions come from a combination of strong training, standard processes and detailed attention. A cashier who is distracted by phones, questions and other duties cannot focus on the primary task of accurate transaction and record keeping. Finally, with honesty and accuracy, efficiency should proceed. A cashier must ensure that they complete transactions quickly so that customers can be on their way. Too often cashiers see a transaction goal as the goal of the greedy shopkeeper. Help them see that for customers who have already made their purchase decisions, a long transaction wait steals time from them.

Sincere Gratitude

Customize gratitude to each shopper. Listen to the final exchange between your cashiers and your shoppers. The tone should be as bright as when the customer comes through the door. Not a downward “Thank you for shopping. Come again.” as if they just finished a transaction with Eeyore. Not “Have a good one.” Bright, happy, optimistic: “Thank you. I hope I will see you here again soon!” A cashier’s voice should sound happy to have served and eager to see the customer return.

As simplistic and old-fashioned as these four items are, they are exactly what customers want and deserve:

1. A smile
2. First to greet
3. Honesty, accuracy, efficiency
4. Gratitude that is customized to each shopper

Execute these basics every single time with every single customer and many of your customer complaints will be eliminated.

We will not delve into the right cash levels to have on hand, identity and currency fraud, theft, bagging or sales techniques. All of those items are critical. But they can be taught and monitored. What you have to work at is creating the right environment and incentives to make each customer interaction special.

To succeed, cashiers should also have more than a basic understanding of the business.

Cashiers need to become familiar with the week’s promotion and with the product sold in the store so that the customer can be made aware of any purchase that may qualify for a discount or another offer. Have a weekly meeting or a bulletin board where offers and new items are introduced to the cashier staff. Help them understand that they are not

CUSTOMER SERVICE

“selling” to a customer (which can be difficult for some people) but that they are making sure the customer is aware, so they do not go home and become annoyed once they realize they could have made a better purchase.

Cashier: I see you purchased an air filter. Did you know that if you buy a second one as well, we are giving 15% off this week? That is a good deal if you think you’ll be back soon for another one.

Customer: No, I didn’t see that sign. Thanks.

Cashier: Let me call someone to bring you up a second one.

Notice how the cashier makes this announcement in a friendly, conversational tone that was customized for the specific customer.

Cashier: I saw you looking at our new mailing supplies line. We just brought that in and thought it would be convenient for customers to pick up postal supplies here as well. What do you think?

Ending a statement with “What do you think?” will surprise customers. Rarely does anyone ask them what they think. It doesn’t come across as trying to sell, but to inform. By saying it, this customer will remember that your store carries postal supplies in the future.

Name Game

Create a contest once a quarter for your cashiers. Give away a gasoline or pizza gift card to the cashier who addresses the most customers by name. Keep a running tally where all the employees can see it. It may have to be an honor system tally – - but the important thing is that your employees will see that you are serious about recognizing and addressing customers by name.

If ever a job fit well into the Zen philosophy of being present in the moment, it is being a retail cashier. Each transaction is a fresh start. Each customer requires individual focus. Each exchange of goods for money is an opportunity to achieve flawless and smooth perfection. You may think that is over the top – but when you find a great cashier and talk with them about how they get through the day you will find it is because of this challenge of creating a perfect interaction repeatedly throughout their shift. Great cashiers want to make their customers’ day better because of the encounter. They match the style and the pace of the customer but add their own imprint. And their customers return to the store again and again.

RETAIL: The Second Oldest Profession

WIN Today

Monitor cashier transactions for one simple element. Greet first. Explain that they are expected to greet a customer before the customer greets them. Every customer. Every time. Make it a part of your store's culture and a non-negotiable.

If you are the cashier, see how many customers you can serve in a row before some super-fast customer greets you first. Leaning into this competitive mindset of providing fast and customized service will make your shift go faster and give you a way to find enjoyment in the role. Once you begin, share it with others in your store and watch your enthusiasm light up the rest of the staff.



About the Author

Flora Delaney is a former retail merchandising executive with over 25 years of experience working for brands as large as Best Buy and Ahold and as small as single-store boutiques. She is a global retail consultant who helps retailers re-discover what makes them successful. She works with store leaders to reinvent their customer experience and create loyal customers and profitability. Her clients include Target, Whole Foods, PetSmart, The Good Guys (AUS), Family Dollar, Dell, Petco, Sears, and many small chains and nice shops. She is a sought-after speaker at trade events and retail meetings.

At the insistence of past clients, Flora has documented what the best retailers know and how everyday retail employees, department heads and store managers can make their store more profitable as well as a more fun place to work and shop.

Did this book help you?

Could I ask for help in return?

You did it! Congratulations, retail maven! Reading to the end of the book means you've got the makings of someone who's ready to truly win at retail. I hope you will return to this book again and again to make improvements for your store and your career. Thank you again for giving me your valuable time to try and help your retail operation.

If you enjoyed this book and would like to help, then you could think about leaving a review on Goodreads, kobo, indiebound or anywhere else that readers visit. I would appreciate your honest review and other readers would like to see what you thought as well. Thanks in advance to anyone who does ... It means a lot.

If you would like to find out more about future books or invite me to speak at your next event, then please visit my website for full details. www.floradelaney.com

Also feel free to contact me on Twitter @floradelaney or through the website. I look forward to hearing about your retail journey.

~Flora

I hope you enjoyed and learned some new approaches for improving Customer Service in your store.

Ready to learn more?

There are many ways to get the book in a format that works for you:

- [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com) for a kindle or paperback book
- [Ebooks](#) in every format for every reader
- Or [go to your local independent bookseller](#) and ask for them to order the book for you.

Thank you for taking the time to focus on how to improve your retail operation. With focus, discipline and some savvy know-how, every retailer can WIN today.