



## INFORM AND DELIVER: THE NEW SELLING MODEL BY RETAIL CONCEPTS

### Selling is a Seven Letter Word

In retailing today in 2011, "selling" is a dirty word. "What?!?" you may be asking, "How can that be? Isn't retailing all about selling?" Not really. Think about it, selling is something that both store employees and customers hate and it puts the two groups at odds when they should and can be partners with the exact same goals of helping people buy the products they want, in the way they want to buy them. Traditional sales models of yesteryear involve selling things that customers do not want—by convincing them that they do. The conventional model basically encourages employees to keep suggestive selling to a customer until the customer says "no more"—either verbally with a "no, thank you" or "I think I'm all set" or non-verbally by simply walking out of your store empty-handed. The goal of this is essentially to generate more dollars for the store at the expense of a customer who does not want to spend those dollars but gets coerced into doing so by a "great" salesperson.

Let us tell you about the new Retail Concepts selling model...

Consumers in 2011 are increasingly disinterested in dealing with traditional sales people. They are not looking for friends or relationships in stores and don't care if the staff knows their name. They want to get what they came for and get out. They are busy and want a store that understands that and provides what they are looking for, efficiently. These consumers want information about products, and they want fair pricing, and they want all the other services such as gift-wrapping, easy returns, etc. but they don't need to talk about it. They want the information online. They want it in clear signage in-store around the product and its attributes, as well as store policies, procedures and services. They don't want to have to ask. These customers spend money just like "traditional customers do and they deserve respect. But most small shops not only don't give it to them, they continue to insist on trying to speak with them and insist on showing them items they did not come in to get. They frustrate and drive-out shoppers who have money and want to spend it but they do not want to be "sold" or "told"; they want to shop on *their* terms and since they are customers, smart stores allow them to do so.

The new model that we at Retail Concepts have been working on is "*inform and deliver*" as opposed to "sell, sell, sell!" This new model has no more role-playing exercises and practice to create forced phony conversation with customers. This new model has stores hiring intelligent people and then giving them all available information and challenging and empowering them to deliver exactly what



customers ask for and only that. This new model is totally transparent, with staff and customer on the same side, wanting the same thing. It eliminates the pressure and allows respect so employees can relax and enjoy their jobs instead of hating what they do and having it show (which we all see in many stores) because ultimately, they are being asked to convince people to buy. And, really, who wants to do that?

Okay, hold on, we know what you are saying: THEY WANT US TO "SELL" LESS?!? Well, yes, that is exactly what we are saying—"sell" less in the traditional sense of the word and EVOLVE the way you interact with your customers and position your products so that you can have happier and more engaged customers (and staff for that matter), move more goods and ultimately drive more dollars to the register day-in and day-out.

So this "evolved" sales model, what does it entail? Here's the basic gist: of course you still want to engage verbally with your customers, but just in a new way. Sure there will be those old-fashioned folks who want to interact with salespeople as they always have and that's fine. With this customer group, you can keep doing what you are doing. But in order to survive and grow with the times, you must approach your store and relationships with your customers in a new way—based on the way they like to shop.

This starts with a staff that is always friendly, alert, empowered, knowledgeable, creative and fun—and always available to help customers on their terms to find the merchandise they need, in the way they want to find it. Without that fundamental element, you are DOA. Then branding (yes, even for small stores) is key as it helps position you as an authority in your product category and gets customer buy-in. Informative signage is a MUST as it provides consumers with important attributes about products and allows them to shop non-verbally and still get the same information as those who prefer to engage directly with staff. A proper, well-planned and well-assorted merchandise mix is a key selling tool that can really make or break a business. If you have the right product, at a compelling price-point and positioned in the right way, this will unquestionably drive volume, better than a traditional salesperson ever could. Stores who take this approach will do more business with less "selling" and staff and associates will enjoy the experience more.

For many, retailing jobs are hateful because of the pressure to “sell” and when that is changed to an expectation to “inform and deliver” most all become happier and better employees...the remainder can go work in used car dealerships (take it easy used car people, we’re just joking!).



So without further adieu, below we are the eight key elements of the Retail Concepts selling model, better known as Inform and Deliver.

## **Inform and Deliver: The New Selling Model by Retail Concepts**

### **1. Non-verbal communications**

A great store will always have staff that is friendly, alert, empowered, knowledgeable, creative and fun. And of course a great store will always verbally interact with those customers who want to interact with employees. However, the mistake that most shops make is that they impose this approach on ALL customers, assuming paternalistically (since they get positive feedback) that what works for the core customers who love the store and its methods should work for all customers. There are many customers who are not looking for friends or relationships in stores and who don't care if the staff knows their name. They want to get what they came for and get out. They are busy and want a store that understands that and provides what they are looking for efficiently. These consumers want information about products, they want fair pricing, and they want all the other services such as gift-wrapping, easy returns, etc. but they don't need to talk about it. They want the information online. They want it in clear signage around the product and its attributes (think about Crate and Barrel and the approach it takes to signage for its goods). They want it in stores that non-verbally explain their policies and services so the store is understood without verbal interaction. These customers spend money just like "traditional customers" do and they deserve respect but most small shops not only don't give it to them, they continue to insist on trying to speak with them and show them items they did not come in to get. They frustrate and drive out shoppers who have money and want to spend it but do not want to be sold or told; they want to shop on their terms and since they are customers, smart stores allow them to do so. But it is much more than just leaving people alone, it is providing a high level of service but a new kind of service, a non-verbal product and information based, fast and efficient service.

### **2. Don't put employees at odds with your customer**

It is widely accepted in retailing that great employees should be incented to always suggestive sell, create multiple sales and have the highest possible average sale. What is conflicting here is that consumers often want to buy what they came for and then go about their business. It is because of this dynamic that traditional sales methods put store associates and customers essentially at odds



with each other. The associate is pressured to sell more, show more things and keep the customer in the store at all costs. They are trained in selling techniques; they often have contests and bonus plans based on pushing certain items and just pushing merchandise in general. With this type of dynamic, most customers get uncomfortable because they want to be nice but want to get out. And on the flip side, most associates are frequently uncomfortable because they are being watched, they need to get results, and/or they are responding to the discomfort that customers are showing. As you can see, the dynamic is just dreadful. By taking the pressure off traditional selling, finally customers and the store staff are truly in the same place and everyone can enjoy the experience—no matter what side of the register they are on.

### **3. You sell merchandise NOT service**

Stores do not sell service\* (\*as traditional stores define it) they sell merchandise. Customers do not want service\* they want merchandise. Customers do not want service\* they want information. Customers do not want service\* they want speed and efficiency. Customers do not want service\*, they want an experience that fits the way they shop, and exceeds their expectations every time. Whether a pizza, or a gift, or a shirt, a small store's first job is to provide a better item than competitors are selling or provide a similar item at a compelling price. Store owners must know the category they're in and be able to make or seek out the best for their customers and in doing so that owner becomes an authority in that niche as well. If you properly sell your merchandise then you are providing great service simultaneously and naturally.

### **4. Make sure you have the goods**

Traditional selling relies more on staff, than actual compelling product to move inventory. But really, how is that ultimately meeting the needs of the customer?

Stores must have what their constituency wants. Gone are the days when people had few choices other than the local store in town, that because of lack of competition could easily prey on customers to help them move goods. Believe it or not, stores used to use well-honed sales techniques like shoe stores bringing out the wrong shoe size (because it was all they had in stock) but concealing the incorrect size or putting it in a different box and then convincing the customer that it fit. Or clothing stores putting an odd size jacket on a male customer (like a 41 short) and convincing him that the other stores didn't know how to fit him properly and that he needed a "special order" which only the local store would do. Even to this day, many average-sized people are shopping all over convinced that that they are narrows, wides, longs and shorts as a result of these exchanges with these types of small store sales vultures from yesteryear. But now, many



customers are more savvy and expect that stores have the goods they need, in the sizes they need them. You can no longer train and motivate a staff to sell merchandise that consumers do not want to buy. So while buying for small stores can be very challenging, unless this difficult task is taken head-on and interesting and unique products are presented, there is no chance for success.

### **5. Branding at every touchpoint**

Branding is a critical way for you to communicate your authority, gain credibility with your customers and motivate them to buy from you—today and going-forward. It is about keeping your store top of mind as THE place to get product {xyz}. It is about experience—that fits with who you are to the core and created to enhance how your target customers shop. It is about making sure that everything the customer interacts with along the way leaves a positive impression of your store. Walk into your store as if you were a customer, look at everything in the customer’s path from the tape on the windows featuring a sign about someone else’s event, to the dirty fingerprints on the door, to the cash wrap cluttered with staff cell phones, tupperware (gasp!) and pens with other people’s businesses endorsed on them for customers to sign YOUR credit card sales slips. Continue on and take a trip to the bathroom, the dressing room. Are they clean? Branded with your store’s identity and personality? At check-out, see if there is an easy place to put product, a clear place to stand in line, an efficient process for bagging and getting customers out the door (in a friendly manner). All these things speak to you, your store, your customer’s experience. Any one of those small things along the way could turn someone off. You don’t think they relate to selling? They ARE selling...your brand...and if not considered, you could ultimately lose sales.

### **6. Transparency**

Surely you have heard the expression “there is more than one way to skin a cat”. Old school selling is essentially skinning a cat. But really, instead of skinning them, why not work with them for the mutual benefit of both cats AND people? Some ways in which stores “skin cats” and work against their own customers is by training staff to “flip returns” (i.e. challenging them to sell more than the value of returned items with no consideration at all to what the customer wanted when re-entering the shop). Or even worse, pushing store credits, coupons, gift cards etc. not because they are a convenience but because a fair percentage of these items go unused and the dollars become pure profit.

Instead, why not make efforts to continually keep holders of these credits, coupons and cards informed that they are still good, by tracking them through your POS? Or even to allow customers to earn “shopper’s interest” on their



outstanding amount? The difference here is the old school way is to just take (or steal for that matter) the money if the customer loses track of it while Inform and Deliver really uses this as an opportunity to once again show that the store is using up to date technology and information systems not to cheat customers or sell to customers but to help customers by reminding them of money they have to spend that the store is holding. Plus, by encouraging them to come back, you have another opportunity to have them engage with your brand. What retailer doesn't want that?

### **7. Change your mindset!**

The traditional way is saying one thing to our customers ("we love you") and then doing another by training pushing, cajoling, pressuring and rewarding staff for selling customers merchandise they didn't come in to buy and often don't want. That's a funny way to communicate love. The new way is to have a store that works much harder to have more of what customers want (and less of what they don't).

Things like returns, exchanges, damages, repairs, or whatever, should be done just as customers ask in all channels of operation, with more always being delivered than expected or requested and with less time, effort (and talk). This way, if love happens, it is with the store and the product (think Johnny Cupcakes, the Apple store) and not with the people who know your name and who then talk nice to you as they twist your arm to buy stuff.

### **8. Change your terminology!**

There are stores out there who thrive on this type of new selling approach (in a way that makes sense for their brands) and consider it as an integral part of who they are as retailers. Winning stores like Crate and Barrel, Container Store and the Apple store thrive by understanding and meeting customers' expectations in ways that customers desire. Each of these stores excel at providing information and each does it in their own unique, yet customer-oriented way—none of which involve traditional selling.

So as you can hopefully see, selling really is a 7 letter word—one that implies negative things to customers—suggestive selling, salespeople, multiple sale, etc. (ok, we know, you get it). So instead, what managers should be asking is "How happy is that customer?" and "How quickly did they get the item or the information they were looking for?" instead of "How much did you sell them?" It is these types of questions that will ultimately lead to retail success in 2011 and beyond. So, what do you say, isn't it time you changed how you think and embrace the Inform and Deliver approach to selling?