

DEFINING DIFFERENCE

Learn how boutique owners are using customer service to distinguish themselves from the competition.

As big-box retailers expand into every town across America with their low-low prices and comfortably predictable store environments, and a record number of e-tailers make shopping simple for consumers in even the most remote locales, independent children's wear boutiques must find innovative ways to stand out. Rather than embrace BOGO blow-outs and marketing blitzes, savvy shop owners are simply focusing on old-fashioned customer service. Establishing their businesses as not only places to make money, but as extensions of their own homes, they've discovered that no amount of free shipping can beat a sincere smile.

According to Mickie Albert-Caracatsanis, vice president of Satisfaction Services, a consulting company that coordinates mystery shoppers and detailed store analysis, customer service is the defining factor in a retailer's ability to survive. "Businesses are starting to realize and accept that customer service is one of the only competitive edges that you can really affect over the competition," she stated. "All the good locations are already taken and price points are just too close across the board. Plus, you can get anything online these days and most times it is even cheaper."

So, with smaller staffs and more personalized shopping environments, boutique owners should be poised to use impeccable customer service to their advantage. Ironically however, it is these very stores that are often deemed by consumers to have the poorest service. In fact, shoppers have told *Earnshaw's* that they avoid boutiques due to things like strict return policies or snooty treatment. Albert-Caracatsanis said that standards are so low when it comes to service, that most consumers are actually shocked when they are treated with respect and kindness. "It is rare for consumers to feel genuinely cared about. Today, all we want as consumers is to be acknowledged and to not be abused," she said. "Truthfully, we're not asking for a whole lot."

The Basic Niceties

While Albert-Caracatsanis contends that

too many store clerks embody the stereotypical gum-smacking, lipstick-applying, nearly-invisible lump behind the counter, there are retailers who have caught on to the boons of good service—they cover the basics of saying hello, being available to answer questions, and generally being friendly, and then they take it a step further.

For Monica Tran, owner of Trust Fund Baby in New York's trendy Nolita district, great service begins with the very term that she uses to describe her shoppers. "We don't call the people who walk into our store customers. We treat them as clients, because we are here to serve them. They are paying for something, and they better feel good while they're doing it," she said. With lac-

“Our No. 1 rule about customer service is knowing when to make an exception.”

—Jamara Ghalayini, owner, Pumpkinheads

quered green, blue and red walls and shelves filled with curios that she has collected while traveling, Tran's shop—which houses her own vintage-inspired children's designs along with men's, women's and accessory collections—is inspired by her grandmother's childhood home in Vietnam. "I don't like to call it a store, I like to call it a retail environment. It's almost like walking into my house," she added.

Julie Burgmeier, who owns La Connor, Wash.-based Childhood Bliss along with her partner Carol Whited, agreed that the foundation for a positive shopping experience is making every customer feel right at home. "When customers walk into our front door, I think about them coming into my home and I treat them like a guest," she said. "The best feeling is after they're done shopping, and you've gotten to know them—it's like you've made a new friend." Appropriately, the vintage-meets-urban Childhood Bliss, which carries brands like Petunia Pickle

Bottom, Small Paul and Meli Meli for boys and girls, is located in a quaint old home with big bay windows.

Boutique owners, who tend to view their stores as extensions of their homes, also emphasize the importance of treating customers like friends by remembering their names or relevant details about their last trip to the store. "The most important thing that I remind myself and my staff to do is to ask shoppers questions that will help to remember something about them. Ask their name, and as they are shopping use it repetitively," suggested Jamara Ghalayini, owner of Pumpkinheads in the Brentwood neighborhood of Los Angeles. "When people come in again we always try to call them by their first name and it is absolutely shocking to them." Apparently it has worked: 73 percent of Pumpkinheads's customers are return clients who come in more than once a month.

At Bella Bambini in Caldwell, N.J., a store that carries a refined collection of communion and special-occasion gowns, as well as a slew of trendy brands like the English Roses and Lipstik, owner Diana Salerno keeps a book of all of her customers and will call them or send them postcards when new merchandise arrives. As Salerno gets to know them, she provides them with even more personalized service. "For example, I have one customer who will call ahead. So, I'll pull out all of my [clothes] that I think she'll like and give her my undivided attention so she doesn't have to go through the racks," Salerno said. She's also been known to run outfits to parents' cars on the street while their children were sleeping in the backseat and to ship clothes across the state to mothers in need of emergency vacation wear.

Often-Overlooked Essentials

There are plenty of extra niceties that will amp up level of service in any store—from sending thank you notes to repeat shoppers to hand-delivering packages. However, there are also some basic customer service necessities that are often overlooked.

"We have a few basic rules about service, and the No. 1 is knowing when to make an exception—that's referring to returns or to people needing extra help. You can't run a store based on strict policy and you need people working with you that you can delegate that responsibility to," Ghalayini said. Her liberal policy gives people two weeks to return an item (not

just exchange) and she extends that for an additional month around the holidays.

"Most kids don't like trying things on in a strange place, and I don't want people to be stuck with something that's not going to work for them," she added.

Because parents with antsy kids in tow usually need to get in and out of a store as quickly as possible, Burgmeier expressed how important it is to have clearly labeled tags. It is essential to have sizes, prices and fabric makeup (especially since so many children have allergies to certain materials) clearly identified. "Speed is very important for many moms. We make it a rule not to put anything on the floor without a price tag and we also re-write the price extra large on the tag," she said.

To reduce clutter and make the shopping experience easier for busy parents, Shannon Richord, owner of Ladybug & Caterpillar in artsy Ventura, Calif., keeps only one size in each item out on the sales floor. "I will go upstairs to get something that isn't on the floor. You won't sell anything just standing behind the counter. Most people want that interaction, they want to be shown things," she said. When it comes to sizing, it is also essential that the staff are well-versed in the particular fit of every brand. "A lot of shoppers may not have children, and if they don't understand sizing they'll just get frustrated and leave, or everything you sell is going to come back," Ghalayini said.

So that parents can shop a little longer without being interrupted, many of these boutiques have set up play areas with toys, books and even flat-screen televisions showing cartoons to occupy little busy bodies. For moms with babies, Tran has even equipped Trust Fund Baby with a bottle warmer, a nursing chair and a changing table with baby wipes and diapers. "People are shocked by what we provide. I always think it's sad that people can't believe we offer their children juice without any catch," she said.

Whited of Childhood Bliss underscored the need for a kid-friendly store layout and easily accessible parking. The boutique has isles large enough to roll a stroller through, a big ramp leading into the store and an adjacent parking lot. "We appreciate how difficult it can be to shop if you bring your children along, so we found a store location with a big parking lot, which is uncommon in this town. That way mom can just run in quickly while grandma is in the car with the

sleeping child."

While it may not seem like much, all of these little details add up to a great shopping experience for consumers who could just as easily spend their money elsewhere. Ultimately, these boutique owners believe that providing strong customer service is a no-brainer. Not only does it make a store stand out from the crowd, but it keeps shoppers coming back—and keeps them talking

about the store to all of their friends.

"Any company that takes on a mom-and-pop attitude and demonstrates age-old values is going to create a loyal customer base, and simply grow because of that," Albert-Caracatsanis said. "There is a great opportunity to kick it into gear by looking at what customer service is and why we've lost it. The companies that focus on bringing back service will be very successful, and way ahead of the competition." ●



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