

DOWN TO BUSINESS

A helping hand for indies



Image courtesy of Elégance

Service with a smile

Since Mary Portas hauled customer service into the spotlight with her latest television show, *Secret Shopper*, retailers across the land have been placing consumer experience high on their agendas. Indie owners often maintain that service is their best asset, but how do you really know if you're really enticing every customer to buy? This month *Boutique* has enlisted the knowledge of retail expert Lynn Allison who believes that many store owners are still missing obvious customer turn-offs that can make or break a purchase...

Image courtesy of TK Maxx



Happy shoppers

So you think you know your customers? Retail expert Lynn Allison argues how many stores are still getting it wrong when it comes to service

In an experiment carried out by Harvard University, half of the respondents asked to count the number of times a ball got passed around on a video failed to spot a man in a gorilla costume. This was even after he'd stopped to face the camera, beat his chest and walked slowly off the screen again. The authors commented afterwards: "It was as though the gorilla was invisible. This experiment reveals two things: that we are missing a lot of what goes on around us, and that we have no idea that we are missing so much."

About a year ago I began thinking

about my own high street and online shopping experiences. They had morphed from the simple frustration of not being able to find items I wanted into a deeper fixation about why, especially in the recession, retailers weren't addressing these problems. Couldn't they see that small changes to encourage a few extra sales could add up to a significant increase in turnover? And that these changes could be the difference between scraping through the tough times and having a really successful year?

It was then that I realised, like the experimenters at Harvard, that it was

a form of unintentional blindness. Retailers didn't seem to notice the same things that I did, or realise some customers would give up on shopping before purchasing anything because of these minor frustrations turning into barriers. Despite being trained in customer service, they're so busy 'doing what they are supposed to do' that they not only miss something obvious, but don't even realise there's anything to miss.

So what are these frustrations that could be costing you money without you knowing it? Well, it's time to introduce you to *The Chameleon*



Image courtesy of Primark

– your customer. I believe that customers are like chameleons – they change. They change their needs as they move around your shop and they change their criteria depending on what type of buyer they are. Some of these can be influenced and some can't. But knowing what their world is like and understanding their criteria means you can make small but significant changes that might just turn a 'no thank you' into a 'yes-please.' And knowing their world will certainly give your boutique that winning edge over your larger competitors.

Customer need number one: "I need to understand what you're telling me"

- Make sure customers can see where to go next as soon as they enter the store
- When they get there, make sure the product descriptions, sizes and prices are easy to read
- Identify your target market and work out what their key criteria for making a purchase (price/style/exclusivity/convenience – or something else?). Now make sure you set up your store to match – if you understand how customers are deciding what to buy, then you have more chance of selling to them
- Ensure your marketing messages are not all about you and that they engage your customers by talking about them and their needs

Customer need two: "I need to buy at a time that suits me"

- If customers have a need now, why

not satisfy it? If your processes are fixed to a strict schedule of seasonal buying, you're at the mercy of the weather making your customers want to buy something that you don't have. Consider whether this is in the best interests of your business and whether sales could be gained by stocking some items for longer or all year round

- Don't apply fashion season rules to non-fashion items; if this happens in your store, ask your customers if it suits them – if it doesn't, change it

Customer need three: "I need to avoid items I cannot buy"

- Don't spend any time or money offering things to customers who cannot buy them – show them only what they can buy
- Don't put any financial barriers in front of customers. Find out what features they're interested in and use the information to organise and label the products
- Arrange sale clothing by size, not price

Customer need four: "I don't want to repeat myself"

- Make sure data is kept up to date and cleansed, firstly so that you comply with the law, but secondly so that you don't annoy customers who have already given you valuable information
- Follow-up enquiries: knowing why someone has not bought from you is just as important as knowing why they have and there might be a sale just waiting for someone to ask for it



Image courtesy of New Look

- Listen to what customers tell you and make a note of it – it's the most valuable data there is

In a way this is a back-to-basics message. Don't confuse information with knowledge – having facts and figures to hand is not the same as understanding all the people who buy from you, what motivates them and what criteria they use. Ask your customers how they feel in ways that are meaningful and specific. Listen to the answers. Test your theories, measure the results and test again.

If you recognise the truth of any of these condensed tips then there is good news: because you're reading this, you'll be able to change what you do and see if it makes a difference. As an owner, you can make decisions quickly, creating a kind of super customer service where *The Chameleon* is comfortable everywhere it goes because you are meeting its changing needs. Following on from the recession, small differences count. So have a go at catching your customers.

Lynn Allison is a chartered marketer, keen impulsive shopper, and author of retail guide, Catching The Chameleon, which is available from Amazon.co.uk