



Brian Finlayson

# WHAT'S YOUR FOCUS?

Brian Finlayson explains why putting the customer first is always crucial, no matter what other tasks demand your attention.

**R**etailing's not a bad lark – and it would be even better if you didn't have to deal with customers ... Seriously, though, I'm beginning to wonder if that's the way some retailers I've come across lately think – those who appear to be task -, rather than customer-focused.

Over the last couple of weeks I've had several experiences of venturing into shops and barely raising an eyebrow or acknowledgement from the person behind the counter. They were too 'busy' with paperwork, phone calls and other seemingly more important tasks to engage with me – a potential customer who may have been considering a purchase that ultimately would help pay their bills.

There is always a heap of 'must do' tasks, but sorting these out while you have customers in your shop is not a good look. I'm not suggesting that you pounce on people as soon as they walk in the door, but please give them the attention they deserve and get out from behind the counter. Sometimes I think that the shop counter is perhaps the worst possible shop fitting; of course it's an important space for concluding a sale, but it's a barrier between you and any customer –

and all too often it's used as a permanent workbench .

Sure, there are down times when you can sort the mail, pay the bills and generally get the house in order. Likewise there are periods – particularly 11am until 2pm – when paper shuffling and general admin tasks should be no-go activities and be set aside to concentrate on customer service.

**There is always a heap of 'must do' tasks, but sorting these out while you have customers in your shop is not a good look.**

So, when a customer comes into your store, come out from behind the counter and onto the shop floor and tidy, stock shelves, sort out a display – whatever – as long as it puts you in a handy position to open a conversation and, hopefully, close a sale.

I think a lot of staff get the task-versus-customer focus wrong because they simply haven't had the training they need – and deserve. You might say that, in the current climate, you can't afford to pay for training and professional development. But can you afford

to have people walk out of your shop empty-handed because they were peeved at the lack of service or, worse still, with pockets and bags full of items they've pinched?

Now could be the right time to sign up for some customer service training and get some ideas on how to open and close a sale and make add-on sales. If you think you and your staff could benefit from such training, you could always contact me.

## COST-CUTTING

Cost-cutting is a hot topic for many retailers at the moment. There are always opportunities to trim fat from your business, but I'd regard cutting back on staff as an 'ambulance at the bottom of the cliff' measure. Rather than reduce staff numbers, review the hours they're working to make sure you have the right number of staff to cover the peak trading times, and fewer working during the quieter times. The busy periods will vary depending on your business, location and, perhaps, the time of year.

As an example, I talked recently with a retailer who was altering her opening hours and changing the staff roster to accommodate the

growing number of 'after work' 5–6pm shoppers.

If you need to cut costs, start by reviewing expenditure on the items that I'd classify as 'general overheads' such as power, phone, etc. Ask some questions and do some research: are you getting the best deal from your courier? Do you have the best phone or electricity deal?

And, of course, there's always stock control, but I've talked about that before...

Finally, a word about your most important asset – the people who work for you. I know it's a stressful trading time for many but don't take it out on your staff. Praise your staff for a job well done and if there's a problem or issue, sit down, talk it over and listen to what they have to say. Don't burn them out; a practical solution to this potential problem is having an on-call list of people who are familiar with your business and happy to fill in once or twice a month.

In other words, treat others the way you would like to be treated.

**Brian Finlayson** is an experienced retail consultant with the New Zealand Retailers Association advisory team. He's a hands-on, upfront, tell-it-as-it-is man and can be contacted via: 0800 472 472.